

The Reformed Citizen

Also by Jesse Gordon

The Knack

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Stories from the Steel Garden

JESSE GORDON

The
Reformed Citizen


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THE REFORMED CITIZEN

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For Katie, Kevin, Phil, and Tom,
whose various contributions
helped turn a bunch of crazy tales
into yet another crazy book.

The Reformed Citizen

Distributed Logic

Upgrade Month:

It was the last day of school, and Bryan was sitting at the back of the General Ed classroom with his fists clenched and his teeth grinding in his mouth. His shirtsleeves dangled over his hands, his pants felt too big; he couldn't find socks this morning so he'd just worn his sneakers, making his feet feel sticky. He was suffering, no doubt about it, but it was a palatable sort of pain, for he'd absorbed his lessons, done his homework, earned a solid line of A-minuses across the board. He wanted *out* already, though it had nothing to do with the inborn urge every teenager has to escape the public education barracks. Most kids just wanted off the map for a few months. Bryan, on the other hand, had a life to live, things to do, people to interact with—he had the Internet.

Two weeks previous, the newest version of *SimpliCITY* had gone online for all the beta-testers, and Bryan had been hooked ever since—everyone in the quality assurance pools was. All the white-collars with decent broadband connections and premium subscriptions to the city's mainframe relays got

the programs before everyone else did. They got unrestricted access to any web site, any server in the world, political, religious, pornographic, or otherwise—even the stuff that hadn't been approved by the federal censors.

Bryan looked over one row to where Sarah was sitting. She was staring at him, red-faced, blushing. He knew she was thinking what he was thinking, of what the two of them had done that night a week ago, after he'd e-mailed her the *SimpliCITY* hack. There'd been two miles of fiber-optic wiring between them, but he'd lost his virginity to her—and his virtual model hadn't even been finished yet (the sensory inputs all worked, though; he'd made *sure* of that).

Bryan and Sarah sort of had a thing going, even though in real life he was too skinny and she was too fat. Outside of VR, they'd kissed a couple times, on the rare occasions when the newsfeeds weren't announcing a pathogen alert, but that was it. Anything further and, well, you were asking for trouble, what with the city so overcrowded and this year's flu vaccinations being fifty-thousand short. "Offline, Off Limits" was the popular slogan, and it made a lot of sense. Real life was cold, dangerous—your one chance in the flesh before death dissolved you for eternity. Online, however, you could do anything, and there were no consequences: no STDs, no fatal wounds.

SimpliCITY was the most recent virtual simulator to have taken the Internet by storm, and for good reason: No other program offered as many options, as much customization, as much *realism*, and the interface was a no-brainer. Plus, there were free upgrades for all premium subscribers, all beta-testers (Bryan's family was privileged in that respect).

Most important, though, was the fact that *SimpliCITY* had the best sensory input engine available, and, through a set of open-source hacks, felt good—*real* good, better than the flesh, thanks to new programming techniques and algorithms that supposedly deviated from the recommended allowances.

Naturally, the software was strictly eighteen and over, but, like most kids with enough curiosity and dedication, Bryan had found a hack for his biometric implant. His parents, while adequately funded, had never been keen on regular doctor visits, and so no one knew that, according to his ID chip, he was a 26-year-old computer programmer from the East Side. Of course, he could have gone the extra mile and removed his chip altogether (like many citizens did), but he was a bit of a wimp when it came to cutting and pain and blood. That was why he went online in the first place: to escape the various discomforts of real life.

That's why we all go online, he thought, smiling. He wished he was there now, with Sarah, both of them in their mods, wearing their custom skins. Bryan's was a basic David model, with a more muscular build, his own face (with age-progression), and a decidedly larger genital—ominous, in fact. That was his e-name: Ominous. He'd spent half a day on his model's masculinity, making sure it was absolutely perfect before he'd moved on to the rest of his virtual body. Even without all the right textures, Sarah had taken him (as he'd taken her) in a multi-spa chatroom with two-dozen other netizens frolicking alongside.

He could feel his pulse quickening just thinking about it, though it didn't matter much. No one could tell if he was aroused because he was small for seventeen, almost emaci-

ated, and his clothes were loose and sagging; they hid everything. His mother always said he'd grow into them, but he doubted it. She was just being friendly.

Bryan sighed, tried to pay attention to the artificial instructor. It was hard. He knew the real score: Life was shit. After graduation, he'd get his white-collar certificate and convert his bedroom into an office cubicle for the city. He'd crunch numbers and process forms for fifty years, right up until retirement. There was off-time, sure, designated recreational hours—white-collars worked from the comfort and safety of their homes—but too many of them fell prey to the grind, the notion that if they did just *this* much more today, they'd have less to do tomorrow—but when tomorrow came, the central task manager ended up piling on more than today. In most cases, people ended up slightly behind, so they adjusted by stretching their hours, working in their pajamas, eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner in front of their computers. However, it was a small price to pay for their freedoms. America was still the safest place to live, to worship, to “be all that you can be,” and to be blessed with a premium Internet subscription and *SimpliCITY* and uninhibited sex with Sarah whenever he wanted . . . Bryan didn't mind the inevitabilities all that much.

For now, he merely wanted to live as much as he could, and he wasn't ashamed to do just that—in the privacy of his own bedroom. The world was one giant back-office; the Internet, *SimpliCITY*—that was real. That was where he and all his hungry, horny peers went to learn about sex, drugs, heavy artillery, and everything else that made life worth living. In cyberspace, in his Ominous skin, Bryan didn't have to be

lanky and insignificant anymore, an undersized runt foraging in the cracks of society. He could be a double-agent, a movie star, a mobster, a superhero, an athlete; it was all safe, it was all possible in cyberspace.

With his mouth very nearly watering, Bryan forced his attention away from the clock on the wall and resumed his work. Eventually, the end-of-day klaxon sounded and class was dismissed.

Sarah nudged him as she left. “See you online,” she said shyly, and then scurried off homeward.

Already Bryan was blushing—sweating, almost—from such social contact, but it was okay because he knew he could more than make up for it as Ominous.

The shuttle picked him up just inside the school’s security terminal. His forearm was scanned and he was randomly assigned a seat towards the back, where a handful of bullies just happened to be *randomly* seated as well. These were crude, ill-mannered youths, nothing more than blue-collar fodder from the industrial side of town. Their IQs were nothing compared to Bryan’s, though their bodies were bigger and more muscular, and so, when they poked and prodded, twisted and pulled at him as if he were a rag doll, he could do little else but scrunch his eyes shut and wince.

Let them behave like baboons, he thought. *In a few short months they’ll have their mops and soap pails, their hard-hats and drills. Everyday they’ll have to trudge to and from some smelly, dusty construction site while I’ll be snug and cozy, making bank by sitting around in my underwear.*

The apartment where Bryan and his parents (George and Leah, respectively) lived was a typical federally-appointed

white-collar complex: six stories of brick and steel wrapped in hot chainlink, with a direct line to the county servers. The shuttle dropped him off just inside the security gate; the instant his feet touched the ground he was running all the way inside, up the four flights of stairs to number D-4. He arrived just in time to witness the awesome sight of George installing the new wireless receiver.

"They've released you into the wild, eh?" George asked, winking.

"Oh . . . my . . . God!" Bryan yelled, dropping his notebook onto the floor. "I can't believe it's here!"

"Yup. The county approved the higher bandwidth for the testing pool—that's us. 200 gigabytes, both ways."

It was Christmas, Bryan's birthday, the day he got his first computer—all wrapped in one. He wanted to say something smart, to swap technical specs; instead he was laughing, looking at his father and seeing the slightly-crazed glint in the man's eyes, the swollen flesh of his cheekbones. *These last two weeks he's become just as addicted as I have!* Bryan thought. He slapped hands with George. It was the closest thing to a religious experience he'd ever had.

After he calmed down, he asked, "When can I check it out?"

"We should be up and running now," said George. He pointed down the hallway. "Go ahead—take her out for a spin."

Bryan thanked him, high-fived him again and ran into his bedroom, closing and locking the door. He turned his computer on, hastily pulled off his clothes as he drew on the sensory inputs. Then he crouched beside his bed, felt awkwardly

underneath for the safebox where he kept his birth certificate and social security items. Entering the combination, he opened it and withdrew his *special* input, the hacked version he'd bought online for 99 Patriots—just in time for Upgrade Month. It was a neat little device, sort of like an oversized athletic cup. He fastened it to his groin as he scurried into his chair, raised his left arm for the scanner, and logged on to his premium account. Lastly, he popped in his contacts, overlaying his field of vision with a pair of variable translucency video monitors.

A slightly electric thrill tickled his spine as the megabytes surged through his fingers and toes. One moment he was sitting in a cluttered, musty bedroom, the next he was standing, proud and majestic, in his personal start-zone.

The place was posh, a moderately tweaked parlor template, with shag carpeting and glazed walls, contemporary furnishings and a sky-cam view of the virtual city glittering beyond the balcony edge. There was a sofa pit, a coffee table in the center (piled high with e-mail messages), a wall-screen television; in one corner, a wardrobe with several predefined sets of clothing inside, though Bryan was something of an exhibitionist and so ignored the wardrobe completely as he headed straight for the door.

Through the threshold, into the hallway, he stopped and pulled down his personal menu. He could, of course, walk or drive to the chatroom, but he already had his favorite places bookmarked. He chose the Coral Café and instantly he was there, standing in the aquamarine glow, the seaweed shimmering through the domed glass ceiling above, the subtle synergy of two-dozen candlelit tables glowing in the heady in-

cense. One of the moderators bowed before him, asked if he wanted refreshments.

“No thanks,” he said, moving through the room and catching the attention of several female netizens who, upon spotting spotting his glistening visage, purred or cooed seductively. He found Sarah, with her perfectly lithe hourglass figure, standing beside her table and waving at him, and instantly he attached himself to her, kissing her, caressing her, warming her with his Ominous touch—making up for a school year of ineptitude.

“It’s good to see you,” Sarah said, lifting her arm above her shoulder and clicking on her table’s privacy flag (this allowed the two of them an ample view of the chatroom, while everyone else merely saw an opaque membrane).

Somewhere down the line Bryan remembered his manners and said, “Good to see you too.”

* * *

With the advent of widely-available high speed wireless Internet access across America, true virtual reality (patented by TrueTech and called TrueReality®) was no longer improbable for Bryan’s generation. Without the need for cumbersome goggles, primitive control gauntlets, or ill-fitting bodysuits, one could immerse oneself in cyberspace directly, and the experience was indistinguishable from reality. It had become so good that most people did nearly everything online, work and play—you never had to set foot past your doorstep.

Many white-collar Americans (especially in the big cities) earned their daily bread out of their own homes. This trans-

lated to lower overhead for employers, who no longer had to pay to maintain physical offices. Tasks were routed through the distributed network's automated task manager and made accessible to the blue-collar farms, factories, and manufacturing plants. Medical insurance and worker benefits rested in the hands of the county.

With less commuting in the real world, the public transit budget had been decimated, and funds were diverted elsewhere. Faster-acting allergy meds, new and improved smart pills, more effective beauty treatments and anti-aging therapies—the government could now spend the money where it was needed.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the burgeoning science behind enhanced biometrics. Bryan had a splinter-sized chip embedded just under the skin of his left forearm. His computer's wireless receiver scanned his personal information and logged him on, connected him directly to the county mainframe. As he used the sensory inputs attached to his computer, real-time nerve impulses were generated by his inputs and processed by his bio-chip, which regulated the release of endorphins, adrenaline and dopamine levels, and so forth. As he experienced movement and action in the virtual world, his cerebral cortex processed it as normal, everyday sensory input: He felt gravity, pressure, skin sensation; he tasted, smelled, heard—all the senses were stimulated from the inside out.

True, not everyone was keen on becoming “wired” (particularly the older generation), but if you wanted to do anything of substance in the city these days, you had to have the chip. Without one, you got the leftover tables at finer restaur-

ants, the rear seats at movie theaters; you wouldn't get served alcohol at certain night clubs, wouldn't be allowed near certain popular beaches; hospitals, banks, libraries, public schools wouldn't accept you unless you were implanted. Driver's license? Social security? Voting? You certainly needed a chip if you wanted any of *those* privileges.

Most importantly: If you wanted to beta-test the latest social sims (like *SimpliCITY*), you *needed* the chip.

Bryan had had his implanted when he was a newborn. Most white-collars got theirs that way. Circumcision, implantation, vaccination, and he was set for life. If he ever got kidnapped, the feds would know exactly where he was at all times. He supposed, if his kidnappers were really hardcore, they could just cut the chip out, but that was the sort of thing you heard about on the hearsay channels—uneducated urban myths spread to explain the recent statistical increase in child mutilations. Bryan didn't worry, though: He didn't go outside much.

* * *

It was weird having dinner with his parents.

The first week of summer had already flashed past. Half-dressed in underwear and T-shirt (and wired to his portable audio player), Bryan sat at the kitchen table and dug into a carton of Chinese takeout. George and Leah were there too, though each was absorbed in his or her own world. Somewhere in the background the dirty dishes cast a faintly pungent odor over things, but nobody seemed to care—there was always time for chores later, tomorrow, next week. Right now

Bryan was scarfing his food; so was George, who held his plastic fork with one hand and the television remote with the other.

“News flash,” George said after a moment. He turned up the volume.

Bryan turned in his seat and stared at the screen. A political analyst was talking about terrorism and how, without proper economic muscle, domestic security was going to become a sideshow act:

“Cutting electives from public schools, closing down brick and mortar libraries in favor of electronic repositories—these sorts of practices have offered some additional cash flow, but it isn’t enough unless certain underlying fundamentals are fixed to protect America’s mainframes. The biometrics program needs to be rolled out nationally. Right now we have PC cafés, public shuttles, and highways open to anyone who has a few Patriots to spend. That means fundamentalists, terrorists have access to our distributed network, to physical areas of the city without being tracked—and if our computers are knocked offline, *we’re* knocked offline. Optional identification is not the solution. Rather, we need to take a proactive step: Anyone residing within our borders, anyone entering the country needs to be accounted for electronically. If we secure *ourselves*, we secure our country.”

Somewhere amidst all the mumbo-jumbo, Bryan felt a twinge of anxiety, and he wondered if his anti-virus program had been updating itself properly, wondered what it would be like to be cut off from the Net for any length of time (outside of school).

“I wouldn’t worry,” Leah said. “They’ve got redundancies

for these things, 1,024-kilobyte encryption keys, firewall protection, proxy servers—you have a greater chance of being struck by lightning than you do of losing your wireless connection.”

Bryan turned back to the television screen.

The analyst continued:

“The current administration is a work-in-progress. Not enough has been centralized just yet. As long as the state and county governments are free to dance around the issue, your best bet is to keep it simple. Go to work, go home. Stay away from malls, conventions, theme parks—any public place where there are a lot of people gathered. If you want to socialize, go online. These days, the VR clubs are just as good as the real thing, if not better. Take control. There’s no reason any law-abiding American has to place himself in harm’s way simply because of political red tape.”

“Sound advice,” George said, nodding. “Let the blue-collar punks and hippies thumb their noses at the biometrics system, but they’ll be the first to complain when one of their precious rock concerts or midnight raves is sabotaged by a group of nut-headed fundamentalists with an example to be made.”

Bryan laughed and finished his meal before returning once again to his bedroom kingdom.

* * *

Eating in cyberspace was about as nutritionally beneficial as breathing—but it *was* a social activity that no longer resulted in gluttony, allergic reactions, guilt . . . you could afford to eat

out whenever you wanted and not gain a pound.

Bryan and Sarah frequented a place called Peter's, which was one of the various establishments that had no dress code. Regardless of creed or costume, the attitude was more tolerant here—which was why Bryan was surprised when a trio of punked-out players stepped up to his table and snickered rudely.

"Is this the body you *wish* you had?" asked one of the players, pointing. He wore a neon green skinsuit over his sleek, athletic model.

Bryan frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I know who you are, *Bryan*," the neon bully said. "You're the little shrimp from school. I'm surprised that pretty-boy skin doesn't slip right off your bony little shoulders." He turned to Sarah. "And this is Fat Sarah, right? Gee—I didn't recognize her without her double chin."

"Watch it," Bryan warned, standing and clenching his fists. "Or else."

The neon bully stepped up. "Or else what?"

Bryan faltered. "This is a *comfort zone*. You can't do anything to us."

"Not unless you have the right software," said the neon bully, and he reached out, grabbed Bryan's arm as he called up his personal menu, launched a program called "Meltdown". Suddenly Bryan felt his virtual body shudder, disjoint itself as if he were made of ill-fitting scraps. When the process was over, he stood hunched over, his torso lopsided.

The malicious program had mutilated him, corrupted his model.

The neon bully and his friends laughed. One of them

reached for Sarah and held her arms at her sides so she couldn't click out. Bryan lunged forward, tried to operate his jagged anatomy—and all of the sudden he was frozen. Sarah was saying something, but her voice was on a delay, the sample-rate suddenly plummeting into a static soup—

—the connection cut out.

Bryan switched off his inputs and found himself back in his bedroom, the musty darkness aglow with light from his computer screen, an unsatisfied tremor in his gut. He was sweating.

Lowlife bastards! he thought, attempting unsuccessfully to log back on. At first he thought it was his computer, a program error or system lockup caused by the neon bully's malware, but everything was working, *SimpliCITY* was still running, though he was stuck at the options screen. After a moment's trial-and-error, he realized his Internet connection was down.

It felt funny to be back in his own body. For the past month—morning, afternoon, and night—he'd been Ominous; now he was merely *Bryan*, small and scrawny. His skin seemed not to fit, he had to reach farther for the inputs on his toes, his clothes seemed two sizes too large . . . he felt like an intruder in his own home.

Out in the hallway, George was already dressed and drawing on his jacket. "I'm going to check the receiver outside."

Leah had nothing else better to do, and Bryan was, with each passing minute, increasingly desperate to facilitate the revival of his Internet connection. Along with his mother, Bryan followed George downstairs and outside to the prom-

enade, where the other tenants (*all* of them, it seemed!) had converged in a sort of spontaneous fair.

“Hang tight,” George said. He patted Bryan’s shoulder and headed over to where the receiver antenna sat, a towering monolith aimed at the overcast sky. There were several other men and women standing close together, scratching their heads and furrowing their brows in perplexity over the situation. George said something and then hopped onto the receiver platform, started examining the equipment for physical anomalies.

Bryan took uncertain steps between clusters of men and women, young and old, people he’d been vaguely aware of as his neighbors but whose physicality in this instance set butterflies to his stomach. There were a few children clinging to the pant-legs or skirt tails of their parents. No adolescents. Everyone seemed on edge.

He drew up beside one small group. A forty-something man (Bryan was almost sure his name was Goudie) was taking long, luxurious puffs from a strong-smelling *Perfecxion* as he blew scented smoke and righteous epiphanies into the chilled evening air:

“It’s all part of their plan: Knock out our Internet connection, get us out on the streets waiting around for the repair guys to fix things, and *BAM!* A car full of martyrs comes careening around the corner, a shuttle flies overhead spewing out anthrax dust across the entire city—an escaped convict straps some explosives to his chest and extinguishes half a million lives in the blink of an eye. The whole point of the Net is safety, the privilege of being able to interact with the world without having to put our necks on the line just to buy

groceries. Office slaves like us, we're supposed to be a step above all the rest of the degenerates, but then something like today's outage happens . . . we might as well be *blue-collars*."

An older man, clad in faux-leather and denim, chuckled and said, "That's why we're the *beta-testers*. Catch all the bugs now so that there are no surprises when they roll the final system out. The shit's gotta feed an entire *city* for God's sake."

"Rubbish," Goudie grunted. "They have redundancies, backups—have you ever been to the mainframe node? A mile-wide crater of clustered computers, connected to their own power supply and running day and night. It's impossible to knock them out, be it by power outages, acts of God, or jihad terrorists! No, the government does this on *purpose*. A social test or something. See how we react. It may be part of the quality assurance process, but I say it's all hooley. We work our asses off five days a week—we *pay* for the service, beta or not, so why shouldn't we get it? find some other test group to do this psychological crap."

The old man chuckled again; it was an empty, hollow noise. "I tell you one thing: I'd much rather be inside right now, with a nice cup of coffee, than standing out here. God knows how many misfits are just waiting around for the right moment to pounce. If it weren't for the security gate, I'd never even have come down."

Bryan looked away from the group, glanced nervously towards the street. There was a vagrant—skin like leather, clothes like soggy husks—sitting on the adjacent curb and staring right at him. He wondered if the man had always been there or if he only came out on nights like these.

Nights when the world came to a halt.

George and Leah eventually met up with him again and reported that there was nothing physically wrong with the receiver. He spoke with them for a while about nothing. Eventually the novelty of the situation wore off, and they retreated back into their apartment.

Leah pouted wistfully at the blank television screen, then started tidying up the kitchen; George sat dutifully in front of his computer and waited for the servers to go back up. Bryan went back to his room, stood for a moment in the decadence and considered picking up the dirty laundry off the floor . . . but then he realized he'd have to clear out his closet as well to make space—so he took to fidgeting instead, checking the computer cables, running a virus scan.

Passing the time and trying not to think too much about the circumstances involving the incident at Peter's.

A while later, Leah asked him to take out the trash—five heaping grocery bags that had been accumulating beneath the kitchen sink for weeks. Though he resented the task, he nevertheless set himself to it.

Halfway down the outside stairwell, he realized he couldn't remember where the garbage bins were. He cursed indiscriminately and stepped into the drizzle, his breath coming in hot white puffs. He could hear police sirens in the distance; the noise seemed to echo and reverberate through the promenade, which was now completely empty.

How lonely it is without everyone milling about, he thought. Like an empty chatroom.

He wanted to be back inside, back behind locked doors and shuttered windows, the warm office chair cradling him as

a loved one might. To and from school was all he was used to; anything else was unnecessary (and dangerous) because it was *real*. Not like in a game, where you could just restart if you needed to, but cold and real and terrifying.

The garbage bins, it turned out, were tucked into a mossy crevice behind the apartment complex. Bryan lifted the rickety lid—and let loose an inadvertent yelp as he heard a frantic scuffling from within. He jumped back; the garbage bags slipped from his hands and fell noisily onto the ground.

“Easy there, son,” came a ragged voice from behind.

Bryan jumped again, turned around to see some sort of living monstrosity coming towards him, a flesh engraving, white-whiskered and snow-headed. The man’s custodial uniform hung off him like a shed skin not yet discarded—he was carrying a toolbox.

A blue-collar custodian, Bryan realized.

“Hi there,” the man said, extending his hand. “A bit jumpy tonight, eh?”

Bryan flinched, unconsciously lifted his hand into the air. When his personal menu failed to pop up, he blushed, remembering that he wasn’t online, and quickly stuffed both hands into his pockets.

The custodian chuckled. “I suppose that’s the currently popular greeting method these days?”

“Um, no,” said Bryan. “I was . . . stretching.”

“I see,” said the custodian. He looked up at the sky. “Look at that cloud cover. Bet it’ll be drizzling all night.”

Bryan shifted from foot to foot and bit his lip. One of the garbage bags had ruptured at his feet; he wondered if he might be able to persuade the custodian to handle it for him.

“Um . . . have you seen anything on the news about the outage?”

“Outage?”

“Yeah . . . Internet’s down.”

“Oh, why, no. Nothing on the radio about that.”

“The radio?”

“Sure. I prefer to play it by ear—radio only. Don’t even have a TV.”

“No TV?” Bryan croaked, eyes widening.

“Nope. No Internet either.”

“But . . . what do you *do*, then?”

The custodian raised his toolbox. “Work keeps me busy. In my free time I like to read—and not the e-books or virtual texts you find in the fancy computer cafés, but *real* paper hardcovers, stuff from the twenties, from the 1900s, even, before the paper conservation laws went into effect. Sometimes, though, I just relax and listen to music, the old compact discs my father passed down to me. He had some good stuff: Serrie, Matsui, Garrison—all the classics.”

Bryan nodded. He understood music (though he couldn’t for the life of him recognize any of the names the custodian had just rattled off), but reading old-style? Plowing through a full-length novel without any SmartNotes hovering in the margin, providing definitions and federally-approved interpretations for the words and phrases he didn’t understand? Nuts! Utterly crazy!

“Wow,” he said after a moment. He wasn’t really impressed; he just didn’t know what else to say that would help him reach a swift conclusion to the conversation.

Thankfully, the custodian started to turn away after a mo-

ment. “Well, I’d best be on my way—there’s a broken kitchen faucet in C-5. Oh, and don’t mind ol’ Ginger there.” He gestured at the garbage bin. “Her cat-senses tend to make her skittish around people, but otherwise she’s harmless.”

Bryan nodded and watched the custodian recede into the darkness. Briefly, he heard the sound of the man’s steps as he made his way into the apartment building, then there was simply the ambient noise of the city, the pitter-patter of rain-drops striking the concrete, Ginger’s foraging—Bryan took a deep breath and was glad to be alone again. He crouched, stuffing the remains of a TV dinner back into the ruptured garbage bag, and cursed himself for allowing a mere blue-collar to upset him so. In fact, now that he thought about it, he hated the custodian with a passion, always had—even though he didn’t know the man’s name and had only ever seen him on a handful of vaguely-remembered occasions.

Doesn’t matter, Bryan thought as he deposited his refuse into Ginger’s rusty abyss. *He sucks anyway—this world sucks. Let him and all the other blue-collars run rampant in their shit-kingdom. I could cream them all in SimpliCITY . . . when it’s back up.*

The stark memory of the custodian’s wrinkled flesh and malnourished frame stuck in his head long after he’d gone back upstairs to his bedroom. It made him anxious to get back online, back where all the chemicals in his blood were baselined.

For the remainder of the evening he paced back and forth in front of his desk and chewed his fingernails, inebriated himself with lukewarm cola from a two-liter bottle that had been sitting on the floor beside his bed for a few weeks.

Around midnight the servers came back up, and he let loose a long sigh that had been accumulating in his lungs since his meeting with the custodian. He attached his inputs, signed on, and found Sarah watching TV in her start-zone. She'd switched to a completely different player model.

"Wow," Bryan said, sitting beside her. "Look at you."

"That was pretty messed up," Sarah said. She scooted away from him.

"What?"

"Leaving me there with those jerks."

Bryan frowned. "I didn't *leave* you there—I was kicked off. Some kind of glitch in the system."

"Whatever."

"It's true."

"It doesn't matter." Sarah faced him; she had the mother of all scowls on her face. "You weren't there. You didn't see how they made fun of me, made me feel like nothing. They took a picture they scanned from the yearbook and turned it into a pig-face. They made me wear it. They held me down and told me to shout it out loud so everyone could hear, *Pig Face! Pig Face!* They called me names just like they did in school—they were *blue-collars*, Bryan. They had no right!"

Bryan reached for her, but she shrugged away once again.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"I came here to see you—"

"Go."

Bryan paused for a moment, perplexed, a bit disappointed, then reached for his menu. "Fine," he said, and clicked out.

* * *

Summer wound onward, and Sarah seemed to recover only partially from the incident at Peter's. She still met with Bryan from time to time, but it seemed out of courtesy rather than genuine interest (sex, at this point, was out of the question). Points didn't seem to matter either. On one occasion, he even approached her after a frag match, offered her half his earnings if she would just sleep with him, give him a chance to make things all better with his "Ominous touch." Naturally, this sort of approach resulted in immediate rejection.

He focused himself on other matters, other chatroom acquaintances, frag matches, and, towards the end, retribution.

The idea came to him one restless night in early August, when his tireless libido had him tossing and turning, thinking of ways to regain his former bedroom privileges with Sarah. Revenge may not have been a worthwhile endeavor in the traditional sense, but now that he had a lot more free time on his hands, the little pangs at the back of his mind had begun festering. He went online, signed into his *SimpliCITY* account, and accessed the player profile database. He had no idea who the neon bully had been, so he performed a search, calling up all male players who were using models with neon green skinsuits. There were more than two-thousand; he sifted through each and every one, exhausting the early morning hours until he matched up one particular player with the access log for the Peter's server—and by the time he'd collected all the information he needed, he was livid: It was the neon bully's fault his Internet connection had gone down, the neon bully's fault he was so skinny, the neon bully's fault

Sarah wouldn't put out anymore.

He made sure his proxy was working. Then he logged on, found the neon bully lounging in a chatroom. Without allowing himself any second thoughts, he strode to the bully's table, tapped him on the shoulder, and immediately initiated the Trojan program he'd prepared beforehand.

The neon bully screamed, and even though it was a digitized recreation, Bryan felt the terror as code became curse, bytes became daggers, and every synapse tapped by the bully's inputs was ignited with pain. The beautiful part about this particular Trojan was that it ran with the privacy flag on. The neon bully's table was opaque to everyone else in the chatroom; none of the moderators would know what was happening for a long while—at least not until serious neurological damage had been done.

That'll show you, Bryan thought.

He clicked out, returned to the *SimpliCITY* options screen, where he entered the player customization module and deleted his model from the database. He also cleared out his history and cache files, overwriting each sector no less than forty times. If anyone came asking questions (which he was sure they wouldn't), there'd be no evidence.

Stomach growling, he left his room and went into the kitchen, which was dark and empty (his parents were still locked in their room, working or playing on their computer). The clock on the wall said it was three in the afternoon, though all the windows were shuttered. He poured himself some cereal and sat alone at the table as he ate.

The kitchen stank again.

* * *

Internet time is different from real time by about a third (one minute of Internet time is equal to three minutes of real time). This is mostly due to the little, almost imperceivable idiosyncrasies, such as network traffic, ping times, and hardware capabilities. Spend twenty minutes online and you've lost an hour in the real world. You could whittle half your life away just sifting through all the e-mail, waiting for all the downloads.

As such, the final month of summer had Bryan scrambling to make the most of his free time. He ignored his parents (they weren't around much anyway), ignored his chores; he wore the same sets of clothes for days at a time, neglected food and water for as long as his stomach could handle it. He sometimes pulled eighteen-hour days just to get done all the things he wanted to get done.

Some of it (as much as he allowed himself to admit) had to do with Sarah's newfound apathy towards him. Though she continued to spend most of her free time online, she often refused any offered social opportunities. Every now and then she'd talk with Bryan, but anything further and she clammed up, made an excuse to leave. For her eighteenth birthday, she had a brief conversation with Bryan via her pager before abruptly announcing that she had other matters to attend to.

The resolution to such a situation was fleeting, though Bryan found that if he kept himself busy, kept himself from agonizing over how to patch things up, he was more easily satisfied by the naïve notion that time would eventually heal all wounds. Still, on the occasions when he would be alone in

his start-zone and thinking of how it used to be, remembering how it was to have Sarah lying curled against him, warm and comforting . . . he wished she would simply stop her moping and spread herself open, virtual body and soul—as it was meant to be. Especially now that he had a new model, a new set of hacked sensations for her to share.

He gave her some time to reorder herself. Finally, one day when he could stand it no more, he paged her—kept on paging her over and over despite the fact that she was obviously ignoring him. Her messenger listed her as being in her start-zone; he went there, got stuck outside the door when his password failed.

By now he was infuriated; he wanted results. It wasn't the most eloquent way of doing things, but he nevertheless went to one of the warez chatrooms and found some information on how to override the security on most standard start-zones. After five minutes of working to exploit a firewall vulnerability, he was in, standing in the middle of scattered pillows and discarded clothing and Sarah writhing exquisitely beneath the ministrations of her lover.

Bryan must have said something, made a noise, for suddenly her eyes snapped open and she swore out loud as she untangled herself from her partner, covered herself with a spare bed sheet. The shaded polygons comprising her skin were glistening.

“Oh-geez-Bryan,” she gasped.

He backed away, forgot for a moment that he was in cyberspace and fumbled for the doorknob (when he could have just as easily clicked out).

Sarah stumbled to her feet, stepped towards him, tried to

explain as, behind her, the man she'd been fornicating with clicked out. "I'd never do this to you in real life, but it's just the Internet, right? It's not real—you have to understand! You're my friend, but . . . a woman also needs strength, a protector. What I mean is . . . after what happened at Peter's . . . you're special to me, of course, but I need more, you know? We're both adults now, you understand. We have to make provisions for the future. Oh, Bryan—please don't be upset."

Bryan's arm reacted of its own accord, and he clicked out, exited the game entirely. Alone in his bedroom, he sat for a moment with lenses still dulling his vision, inputs still tingling on fingers and toes—the real world—and tried to think of what to do, how to process the realization that his girl had been with someone else.

The tart, he thought, though he couldn't quite make himself angry enough to really mean it. *She couldn't wait, couldn't wait to be eighteen and out of school so she could latch on to the first guy she met who'd provide for her—and now all she has to do is put out for him whenever he asks and she'll never have to get a real job.*

He tried to shrug off the humiliation, tell himself that Sarah had merely been a girl he'd fooled around with online—after all, outside of *SimpliCITY*, they hardly spoke to each other. Even so . . . it hurt.

He was tired. As of late, his sleep patterns had been erratic; he might have dozed off, but, as usual, his brain wouldn't quiet itself. He might have eaten something, then, but the thought of food made him nauseous. Something in his gut threatened to turn over, so he ignored hunger, denied fatigue, went online once again—and all the physical aches and

pains became background noise.

There was a frag match being held at an arena called Satan's Gate. Bryan joined an armada of hideous creatures, ravenous demons, grotesque aliens, and slaughtered as many members of the opposing team as possible. In such fashion he lived entirely online for a week. Maybe he slipped out to use the bathroom once in a while, maybe he foraged here or there for stale potato chips—he couldn't remember. He was too distraught, too upset—and it was ultimately easier to simply flood his brain with sensory input at all times than it was to cope. He might have started to enjoy himself, even—until, during a crucial moment during a match, his vision flickered dark and he stumbled unexpectedly onto the virtual ground. All around him the game continued, he heard the echoes of gunfire, players exchanging quips, and all he could do was listen as he lay frozen. His thoughts became jumbled, and a dull hum filled his head—then he became utterly disconnected from everything.

Dead inside himself.

* * *

The bloodied fallout from a perfect frag drew Bryan forth from a deep trance. He opened his eyes, rolled onto his back, found he was covered in meaty bits of virtual flesh not his own. Somewhere nearby a player cackled fiendishly and then scurried off in search of further prey.

Bryan reached for his personal menu, clicked out of the Satan's Gate arena. Glancing at the time stamp, he saw that he'd been asleep for nearly twelve hours.

He signed out of *SimpliCITY*, removed his contact lenses—he was back in his bedroom, back in his shivering, malnourished body, all thin and pale and pathetic, and it felt absolutely perverse.

He disconnected himself from his computer and sat staring wildly around the room, his heart still fluttering in his chest, nerve endings nearly going into shock. The air was stale, putrid—his own body odor was enough to make him gag. Days going without a bath, the sweat accumulated from a dozen simulated battles now staining his skin and matting his hair—he was parched.

Never thought I'd have enough of this, he thought, getting to his feet. He kicked off his inputs, and stood as still as possible for a moment as the blood rushed to his head, making him dizzy. There was a door at the other end of a field of discarded clothes, soda cans, candy-wrappers—stuff that has somehow grown into a two-foot tall pile of its own accord. He waded through, opened the door, stepped out into the hallway. He was vaguely aware that he was naked, but it didn't matter because he was delirious—and besides, his parents' door was closed. He could hear the usual newsfeed audio emanating from inside, see the neon glow shining beneath the door.

He made his way towards the kitchen. There was a horrid smell in the air, like the most rotten garbage. It had been growing over the past week or so; he'd been purposely ignoring it, hoping that either George or Leah to take care of it. Evidently they'd been following the same line of thought.

Bryan swore under his breath, retreated into his room to look for his pants and shoes so he could take the trash out. He

found the pants, but the shoes . . . he'd forgotten where he'd put them, probably hadn't worn them since the server outage.

Back in the kitchen: The place was a mess, rife with a foulness all its own—but underneath there was something else. Something not even decaying cabbage and beans could produce. Bryan looked for fresh garbage bags to wrap the old ones in, but he couldn't find any. He opened the fridge and searched vainly for a soda, a bite to eat; there was nothing but old cheese, petrified Chinese takeout. The racks were virtually empty, and he realized, subconsciously, that he'd been eating all the food in small bits, here and there.

"Mom!" he called, becoming irritable. Only minutes away from the Internet and already he was feeling an ache to get back.

In the hall again, he stopped outside his parents' room. The smell here was horrendous.

"Mom! Dad!" he hollered, banging on the door, sniffing, finding chilled snot trickling down his upper lip. Vaguely, he recalled coming down with a cold earlier in the week, but had not paid much attention to it.

He banged a few more times before grabbing the knob and shoving the door open—and catching himself in mid-step, his limbs stuck in a momentary delay as his brain tried to process the scene before him: George and Leah, sitting together at their computer, caught in a sickening embrace, the skin peeling off their faces, tiny flies and beetles feasting on half-jellied eyes, the odor of human decay washing over Bryan in a rush of stale air.

He stumbled backward, the reality hitting him—*dead*, he thought. *Days ago, weeks, maybe . . . my God . . .*

Holding his pants up by the waist so they wouldn't slip off his bony hips, Bryan turned and ran. He fumbled with the locks on the front door, tore it open, stumbled out into the corridor, down past identical doors on either side. He slammed his fists against several, screaming for help as he went, but nobody answered. Maybe they didn't want to answer—maybe they *couldn't*.

Outside, the city air was acrid, full of noise and exhaust. It was light out—it shouldn't have been, it should have been night. Bryan tried to be certain, but his biological clock had been turned upside down.

There was yellow police tape draped all across the security fence. When he tried to let himself out, his password failed—the gates were all sealed from the outside with heavy padlocks. He didn't understand what he was seeing, what was wrong with this real-not-real world. His hands shook, he saw cars pass by but they were like shaded polygons. Pedestrians walking on the other side of the street had become soulless sprites, and they seemed not to hear his cries for help. The ones who did merely looked away, quickened their pace. Bryan wanted to click his personal menu, found his hand reaching up into the air, trying once, twice, three times when he realized it wouldn't work.

Nothing worked.

He sneezed. The pressure in his lungs caught him off guard and he felt pain in his ribs. He thought of the custodian, how he'd hated the man for being old, for being eccentric—for being real.

The entire apartment complex was locked down tight. Bryan tried every entrance, to no avail. By the time he'd

made a complete circuit of the campus he was coughing and sneezing, and his bare feet were caked with mud. Still gripping his pants about his waist, he made his way to a nearby stairwell and seated himself on the bottom step. Between bouts of tears, fits of coughing, he tried to make sense of his situation (how *bad* he come to awaken in a world as mad as this?). Obviously, something had gone wrong, there had been some sort of accident, but why had the authorities not checked on his family, on anyone else's family, before condemning the complex?

It was all too scary to think about. He couldn't handle the fear and uncertainty; he cried, holding himself for what seemed like hours. Eventually, as the sky reddened and the light started to fade, he knew there was no one coming for him—and so he decided that this world couldn't possibly be real. Of course it couldn't be real.

He left the stairs, slowly walked back inside the complex, up to the fifth floor where the door to his parents' apartment still hung open, allowing the horrid stench free reign. He went inside and to his room, where he sat at his desk and attached the inputs to his fingers and toes. The familiar voice welcomed him back online, where it was warm and clean and safe.

Bryan's fear settled itself. His synaptic processes distributed themselves across the Net as he checked his e-mail, read the news, played the games. His cold, the infection devouring his sinuses, the hunger pangs spearing his stomach—the faux-world he'd been born into—was a faraway memory, and even as the memory began to fade he was convinced there was no place he'd rather be.

Line 43

“Good morning,” said the bus driver.

The man in the denim sherpa jacket stepped onto the platform, dropped two-ten into the farebox for a Day Pass, and moved down the aisle. As he went, he took note of this morning’s particular sampling of riders: a trio of Hispanic women towards the front, laundry baskets in hand, chattering cheerfully in Spanish; behind them, on the driver’s side, a younger woman, hair still damp and stringy from the shower, a fine layer of mascara doing its best to draw attention away from the swollen circles under her eyes as she gazed sullenly out the window; several seats down, a beefy, mustached Caucasian man with his face buried in *The Orange County Register* as he picked at some sort of scab wound on his cheek; behind him, two university students conversing in Japanese as they pointed out items in a battered copy of *Import Tuner*.

There were others as well, but most noticeable was a pair of men sitting at the rear of the bus. Their discussion carried across the entire compartment (actually, it was the one wearing the patched Raiders jersey who was doing most of the

talking; his companion, a prematurely gray forty-something in white Polo and slacks, merely nodded agreeably and uttered a word or two every now and then) and seemed to have something to do with politics.

Denim seated himself beside the mismatched duo and smiled warmly.

“Hello there,” greeted Slacks, evidently in search of an opportunity to relax his jaded attention span. “Sure is one heck of a morning—chilly enough to get your teeth chattering, eh?”

Jersey, having been caught in mid-sentence, nodded politely enough, adjusted his Raiders jacket, and said, “Cold enough for a nice flu outbreak, no less.”

Slacks chuckled and gestured at his companion. “We were just having a little discussion about this and that.”

“It’s the whole population-control bullshit,” Jersey continued. “*They’d* love it if we all dropped dead tomorrow. All of us in the projects and the ghettos and the cramped sardine-can apartment complexes where they’d just as easily have built golf courses and country clubs for *themselves*. You see, none of us matters—they want to whittle us down so that the planet’s population can be managed more easily.”

“You don’t say,” murmured Slacks amusedly.

“It’s been going on for centuries. A controlled test here or there, now and then, to see how the general public, how the hospitals and doctors and nurses react. HIV, AIDS, polio, SARS, West Nile—you think it’s *just* global warming that’s making it easier for us folks in the northern hemisphere to contract all this crap?”

“Well—”

“You *bet* it isn’t!” Jersey wagged his finger at Denim (who hadn’t spoken at all, though his mere presence seemed to have given him automatic membership in the discussion). “Every good strategy needs testing before deployment. These biological weapons of mass destruction—they need tweaking so that they can get the job done without spoiling what’s left over. Like with the neutron bomb, ‘Clean Killing,’ and so forth. Even *that* wasn’t good enough because it was too obvious—Americans don’t like war, though they’ve certainly grown accustomed to the benefits of winning. No, the wars of the future will be fought in laboratories and walk-in clinics.”

Slacks shifted in his seat, crossing one leg over the other. “Come now. The government isn’t all lies and secrecy.”

“Of course it is! That’s *exactly* what they’re all about!”

“And who are *they*, exactly?”

“The men at the top, the ones in control—pharmaceutical companies, stockholders, Skull and Bones initiates; the corporate elite who buy our congressmen and presidents for us. The global government.”

“Now, now,” chuckled Slacks. “That’s a little over the top, don’t you think?”

Jersey’s nostrils flared. “Have you ever met a politician?”

“Well, no, can’t say that I have—”

“Exactly my point! We only *think* we know who we elect into office, but it’s only a small smattering of people *they* select to get the 15% of the votes required for the public debates, and then once one of them’s in office, it’s business as usual, keeping you and me in the dark, keeping us at our menial jobs so that we can keep paying our bills, our taxes, and when we’re not working for them, we’re sitting drunk in

front of the television and allowing ourselves to be spoon-fed the latest political and societal propaganda.”

Slacks shook his head, paid an amused glance at Denim. “I think you’re overreacting. *We* vote these people into office, don’t we? *People*, like you and me, who have just as many problems as we do.”

“Yeah—problems *they* create.”

“And why would anyone want to make their day job *harder*, exactly?”

Jersey nodded and closed the gap between himself and Slacks. “Let’s go back to the SARS example. Twenty years ago there was the first outbreak, but it was a flop because not enough people overreacted, not enough people demanded the vaccinations—it didn’t spread far enough. The general populace’s health was too good, you see.”

“Oh?”

“*They* blamed it on the wide availability of vitamins and fortified foods. Everybody was taking care of themselves, and so they were less susceptible to the latest outbreaks. Similar flus seasons followed, and each time there was a shortage of this, a contaminated shipment of that—and most folks lost the blood lust for vaccinations altogether. So you know what *they* did, what they’d been trying to do ever since all our precious little modern societies inked the CODEX deals in the 1960s?”

Slacks shrugged. “What’s that?”

“*They* wanted to have certain laws passed that controlled the production of vitamin supplements for all countries with UN membership. You’d have to have a doctor’s prescription for something as simple as vitamin C—so all of us Joe

Schmoes without medical insurance would have to pay through our asses if we wanted to see a doctor about *possibly* taking supplements. ‘It’ll never happen,’ they all said—but *whammo!* Dupe a major vitamin distributor or two with a class-action lawsuit, cite a couple well-to-do school kids overdosing on herbal supplements, and you have a whole new War On Drugs campaign fronting the Safer Supplements Act of ’07. Oh, there might still be some basic placebos in the drug stores, but they’re mostly cellulose, so watered down as to be utterly useless—for our children’s *safety*, of course.

“Most of us just say ‘fuck it’ and stop taking supplements altogether—which isn’t bad in and of itself, but each time we hit the latest and greatest flu season, we have to take on a new strain of bugs without the benefit of a fortified immune system.

“And that’s how it goes: You take out a portion of the elderly one year, a portion of the young children the next, and on down the road. Eventually all you have left are the strongest adults, the *soldier ants*—the workers who keep Corporate America in business by paving roads for the elite, by building their offices for them and then going the extra mile, even, by doing their paperwork, managing their databases.

“Whittling our lives away, that’s what we’re doing—until we’re too old to be of any use; then it’s the unfortunate mosquito bite, a sip from the tap on the wrong day, a tainted package of beef, and *poof!*—one less population statistic to have to tally.”

“That’s a shame,” said Slacks (once it was obvious Jersey was allowing for a brief intermission). “I remember the vitamin C tablets my mom used to give me. They were cherry-

flavored—ten dollars a bottle, from the health food store.”

“It’s heresy!” Jersey’s hands convulsed upwards. “You know what I saw at the grocery store the other day? This huge poster of a gigantic red bell pepper, fresher, juicier, and shinier-looking than anything you’ve ever seen. The caption read, ‘So what if fruits and vegetable are losing half their vitamins—who cares?’ Now *that’s* a blatant example of what’s wrong with America. It’s all about appearances. Any manner of maladies could be festering under the surface, but as long as if everything *looks* good, then it’s good enough.” He coughed, reached into his pocket and withdrew a small bag of cough drops. “It’s a damned shame, because I pass the coffee shop on the way home every evening, and I see these gorgeous young women—petite beauties, probably in college—with their tight little asses, sculpted waists, perfectly-shaped breasts, skin like smooth porcelain . . . each and every one of them has a latte in one hand, cigarette in the other, and this sullen, devastated look on their face—as if being young and divinely beautiful is a *curse*.”

“So, they all hang out gulping down enough caffeine to turn their livers into meatloaf; that, as well as the cigarettes and Ritalin, will make them *fine* contributors to the Pharmaceutical Fund when they’re in their thirties and they need six types of medications to keep their organs from grinding to a halt.”

Slacks nodded in agreement as the bus abruptly slowed. They passed a car accident, and everyone on Slacks’ side turned around in their seats to peer out the window just as the bloodied driver was excavated from the ruins of his Lexus.

“This’ll be on the evening news,” Jersey said, shaking his head. “Sponsored by the latest commercial from Progressive Auto Insurance.”

The accident past, Slacks turned in his seat and faced Jersey again, while Denim quietly, patiently observed from behind heavy eyelids. “Tragic . . . simply tragic. They say it’s safer to fly—then again, I don’t take a jet to and from work every day.”

“Such is life.” Jersey leaned back and closed his eyes. “I had a dream once, where I was at this fancy restaurant—real hoity-toity, people dressed in tuxedos and formal gowns and all. How I got invited, I have no idea. Maybe I was the friend of an ambassador or some prime minister—maybe my wife was President. Anyhow, we were all there eating off golden plates and drinking from crystal goblets, and the toastmaster held up his glass. He started talking about the future, how humankind was going to flourish once again, so long as we didn’t repeat the mistakes of our past. Then he went over to a window and threw open the curtains, and I could see we were up high somewhere, looking down into the valley. Orange County, Anaheim, L.A.—it was all laid to waste beneath us.

“‘500 million, worldwide,’ the toastmaster told us. That was how many were left after whatever catastrophe leveled the playing field. He mentioned how, in the weeks, months, and years to come, we would rebuild our society, draw forth a new civilization from the ashes.” Jersey put his hand to his head. “He said, ‘We will send a fleet of farmers and carpenters into all the great valleys, and we will transform the devastation into a prosperous utopia.’ And everyone cheered, but I didn’t—I could *feel* the shame hanging over us like a fog.

We *knew* how we'd gotten there, how we'd *allowed* a third World War, how we'd *allowed* the rainy-day retroviruses to escape into the wild, how we made *sure* there was only enough vaccine for those on the list. In this new world we were starting fresh, and we needed a clean slate. There was no room for error, no room for the teenage misfit shooting up heroine in his mother's 1-bedroom apartment, no need for the sixty-five-year-old retiree who picked up tin cans on Saturday mornings. The Earth was running out of room—so we *made* room." He opened his eyes, panned a perilous gaze between Slacks and Denim. "500 million. Can you believe it? That was the only time I ever got sick to my stomach from a *dream*."

"Thank goodness it was only a dream, then," said Slacks.

Jersey blanched. "You're not *listening*. It starts with the little things: a 'harmless' dream every now and then, a *feeling* of knowing better—a treaty signed here, an unsavory bit of legislation passed there. Before you know it, the future catches up with you."

Pulling the stop-cord, Slacks smiled and stood, holding onto the safety rail for support. "Well, my friend, looks like this meeting of the Conspiracy Clique has come to an end. See you at five-thirty?"

Jersey grunted something feral and nodded as he buried his face in a bus schedule.

Momentarily, when the bus reached its stop, Denim stood as well and moved towards the door. He made sure to grasp each and every safety rung along the way, linking his gloved hands with the leather, kneading it in an efficient, subtle manner. He followed Slacks down the platform, out onto the side-

walk, where the downtown Anaheim office buildings rose all around. The bus pulled away, momentarily swathing them both in a cloud of hot steam and exhaust.

“Say,” he asked, waving at Slacks. “You got the time?”

Slacks looked at his wristwatch. “Seven forty-three.”

“Thanks.” A pause, followed by a low chuckle. “Back on the bus . . . that was a pretty intense conversation, eh?”

“Sometimes,” said Slacks, “I think the only plague America is suffering from is paranoia.”

Both men had a chuckle. Slacks reached into his pocket for a cigarette; Denim reached into his own for the moistened sponge—

“A few too many science fiction books, if you know what I mean.”

—ran his gloved fingers over the honeycombed surface, just as he’d done before exiting the bus—

“Especially considering most of us were raised by the television. Can’t blame people like Av for taking the daily headlines a little too seriously.”

—and waited for the right moment.

“But I’m not one to judge. My neighbors are my neighbors. I don’t mind listening.” Slacks lit his cigarette, took a deep, long drag, and then stepped forward, holding out his free hand. “I’ve got to get to the office, you know?”

Denim nodded and, with the friendliest smile you ever saw, withdrew his hand from his pocket, offered it to Slacks. The handshake lasted not two seconds—but it was enough. “Take care.”

“Yes, take care,” Slacks said.

They parted ways—Slacks to whatever nine-to-five job

he had waiting for him down the way, Denim to the next bus stop, the next conversation. Along the way, he removed his gloves and dumped them, contaminated as they were, into a public wastebasket. Then he drew on a fresh pair from his satchel.

He checked his schedule. If he hustled, he would make the eight o'clock to Huntington Beach. Jogging briskly to the nearest stop, he arrived just as the bus pulled up. He helped an elderly lady aboard and, flashing his Day Pass, looked for a seat.

The Ninth Life of Vincent Nguyen

As a child, I was a connoisseur of fear: Fear of falling, fear of heights, fear of sticky school bus seats and fear of grimy public toilets, fear of mad cow burgers and pointy-glass Halloween candy—I collected phobias like other children collected comic books, and when I wasn't whittling away my time being afraid of something, I was meticulously cultivating the art of fearing fear itself.

My parents were neither the cause nor the solution. They adequately provided the basics from the start: food, clothing, shelter, regular doctor and dentist visits. When I sneaked out nights to take in the ten o'clock news, they promptly emerged from their bedroom (bleary-eyed and fuzzy-haired), turned off the television, and whisked me back to my bed.

My mother would always ask, "Why ever do you like to watch such things as car crashes, bank robberies, and medical mishaps right before bed? You'll fill your head with worries and nightmares!"

It was quite the other way around, actually. I had been born with an anxious mind. Watching the news, violent

movies, pulling away from my parents at the grocery store so I could catch a glimpse of the accident in the parking lot—it was my way of confirming that I was not the only person in the world who endured a certain amount of misery. No mixture of coaxing or coddling, no bedtime story told with motherly love could settle me enough to sleep with the lights off (or keep me from dreading the dawning of each new day).

My parents didn't quite know how to deal with me, and so they left most of the treatment for my condition to time and the hope that I would someday grow out of my phobias. I might have easily become an introvert—one of those people who lived alone in an ultra-clean apartment and stocked a warehouse of soaps and household cleansers in every cabinet, cupboard, and drawer—had I not made friends early on with someone I can only describe as an angel in human form.

My angel's name was Vincent Nguyen, and I met him in the second grade. I had already earned a solid reputation as a freak-child in the classroom (avoiding the water fountain, wiping down my seat before lessons, meticulously grooming my hands and fingernails after using pencils or crayons), so friends were a rarity. In fact, most of my interaction with other human beings was restricted to lunchtime episodes involving certain boys who felt it appropriate to exercise their burgeoning masculinity by making me the victim of every schoolyard prank there ever was. There were many times when I would sit alone at one end of the playground, pondering whether or not to let myself cry as I wiped mud from my shirt, spitballs from my hair.

Sometimes a random teacher would happen by, ask what was wrong, and politely nod as I pointed at my attackers and

blubbered something unintelligible. Inevitably, it became obvious that I was the Boy Who Couldn't Be Helped, and whatever sympathy I might have otherwise gleaned was quickly replaced by a flustered attempt to put a lid on a million frightening burdens treacherously packaged in child form.

Vincent, however, never shied away from my cacophonies.

On one particular afternoon, during physical education class (one of the few occasions when I allowed myself to be forced into shorts and T-shirt), I had relegated myself to sitting apart from the other children after skinning my knee on the asphalt. Vincent—still a distant acquaintance, at this point—came over to me, put his arm around my shoulders and asked what was wrong.

My first instinct was to recoil, to brush off my neck and shoulders with an upturned corner of my shirtsleeve—but Vincent's manner was so accommodating, so warm that I couldn't help but feel immediately (and inexplicably) comforted by his presence. (As an added bonus, he didn't have that sweet-and-sour smell most other children—especially boys—did.)

"Not in the mood to play?" he asked.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I don't like playing with the others—they always throw the ball so it hits my glasses, and they never let me make a shot, and they call me Kenny-Wenny when I fall." I don't know why I mentioned that last part up front; "Kenny-Wenny" was a name I abhorred more than life itself—I didn't need to go around introducing myself as such.

“They’re dumb, I know,” Vincent laughed. Then he leaned in close and whispered into my ear, “See James over there?”

Looking, I nodded. James was one of the taller, more popular boys, and he often humiliated the maladjusted for bonus social points.

“I caught him playing with his ding-dong in the classroom.”

The two of us bowed our heads together and started giggling fiendishly, and I suddenly found that I could tolerate Vincent without the usual qualms.

From that point forward, we started spending our lunches together, every single day of the week. A month into it I realized that I’d somehow made my first real friend.

Once my mother discovered our relationship, she literally jumped at the opportunity and made sure she connected with Vincent’s parents, made sure it was clear their son was always welcome at our house for after-school get-togethers or weekend sleepovers. Luckily, Mr. and Mrs. Nguyen were nice folks, and sympathetic to my situation.

It was an odd pairing: Vincent was Asian, dark-haired, and athletic; I was Russian, blond, and lanky. Spotting us together on the street, one might surely wonder what two boys such as ourselves had in common. Indeed, we were quite different and had wildly varying tastes as our own individual personalities developed over the years. Vincent liked rollerblading, swimming, and listening to punk music; I stuck to video games and comic books—yet there was always a reason for us to be together, always a reason we wanted to see each other on a daily basis.

A lot of it had to do with what Vincent and I liked to call “fear-stomping.” I was an emotional mess early on, and Vincent picked up on that—but unlike other people, he seemed to thrive on weeding out my innermost turmoils.

The game went like this: He and I would sit somewhere private and I would divulge whichever one of my fears happened to be most distressing at the moment. He would then nod and look away for a moment, studying the details of our surroundings as if trying to rearrange the elements themselves. Whenever he fixed his gaze upon me again, there would be this gleam in his eyes, an overwhelming excitement about . . . *something*.

“Come on,” he would say, grabbing my hand and hauling me to my feet. “Let’s go over *there*.”

There was never the same place twice. For instance, if we’d been sitting in my parents’ backyard, *there* could have been a section of dirt behind the hedges, a shady spot beneath the maple tree, or a choice patch of grass beside the garage. Indoors, we’d move ourselves to some overlooked corner of the dining room or into the crawlspace between the washing machine and the linens closet—or, if we happened to be walking through a hallway at the time, we would press ourselves up against the wall and slide sideways as if navigating the edge of a deep chasm. I never fully understood how it worked, but once we got *there*, once we settled ourselves again, Vincent would ask me how I felt.

“I feel fine,” I would always answer (save for the unfortunate occasion or two when I was suffering from a cold or sore throat).

“No . . . how do you *feel*?”

It always took a moment to ponder the question and take inventory of my senses, which, well, *twitched* whenever I realized something had happened. (It was more of a mental twitch than a twinge of pain—like being jostled after falling asleep in the backseat of a moving vehicle.) Vincent would ask me if I was still afraid of such-and-such, and I would smile and cock my head sideways, asking him why in the world I would be afraid of whatever it was he thought was bothering me.

His unvarying response was to grin triumphantly as he stood up and slammed his foot into the ground.

That's what "fear-stomping" was.

I didn't think too much about the mechanics involved until I was eight. Vincent was sleeping over my place, and (after an hour or two on the Nintendo) we'd just settled in for the night when I felt something crawling up my leg. At first I thought it was just an itch, so I reached under the covers, scratched—and let loose a bloodcurdling scream when I felt whatever it was scurry onto the back of my hand. I threw back the sheets and leaped out of bed, brushing myself off as I pressed into a corner at the opposite end of the room.

Vincent was rolled up in his sleeping bag on the floor. When he heard the commotion, he lifted his head and asked what was wrong.

"S-something was c-crawling on me," I stuttered. I pointed at the bed.

Getting up, Vincent turned on the light and went to inspect the danger zone. After a moment's searching through the rumpled bedsheets, he found the culprit: an adult daddy-long-legs.

He cupped it in his hands and walked over to where I was cowering. "It's no big deal. See? Here."

I flinched away, raised my leg so high my knee poked my chest. "I don't want to see it, take it away, take it away, *please!*"

"It won't bite. It's not even a spider. If you let it live in a corner of your room, it keeps away the ants during the summer."

I hated bugs—I couldn't have been more terrified if I'd woken up with an ax-murder lying next to me, but Vincent's voice was so soothing, so self-assured that I just *had* to open my eyes again and take a look.

"See?" said Vincent, opening his hands ever so slightly.

I saw the insect, missing two legs, half-dead already, slowly crawling about on the flesh turf of Vincent's palm—and I realized how ridiculous I must have looked, standing bare-bottomed and red-faced, huddled in the corner because of *this*. I was still afraid, but my embarrassment greatly overshadowed my fear.

"Come on," Vincent said, nodding towards the bedroom window. "We'll let it outside. Some other insect will eat it."

"Gross," I croaked, but followed nonetheless since it was a convenient way of ridding myself of my newly-discovered eight-legged foe.

We crawled out into the backyard. Vincent crossed the patio, stepped boldly onto the grass; he was halfway to the back fence when, realizing I had remained banked upon a safer terrain of solid concrete, he stopped and faced me.

"Aren't you coming?" he asked.

I looked down at my feet, imagined my toes entangled in the blades of grass, Bug Forest, and promptly shook my head.

"I can watch from here," I answered. (Besides, it was chilly, and neither of us was wearing any clothes; there was every reason for us to get back inside as soon as possible.)

Vincent gave me a look and made his patented fear-stomping motion with his left foot.

Oh.

I set out across the yard. The grass was cool and damp beneath my feet. I might have stepped on a snail, or a piece of glass, but the promise of eradicating another of my fears spurred me on until I was beside Vincent, walking shoulder to shoulder with him.

We ended up between the shed and the fence, where a narrow concrete step afforded us a place to sit. Alone together (and out of the moonlight), I knew we were *there*—and suddenly I was no longer afraid of insects. Vincent handed me the daddy-long-legs, and I let it crawl down my upheld arm. It tickled.

After a moment, I released it onto the ground. Then I turned to Vincent and asked, "How do you do it?"

He shrugged. "I take you to a place where you're not afraid." He drew a line in the air with his finger. "They're like bubbles, floating all over—a jillion of them, all the same but a little different too."

I was confused. "What're like bubbles?"

Vincent looked at me again. His eyes wandered down my chest, and he smiled. "Places."

"Oh. Okay."

I wanted to ask him more, but his attention had apparently wandered to other matters. He put his hand on mine. Then he slid his other arm around my shoulders, pulled me

in close, and kissed me.

At eight, physical affection beyond bedtime kisses from my mother was a far-off theory, an unimportant entry on a hormonal to-do list that hadn't yet been inked. In school, girls sometimes kissed boys, but I had never seen boys kissing other boys. I didn't know what this was, and so I didn't recoil—but neither did I respond. I simply froze, inexplicably curious, but unable to connect imagination with a physiological response.

Momentarily, he pulled back, letting me go. I watched him carefully, and he seemed to pass through a maelstrom of emotions, all at once. Finally, he stood up. He said, "I'm sorry. We should go back inside."

There were a hundred newly-formed questions in my mind, questions about friendship, brotherhood, sex—but I knew there was something else too, something between us that I dared not rattle at this early juncture.

Besides, my butt was cold.

I stood, took Vincent's lead, stepped back into the backyard—but not before cutting a roundabout path along the perimeter (which I thought was odd). As we passed from shadow to moonlight, I felt something fall away, a second skin, an invisible cloak woven from the breeze itself. Insects no longer terrified me, but, in a way, what Vincent and I had done behind the shed . . . it had me trembling for another reason—something I couldn't even begin to understand. I didn't hate it, I didn't like it—I didn't know what it meant to me.

I was glad to leave it behind.

* * *

Time passed, and the memory of kissing Vincent receded into a mental closet cluttered with English lessons, mathematical figures, comic book plots, and video game high scores.

My fear-stomping expeditions continued throughout. Soon riding a bicycle no longer required my knees and elbows to be wrapped in five layers of padding; walking past the butterfly bushes no longer had me holding my hands over my ears out of a fear that a bumblebee would puncture my eardrum; bedtime was no longer a ritual battle between darkness and light. When I was eleven, I finally learned how to swim. The following summer, I rode my first roller coaster and couldn't stop talking about how awesome it was for weeks afterward.

By the time I reached my mid-teens, I was a relatively normal young man—still conservative, by most people's standards, but able to interact with family, friends, and teachers without breaking into a sweat or losing control of my pulse.

Vincent and I were closer than ever, often passing up opportunities to go to parties or to the movies just so we could be together and gossip, listen to music, or shoot some hoops—not like with other friends, the sort of people I met at school and who *sort of* wanted to hang out but who were often too busy. Vincent always made time between homework, chores, and (when he entered his teens) girls, and he never complained of social suffocation.

I finished high school, got a job at the local office supply store over the summer, and started computer programming

classes at UC Irvine in the fall. Vincent, having decided on a business degree, enrolled as well.

He and I were still best friends—better than ever, for all intensive purposes—but I couldn't help playing audience to the tiny voice at the back of my head that routinely uttered worries of varying importance.

There were two major ones: One was undefinable, an out-of-reach whisper of something pertaining to skin and skin, wet kisses, and passionate embraces—all trapped behind an unmovable mental screen that went nameless for all my virgin years. The other was something I had wondered about since my elementary school days: what life would be like without Vincent Nguyen.

This second concern was perhaps the most potent of all my collected worries. However, I never told Vincent about it. For starters, it was too much of a downer to fully acknowledge amidst all my other “fear-stomping” accomplishments—and how would he react to the fact that I had become so attached to him I would most likely wither and die if he ever stopped coming around? Perhaps he wouldn't mind at all, perhaps it was another part of being best friends with someone you thought of as a brother . . . but there was always the chance my one ultimate fear would be the straw that broke the camel's back. So I never mentioned it, and the years gradually took care of the rest.

Then, when I turned twenty-one, everything changed.

It started on my birthday: Vincent called me after work and announced he was throwing me a little party, whether I liked it or not.

“I'm tired, I have an exam to study for—I have laundry to

do,” I protested, but Vincent saw through my usual delay tactics and said he and a couple of friends would be over at seven o’clock.

We met by the swimming pool (I shared an apartment with a night-owl UPS junkie named Neil, which worked nicely, because though we got along well enough, it meant I rarely had to deal with him face-to-face). Vincent had bought a cake; half a dozen or so school acquaintances had brought a variety of beers and wine coolers. Technically, we shouldn’t have been drinking out on the deck, but everyone agreed that the risk was worth it if my turning twenty-one was to be a memorable event.

After they sang to me, the girls took turns offering hugs and kisses. After a while, the group changed into their swimwear and took to splashing in the pool. Vincent and I held back, appropriating a pair of lawn chairs for ourselves and settling into a subdued discussion. I could tell he was in a nostalgic mood—his eyes had that certain sheen, that distance in his gaze that betrayed his unspoken thoughts, which were most certainly worlds away at the moment.

“So,” he said. “Twenty-one. You’re a big boy now, eh?”

“Yup,” I replied, blushing. It had been a running joke that, since Vincent’s twenty-first birthday (earlier in the year), I had been temporarily left behind as the “baby boy” of the group. At his party, there had been enough alcohol to stock a corner liquor store (and enough people to soak it all up, without a trace, by dawn). I had gotten only halfway through a can of some discount ale before transforming into a complete and utter beef stew—but it had been a good excuse to leave early, to get myself out of the way before the lights

dimmed and the snogging began.

Vincent took another sip of his wine cooler. "Do you still see Shayla from time to time?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. At school. Between classes."

"That's it?"

"Um . . . yeah."

"So, you've never asked her out?"

I found myself squirming. "No."

"No?"

"I've got other stuff keeping me busy." I thought for a moment, grasped at the first excuse to enter my mind. "I don't have the time for a relationship right now. With school and work . . . I'd want to spend time with her, not just ignore her, you know?"

Vincent sighed. He'd been down this road with me before. "It's not that bad."

"What?" I asked, pretending I wasn't keen.

"Girls. Love. Sex."

"Oh." I lowered my lashes, obscuring Vincent from view.

He leaned forward. "You're still a virgin."

Suddenly my eyes were on the verge of watering, and I didn't know why. I knew Vincent had gone the route that many teenagers do, dating different girls, developing his sex life between book reports and algebra tests . . . quietly trying to unwind me along the way. I had never so much as kissed a woman (yet I *had* kissed Vincent, so long ago, hadn't I?), let alone fooled around with one—but so what? What did it matter? I didn't have to rush headlong into something like physical intimacy just because maybe I had the slightest fear of breezing through my twenties without ever knowing the joys

of loving a woman. Even then, it wasn't so much a fear as it was a precaution against disease, emotional stress—*rejection*, if I wasn't good enough, if I did something wrong.

Nevertheless, I was curious and, bearing the weight of too much alcohol in my bloodstream, more than a little wistful.

"What's it like?" I asked, unsure if I was referring to the sex act itself or to the freedom associated with inborn confidence.

Vincent smiled and offered a deep sigh. I could smell his breath, sharp and heavy, as I studied his face intently in the gathering darkness, and I was a bit surprised to find him looking *there* again.

It had been years since we last went fear-stomping.

"Vin," I began, nervously crinkling the beer can in my hand.

He blinked himself back into reality. Then, finishing off his drink and setting his bottle down on the concrete, he moved beside me and put his arm around my shoulders.

"It's easy as breathing," he said. "Once you realize that all the different places are *here*, and all the separate times are *now* . . . you're just catching different transparencies as they happen to overlap, aligning them how you like. Most of the time it works . . . sometimes it gets a little sloppy."

I pondered his words, not understanding, and was about to ask him what he meant when suddenly (and quite unexpectedly) he started nuzzling my neck.

I wasn't gay. Males held no tantalizing qualities for me whatsoever. I was attracted to women, had enough of a heterosexual drive to have bolstered chronic masturbation all throughout high school as I'd frequently imagined myself

boldly making love to any and all girls who happened to catch my eye. Of course, I'd never had the courage to ask any of them out, but I'd been horny enough to brave all the risks of permanent blindness and hairy knuckles if it meant earning a few blissful moments of Kegel workouts. I'd never had a girlfriend, but that didn't mean I wasn't straight.

Vincent knew this. Vincent, whose affinity for women had often sparked intense jealousy on my behalf, knew *me*, and that's what was most confusing as I felt his lips traversing my skin.

I pulled away slightly, tried not to make my confusion too obvious. My first concern was that someone would see us, but when I glanced over Vincent's shoulder I saw the rest of the group, splashing and laughing, absorbed in their own affairs.

"You worry too much," Vincent whispered, giggling. "I'm not just some stranger, you know."

I returned his gaze, unsure of what he meant. For a moment I was transported to a moonlit backyard on a night when two boys had sneaked out to set a daddy-long-legs free and had entered into an embrasure that had infinitely more to it than mere childhood experimentation.

How had I forgotten? How had I left that memory there, hidden behind the years, a framed portrait lost to dust and cobwebs at the back of my mind?

I was heading dangerously into the crest of a phenomenal buzz, and, looking into Vincent's eyes, seeing the intensity there, I suddenly felt a shadowy echo of something long-lost to my own inhibitions. I couldn't actually *feel* a sexual attraction towards him, but I could *remember* one, I could remem-

ber distant sounds of laughter and passion as an alternate pair of best friends (who'd taken a different road after sharing their first kiss) expressed their love for each other via physical means.

A part of me considered that it didn't seem all that impossible. It was just two friends messing around with each other, two friends having fun. Vincent and I were close enough to do something like this and not feel threatened by it—yet I was unable to simply throw myself into his arms and reciprocate the affection I knew he wanted me to feel. My sexuality had already been hard-wired.

"I'm sorry," I said slowly. I didn't want to hurt his feelings. "I . . . I'm not gay."

Vincent shrugged, still smiling. "Neither am I."

"But . . . you were just kissing me."

"Consider it a birthday present," he said, and got to his feet. For a moment he simply stood very still, gazing around the deck as if looking for something; when he found it, he turned to me and held out his hand. "Let's go for a walk."

It might have been the beer, it might have been genuine curiosity, but I found myself standing, taking Vincent's hand and allowing him to lead me out of the pool area.

There was something I had to know . . . *something*.

A laundry lodge, flanked by a legion of juniper bushes, stood adjacent to the pool. Vincent stopped at a spot between the rear of the lodge and the management staff parking lot, where the soil was slightly recessed and the leaves had thinned.

"Down there," he said, crouching and pointing. "Follow me."

There, I thought, laughing. We haven't done this in years.

I dropped onto my hands and knees and followed him along a brief path of mud and pebbles. At first I was abhorred by the thought of what I was doing to my clothes, but only for a moment, as suddenly we emerged into a hidden cove, a spot that was special, secluded—

—a world within a world.

“How do you feel?” Vincent asked, scooting forward on his knees and taking me in his arms.

I was unable to answer verbally, so I merely showered him with kisses, fell with him onto the ground. It was like seeing a loved one after many, many years of being apart. I'd never had a lover before, so I couldn't compare it with anything else, but I knew that I'd somehow missed Vincent all these years and that I wanted him more than anything in the world.

Any and all inhibitions evaporated as we groped at each other's clothes, peeled away the layers of fabric. We spread our shirts and pants on the ground and lay together, and, at Vincent's tender direction, I learned what it was like to touch and be touched.

Afterward, I found myself giggling almost hysterically at the wonderful audacity of the situation.

“What's got *you*?” Vincent asked. He reached for his pants.

“Nothing,” I replied, gathering up my own clothes. “I'm just wondering why we haven't been together more often.”

Vincent smiled. “Anticipation makes it more special.”

I studied him as he dressed, caught every motion, every flex of every muscle as he slipped back into his pants and

shirt. At last, I donned my own clothes and, once the both of us were just several layers of mud and grass away from being presentable again, allowed myself to be swept up in his arms as he smoothed my hair.

“I want you to promise me something,” he said.

“Anything,” I replied.

“*Seriously.*” He took my face in his hands, brought it level with his. “It means a lot to me. Once we leave here, things will go back to the way they were—I want you to promise me that you’ll keep this time and place with you always. Promise?”

I nodded, smiling crookedly.

“Say it.”

“I promise.”

He smiled approvingly and ducked through the shrub façade.

I followed, hardly gathering the slightest bit of meaning from his words—but once I was outside again, something in my head turned over. I shuddered, standing straight beside Vincent and gazing into the darkness of the parking lot as if it were the transplanted back lot to Dracula’s castle. Vincent seemed off-center as well, though when I looked at him he appeared jovial enough. Still, something had changed, something to do with *us*.

There wasn’t much time to hone in on what had just happened. If there was any misalignment to the world, any crookedness to Vincent’s expression, I missed it as I belched wretchedly and proceeded to vomit with the force of an opened fire hydrant.

Vincent sighed and grabbed me under the arms before I doubled over completely.

“Look at what we’ve done to you, birthday boy,” he said.

* * *

Neil had evidently been caught in the shower, for he answered the door wearing a towel and one of the fiercest scowls humanly possible. With barely-passable manners, he stepped aside and allowed Vincent to help me inside the apartment.

“Jesus,” he said. “What’s this all about?”

“Lost his key,” Vincent replied, navigating me into my room and setting me on the bed.

Neil came to stand in the threshold. He leaned against the doorframe and folded his arms. “You smell like crap, Ken.”

I laughed awkwardly, reaching to remove my shoes and finding the laces unbearably hilarious. “That’s Vin’s fault—we were messing around together in the bushes and he shook me up just a little too much.”

“Oh,” Neil said, suddenly straightening and backing out of the room. I saw him flash an alarmed look at Vincent, whose face had just turned whiter than Casper’s. “I didn’t . . . I didn’t know . . . you two . . .”

I started to nod my head, to proclaim with unwavering assurance that it wasn’t inappropriate for two best friends (who both happened to be male) to snog each other for fun when Vincent cleared his throat and stepped between Neil and myself.

“Get some sleep,” he said, chuckling. Then, turning to

face Neil: “He’s drunk out of his gourd—been talking out of turn all evening, poor guy.”

I fell back onto the bed; I was half-undressed, shirt and pants dangling off wrists and ankles, as Vincent left, closing the door behind him.

I wished he wouldn’t worry so much.

* * *

The next morning I awoke with a wretched headache. Not only that, but I awoke with the startling, ultra-crisp memory of Vincent and myself lying clasped together behind the laundry room and doing the unthinkable.

I sat up, rubbed my temples—extricated myself from the mess of my own soiled clothing. I had no idea why I’d done what I’d done with Vincent yesterday. That precious half-hour behind the laundry lodge made complete sense on its own, but when dropped into the path of linear time, it was like replaying someone *else’s* memory, as if I’d somehow eavesdropped on my twin brother—except I was quite certain I was an only child.

God, I thought, remembering everything about my first time with crystal clarity. *My first sexual experience—with Vincent.*

It hit me hard—boy, did it hit me hard, because it made absolutely no sense. In hindsight, I could imagine being overrun with desire for another man; now it did absolutely nothing for me. It made me nauseous, in fact.

I made a beeline for the toilet. There was no way of telling how much of what I threw up was the result of too

much liquor and how much was related to the cold hard facts at hand: I'd gone over the edge, crossed into uncharted territory without the slightest clue as to *why*.

Showering helped. I washed away last night's sweat and smells, dressed in fresh clothes—and sat at the edge of my bed for nearly an hour as I tried to decide what to do next.

I couldn't recall the slightest indication of Vincent's ever coming on to me. No curious games of "Doctor" when we were children, no subtle glimpses or pokes in the boys' shower as adolescents—and certainly nothing at all when we'd finally become adults. There *was* that first kiss, behind the shed of my parents' house, but it was an afterthought, a shadowy childhood dream hard to separate from the normal experiences—besides, we had been young; passing curiosity was to be expected. (And if Vincent *had* been attracted to me, why hadn't he simply brought it up? He knew he could tell me anything.)

I left my room, went out into the kitchen. It was one o'clock; Neil was already in bed for the afternoon. As I cooked myself a late breakfast, I repeatedly played over the events of last night's birthday festivities in my mind, and I was certain it hadn't merely been the result of too much alcohol. The only excuse I could think of was that Vincent had done it *for* me, done it *with* me to help loosen up my sexual inhibitions—but still, he was a man, I was a man; one plus one didn't equal two, in this case.

It was too much to keep bottled up. I looked down at the stove; a bubbling omelet smiled back at me from the frying pan. With a sudden distaste for food of any kind, I dumped it all into a plastic container, shoved the container in the fridge,

and went for the phone. Shayla's number was on speed dial. Thankfully, I caught her while she was home.

* * *

It was a distinctly male thing to do, and I hated myself for doing it, but I *had* to know.

I asked Shayla out on an impromptu date, and she accepted. We went to see a movie at the AMC, had dinner at Denny's, and returned to my place for the wind-down. Amazingly, I was able to enjoy myself thoroughly—Shayla even pointed this out as we were sitting together on the couch. I laughed and, before my brain had time to intervene, swooped in for a kiss.

As luck would have it, Shayla had been harboring an attraction towards me for some time, and she wasn't too shy about letting it loose. She admitted she'd liked me *that way* since our high school days, I told her much the same—and we proceeded to make out for the better part of an hour. Eventually we became so worked up that I knew there was no turning back, and I used the excitement of the moment to test out my theory. With Neil at work for the evening, Shayla and I were alone to fornicate to our heart's content. Miraculously, I enjoyed every minute of it—no fears, no worries.

Shayla curled up with me afterward and told me that she loved me. I had, of course, loved her since the ninth grade, but had been unable to take the steps leading from cafeteria conversations to hand-holding, kissing, and beyond. Now everything I'd kept locked away for all those years had been released all at once, and I convinced myself that what Vincent

and I had done behind the laundry lodge had been a necessary bridge, a method of stamping out my fear of intimacy. And really, if that was the case, how else could he have taught me love and trust without actually *making love* to me?

Still, I hadn't the slightest idea how I was ever going to face him again.

* * *

I was almost entirely certain no rumors were started, as far as Vincent and I were concerned. Neil still treated me with the same pleasant detachment, and the rest of my school chums appeared jovial as ever when word spread about my blossoming relationship with Shayla. If anyone had caught Vincent and I in the bushes, they didn't mention it.

I saw Vincent from time to time, between classes, and we occasionally stopped to swap a word or two about this and that, but otherwise we made excuses not to see each other. There was no out and out apathy between us (at least, none that I picked up on), but I knew something had changed. With the passage of a single weekend, we'd grown far enough apart to justify a decade's worth of social stagnation. This alarmed me to no end, one, because it meant I was losing my best friend; two, because in order to rectify the situation, I knew I would have to *talk* with Vincent—and that scared me to death. I wasn't necessarily concerned about the possibility he was gay, or bi, even; it was something deeper, something like a favor I knew I could never return—something that would forever set us apart, now that it was out in the open.

Weeks and months passed, and I forced myself to keep

any overt agonizing on the back burner. I had school, I had work—I had *Shayla*—to keep me busy.

Shayla was wonderful. A little on the shy side, she was the kind of woman who was perfectly happy to spend her time with me, as I was (and not as how she would have me be). Her smile was brilliant, she was endlessly interesting to talk to, and she had a small, like-minded group of friends who made me feel welcome from the beginning. They were quite off the beaten path as far as style was concerned, and I loved it. We were our own little sub-subculture: listening to our own music, laughing at our own jokes, and content to spend eternity wrapped in our own little social clique.

It would have been easy to forget Vincent, to move on into adulthood and leave my childhood crutches behind, but my conscience was stubborn. I thought of him whenever a moment's respite allowed my mind to wander. I had dreams about him in which we were together, hanging out, going to the movies, shooting hoops, sampling from various fast food restaurants—it was like a mirror of my waking state, except whenever I tried to talk to dream-Vincent, my mouth froze up and my tongue went limp. I was always trying to ask him *something*, but it was like talking under water. I would often wake up trembling, feeling suffocated, as if I didn't fit properly.

Eventually it started affecting my sex life. On one occasion, Shayla caught me crying out Vincent's name during our lovemaking. Not, mind you, out of any sort of amorous fantasy—but I *had* been preoccupied with him all day, trying to think of an excuse to call him; the orgasm merely overloaded my already smoking synapses, and I ended up embar-

rassing myself beyond belief.

Shayla was persistent. After repeated attempts to elicit the truth, she dragged me out of bed and to the kitchen so we could talk over tea (we were at my place, and Neil was at work).

"I heard a story once," she said, setting the kettle on the stove and then leaning back against the refrigerator, "about you and Vin making out in the bushes behind the laundry room."

Good God, I thought. There *had* been rumors.

"We were both wasted off our asses," I said.

"Relax, Ken. I'm not ostracizing you or anything. It may have been a homosexual activity, but it doesn't make you gay."

I looked the other way.

She continued: "Lots of straight guys do things with each other—it's sort of a favor, a 'help me out and I'll help you out' kind of thing. Guys' brains are wired like that: If they don't clean the pipes often enough they get clogged, and then they're no good whatsoever—you have to do some regular maintenance. Now, you can't always hook up with a girl at a moment's notice, so you rent an adult video and flog the dolphin with a pal or whatever."

Sometimes (like now) it was hard to tell if Shayla was being scientific or sarcastic. Regardless, I couldn't think of two men making out with each other as anything but a solid indicator of consummated homosexuality, and I reminded her again that I was not gay.

Shayla shook her head and sighed. She came over to me and sat on my lap. "Jesus, Ken. You're missing the point.

What happened . . . happened. That's all. Things like this—it's part of life. Maybe a little awkward, but it doesn't mean you should run away from it all."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You haven't seen Vincent in six months."

Six months? "Of course I have. I saw him yesterday."

In passing. "I'm talking about spending time with him, going out together, doing things like you used to."

I sighed, slouched my shoulders. "It's hard . . . I've got a lot on my mind lately."

"You *always* have a lot on your mind."

True—but usually I had Vincent to help me worm my way through. Now I was stuck because my fears were all centered around around him. Worse, it had nothing to do with the convenient excuse of his possible (though highly unlikely) physical attraction towards me. Even if it *did*, I wouldn't have minded much. In fact, at this point, I would have welcomed the simplicity of such a scenario. Anything but this untouchable truth I knew existed somewhere between the folds of this reality and the next.

Between the folds of this reality and the next.

The thought echoed inside my head, and suddenly I was shivering all over with a crazy notion set free.

Shayla looked concerned. "Ken?"

Swept up in my own thoughts, I didn't respond at first. Instead, I worked it all out, this lifelong equation that had suddenly found an answer. You see, I'd had my suspicions over the years: It may have been my imagination running away with the rest of me, but I had an idea of how Vincent Nguyen accomplished the art of fear-stomping. It involved

shifting from here to *there*, and now that I thought about it, *there* was more than just a metaphor, a convenient, private place to play a childhood game without fear of parental ridicule. *There* was somewhere else entirely, another world, another dimension—a wrinkle in the fabric of time and space that only Vincent knew existed.

And that's what was bothering me: the fact that somewhere out there, Vincent and I shared a love for each other that made our relationship in *this* world look like a formality. When we were *there*, we were equals. I didn't have to lean on Vincent for support, and he didn't have to put up with me in exchange for whatever brotherly affection I could muster. The sex didn't matter either. We were probably lovers in the physical sense, but it was the spiritual aspect that had taken a hold of me, made me feel so utterly empty since leaving that secret spot in the bushes where everything had felt right. He'd told me to remember—

—and now I had.

Shayla took my face in her hands. "Kenny. Yoo-hoo . . . are you there?"

I came to my senses again and nodded. "Yeah."

"You want to tell me what's going on?"

I shook my head and got up, leaving her on the couch. I went into the bedroom and got dressed; then I headed for the front door. On my way out I caught Shayla and kissed her.

"I'll be right back," I said.

* * *

It was chilly and quiet as I stood in the fluorescent darkness with my hands in my pockets and studied the juniper patch behind the laundry lodge. It seemed so plain and insignificant now, like an amusement park after hours—but I knew there had once been magic here.

Quickly looking around and making sure no one was watching me, I crouched down and slinked into the bushes. It wasn't so easy this time, as many of the leaves and branches had filled in, but I made it into the cove. Unlike my previous visit, however, the place was cold and wet and cobwebbed. I felt no spark of passion, no feeling of utter contentment . . . not even an afterimage. The place was just empty space, hollowed and meaningless.

Sometimes I felt like that.

* * *

My instinct was to suppress. I carried on for the following week with a noticeable pang in my stomach as I ignored all but the most important mental processes.

On Friday, after work, I made my way homeward feeling like a threadbare rag doll. I was looking forward to my bed, to green tea steaming in my favorite mug and the evening news on the television when, quite suddenly, I found myself standing on Vincent's doorstep. I knocked. He answered, and before he could say anything, I blurted:

"Vincent-thank-God-you're-here-we-need-to-talk."

Vincent, like myself, had become emancipated once he'd turned eighteen and graduated high school, and, as such, he now shared a two-bedroom house with a handful of friends

who worked their asses off to make the rent payments (as well cover the necessary monthly liquor and condom costs). The den was his, and he showed me in, patting me on the back and saying how good it was to see me again—all the typical prattle that's usually intended as a distraction from the underlying discomfort.

We sat together on the sofa and, for several minutes, listened to the sounds of cars occasionally passing on the street. Every so often we said something meaningless. At one point Vincent fired up his PlayStation and handed me one of the controllers. Techno music drifted in from somewhere across the house. I felt like a door-to-door salesman taking up a total stranger's time.

"So," Vincent sighed midway through our second game. "You sounded pretty intense before . . . you said you needed to talk to me?"

I nodded, realizing I could have been using my time to gather my thoughts. Instead, I was caught off-guard, and I blurted the first thing that forced its way out of my mouth:

"On my birthday, when we messed around together—what was that about?"

Vincent turned to me and smiled, and I was surprised to see an amused expression on his face.

"Half a year," he said, "and that's still on your mind?"

I started gasping for air. "It's not—I mean I didn't—I'm not here about *that*—well, I am, but it's not just—it's just . . ."

I had to clamp my mouth shut again, otherwise I surely would have deflated entirely. After a few measured breaths, I managed to think more coherently, and so was able to communicate without sounding like a record being played back-

ward.

"I've been thinking about it," I said. "I don't know why. Shayla says I'm overreacting, as usual, but . . . it's not so much *what* we did, it's *why*. I think I'm missing the point—I think I've been missing the point ever since we were kids."

Vincent leaned back, gazed off somewhere between this world and the next. "I know you'd never been with anyone before Shayla. All the girls, they used to talk to you and hang with you, give you all these signals, but they didn't know what I know—they didn't know how scary it can be to bare yourself so completely to someone. I guess . . . I guess I just wanted you to know what it was like, you know, to be with someone like that . . . so maybe you'd be less afraid when it came to your girl."

"So you're not . . . ?"

He shook his head, then scrunched up his face slightly—as if he'd never considered the flip side of the coin. "Are *you*?"

"No, of course not," I replied, perhaps a little too adamantly. I was trying to handle this coolly, as a close friend should; I kept telling myself he'd done me a simple favor by jump-starting my sex life. Now that it was over and done with, now that I had my answer, I should have been secure enough that the means to an end didn't matter anymore. So why did I still have a knot in my stomach?

Because I *knew*.

For a while I had had my hunches, my insane little notions about how it worked, but now, after I'd made such a powerful connection to the other side, I had fully realized the strange truth about Vincent Nguyen (he'd tried to tell me before, but I'd disregarded it as metaphor and symbolism): that

he was somehow able to shift between separate realities as if they were all one in the same. One, where I was typical, introverted me; another, where I was somebody else, somebody more daring and carefree.

Somebody without fear.

“Vin,” I said, forcing myself through the cluttered wiring of my brain. “I don’t mean the sex part . . . this is more than that. When we were together it was like heaven, it was everything I could have ever wanted. I was *free* there. It was a hundred times better than all the other fear-stomping trips we took. Every time I’m *there* I’m whole. I come back here and I’m just myself again—I mean, I have a part of the other me from that place because I know when I’m there I’m not afraid, but it’s like remembering it all and not actually being able to *live* it.”

I didn’t know what I was trying to tell Vincent, nor did I know what sort of reaction I wanted from him. My words had a noticeable effect, though: He left the sofa and started pacing about the den as if looking for something else to do, somewhere else to go.

“Everything overlaps, you know,” he said. “Every second, every decision every person in the world makes creates a new spin-off universe, a new possibility. Think of it as layers upon layers of worlds where all our ‘what might have beens’ exist. Most people only see one at a time, but ever since I can remember, I’ve seen everything at once. You might think it’s overwhelming, but I think of it like being a spider or a centipede or something. To a human it might sound crazy to have to control all those legs, but not to the insects. For them it’s built in.”

I was glued to the sofa, gripping the cushions with my fingers as I went down a mental checklist of questions. “But how do you know to get from here to *there*?”

Vincent turned and faced me; he was smiling deviously. “Ever wonder why certain events seem to happen at certain times? Well, each event, each *cause* is an overlapping portion of each reality that leads to an *effect*. Most of the time you just take what comes, but if you can see what you’re looking for, you can step in certain places and enter the reality of your choice.”

“Do you disappear once you switch realities?” I asked.

“No . . . you’re not really going anywhere when you do it. Everything’s kind of happening all at once, but it’s the way you see things that keeps you thinking about one reality at a time.”

I bit my lip, thought for a moment. “So . . . in one of these, er, alternate outcomes, I’m not afraid of all the things I am here?”

“Well—”

“I mean, if I’m so much better off there, why can’t I just stay there?”

There—I’d said it.

Vincent sighed and sat back down on the sofa. “It’s not about being better or worse, higher or lower. It’s just where you are. It’s how your mind was set at birth. Think of it like a movie: You can go to the theater, pretend you’re part of the action, but you can’t actually live *inside* the movie.”

“*You* can,” I said.

“Well,” said Vincent, shrugging, “yeah, but it doesn’t mean I *do*—it doesn’t mean I *should*.”

I thought for a moment, then said, “Vincent . . . in that other world, are you and I . . . are we . . . you know, *together*?”

Vincent took a long, hard look at me, and I could almost see movement behind his eyes, the shadowy reflections of moments trapped on the other side of a reality I could only imagine. “You’re not gay,” he said.

“I know. Not here, but *there* . . . I mean, when we went into the bushes together, we were *there*, right?”

“Does it matter? We’re best friends *here*.”

“But there are other places where we’re best friends too.”

I might have pushed the issue further, but the look Vincent gave me made it evident he was no longer interested in talking about it. So I let it drop and suggested I take my leave.

On the way out (and this took me quite by surprise) he touched me affectionately on the shoulder and said, “Maybe somewhere else we were lovers, and maybe it was *you* who lead *me*, you who took care of me . . . and maybe I didn’t appreciate it like I should have . . . so I guess I’m repaying the favor, that’s all.” His caress lingered for a moment, then he seemed to come back into himself and he socked me in a more typically masculine fashion. “Now, let’s forget about all the details and swear to meet each and every Friday for pizza and *Army of Darkness*.”

I slapped his hand and agreed.

* * *

Vincent’s subtle suggestion that I simply live life and leave the questions alone carried me successfully into the new year. In late April, Shayla and I got engaged and split the rent on a

single-room studio wedged beside a Chinese fast food joint and a Latino night club (go figure). At a cool \$500 per month, there were no frills, but neither Shayla nor myself minded sitting around in our birthday suits in lieu of the financial burden an air-conditioner would entail.

For my twenty-second birthday we went to the Olive Garden. Vincent happened to be dating an Irish gal named Blaney at the time, so he brought her along as well, and we had a grand time reminiscing over manicotti and Straccali Chianti. Vincent and I had an impromptu bread-eating contest. Blaney seemed amused enough, and allowed us to run rampant, so long as we didn't drag her into it; Shayla, the ever-vigilant health enthusiast, warned me that too much wheat would upset the balance of my stomach, and she watched the proceedings with a frown on her face.

Toward the end of the evening, I became the slightest bit tipsy and, upon seeing Shayla's almost-full plate, I asked, "Are you going to eat or are you afraid you'll find some Italian's severed finger in the marinara?"

"I'm not too hungry tonight," Shayla replied, managing to keep her smile—though I could tell her mood had been stretched thin.

I nevertheless missed the point completely and wrapped my arm about her shoulders. "I can't *stand* to see you like this! Please, eat something—you're anorexic!" I laughed and patted her flat tummy.

"Christ," she said, shrugging out of my embrace. "You can be a pig sometimes, you know that, Ken?" She left the table and stalked off towards the women's restroom.

Neither Vincent nor Blaney had an explanation as to why

my awkwardness had set Shayla off. Usually she was able to put me in check whenever I acted out of turn. Tonight, however, something seemed to be bothering her.

I waited for fifteen minutes; when she didn't return, I knew for sure I'd set her off. Dreading an argument, I found myself standing outside the women's room and begging for her forgiveness while people, in passing, gave me dirty looks. Eventually she came out and threw herself into my arms, and I felt her hot tears against my neck.

"I'm sorry, so sorry," I murmured, thinking I was a horrible person, that I'd never drink again if this was to be the outcome.

"It's not you," Shayla said. She dabbed her face with a handful of toilet tissue. "It's . . . I've been meaning to tell you . . . it's just hard to get things out sometimes."

My heart leaped into my throat, and the emotional u-turn I'd almost made ended in a six car pileup.

Shayla, still holding me, bit her lip and looked towards the exit. "I need some fresh air."

"Okay," I said.

It was cool outside, the sky overcast. We sat together on the curb at the edge of the restaurant parking lot overlooking the Macy's side of the mall.

"I found out I have Crohn's Disease," Shayla said, her arms stretched out over her knees, one hand clasped over the other. "I'm going to have to have surgery, eventually."

"When did you find out?" I asked (I didn't have the slightest clue how to deal with the situation, so I defaulted to basic curiosity—stalling until I could find the right words be-

sides, “I’m sorry”).

“Last week. I mean, I’d been having stomach problems since last year, but I always thought it was a bad food combination or something. When I started avoiding meals completely because of the cramps, I knew something was up.”

Shayla had always been slim, though she’d started going to the gym with me over the last year to add a certain wiry strength to her frame. I’d always thought her svelte physique was due to her being a vegetarian, or that she’d simply been born with an overachieving metabolism; looking back, I was able to recall specific moments when I’d had my doubts. Like on the hot, stifling evenings at home when I would be at the computer and she would be on the bed, sitting naked with her back against the wall, notebook propped on her legs. Every so often I would glance over my shoulder, catch a glimpse of her with the reading lamp casting shadows over her collarbone, ribs, thighs—all the places where her flesh seemed to be thinning ever so gradually. She would catch me staring and I would smile, tell her she was beautiful while the questions stewed in my head.

I should have asked her about it sooner, I thought. Could’ve made it easier on her by being there through the whole ordeal. A shoulder to cry on, a friend to confide in—someone to help with the burden.

And yet, I couldn’t imagine going through life knowing what I did now. I was used to being the charge of those who possessed a certain amount of strength and leadership ability; to have the tables turned so that *I* was the one who had to be strong for the both of us . . . it made me want to be a thousand miles away and twenty years ahead.

“Ken? Shay?”

It was Vincent, hand in hand with Blaney, calling our names from several cars away. They spotted us and waved.

“Don’t mention this—*please*,” Shayla whispered, standing and brushing herself off. She waved back cheerfully.

I didn’t know how I was going to get through the night.

* * *

At home, Shayla and I curled up together in bed and watched the first quarter of *The Cider House Rules* before the VCR threw a fit and refused to play the tape any further—at which point we simply turned the television off completely and went to sleep.

Well, Shayla dozed off, but I was wide awake, holding her until I knew she was asleep and then slipping quietly from her side, pulling on my clothes and exiting the studio without a sound.

Outside, the air smelled like rain. I drove for an hour, eventually falling into orbit around the UCI campus. I kept making the same mindless circle, never actually pulling into any of the lots, until I was almost out of gas. I found a gas station and spent another fifteen minutes or so rooting around the seats looking for change; I bought five dollars’ worth of unleaded.

Finally, at about two-thirty, I pulled in front of Vincent’s house and sat for several minutes with the engine running. Raindrops began pelting the windshield; rivulets leaked through the crack in the window and trickled down onto the seat. *Plop . . . plop . . . plop . . .*

Just go talk to him, I thought. You know there's no chance unless you talk to him, make him see reason.

I was trapped, constricted, and I knew it. I'd come here looking for answers once before, but I hadn't known the right questions.

I knew now.

The rain pelted my face, soaked my clothes and plastered my hair against my forehead as I got out of the car and crossed the street. By the time I reached the front door, I was shivering from head to toe—but only a small part of it had to do with being wet.

Vincent was half asleep when he opened the door and let me in. I don't think he knew exactly what was going on until I collapsed onto the floor and started groveling incoherently at his feet.

"Please," I begged. "Make me stronger. I don't want to be myself, I can't do it anymore, I can't be there for her the way she needs me, oh, I thought I'd learn to be strong for her if something bad ever happened but I can't, I can't face her, please, I need you to help me . . ."

Somehow I wound up in the den, sitting on the sofa, with Vincent's arms around me. He spoke to me softly, whispering in my ear and telling me to calm down, it would be all right if I just slowed down and explained to him what the problem was.

"It's Shayla," I explained. "She's, er, sick—it's kind of a serious thing. She told me tonight and . . . and all I could do was sit there. I didn't know what to say or do—that's how it will always be. As long as we're together, I'll never know the right words, I'll never be strong enough to deal with any of it.

All my life I've always been afraid something terrible like this would happen, and now it has and I don't know how to deal with it."

"Sure you do," Vincent said, calmly, soothingly. "It's different when it's someone else. It's your first time now, but you'll know how it is as you go along. When you're with a girl, she's your world. Even if you have no clue how to make her feel better, you'll be there for her—you'll *make* it work, somehow. We all go through it; it's *relationships*."

I shook my head. "No, but see—in that other place you took me to, I didn't have any of these fears. I was *sure*, just like you are. I could handle anything—I know if you just showed me how to get there, I could take care of Shayla and everything would be all right."

"Oh . . . I see." Vincent let go of me, got to his feet and folded his arms. At first he looked stern, like he might give me the "older brother" lecture about being a man and learning to deal with life on my own; instead, he let out a long sigh and covered his face with his hands. "Ken . . . Ken . . . *Ken*. What have I done to you?"

"Vin . . ." I began.

"No, no—this is my fault. I stepped across the line when I took you behind the laundry room. You didn't know any better—I was selfish. I saw an opportunity to please myself and now look what it's done to you."

I hadn't the slightest clue what he was talking about, so I started grasping at straws. "Vin, we're best friends, right? You showed me what I can be."

"I took advantage of you—"

"I'm not ashamed of what we did. Not anymore."

“—living this life without being able to love you like I do
—”

“Vin, please. It’s not like that. It doesn’t have to be.”

“—knowing better, but breaking the rules anyway because sometimes I too wonder if there aren’t a million other places we could be together. I opened the Pandora’s box, Ken, and now look where it’s left us: stuck in a world where we both know we’re just shadows of something better.”

I got to my feet. “*It doesn’t have to be this way.* You, me, Shayla—there are other versions of us out there, right? Why should we suffer if we have the solution?”

Vincent shook his head. “You don’t *get it*, Kenny. That’s not how it works.” He scowled and clenched his fists, trying to think of the right words. “It’s like . . . when I first started driving and my parents let me use their car. Whenever my dad gave me the keys, I had to promise not to take it joyriding, not to go over the speed limit, not to mess with the radio stations—it was a privilege, but I had to stick within the guidelines or else I’d have the keys taken away. This *gift* that I’ve been given . . . I’m allowed to use it so long as I keep to the guidelines. As much as I’d like to go hopscotching through all the lives where I’m rich and famous and a porno star or whatever, it just doesn’t work that way. If I shoved my other selves out of the way so I could live their lives, what would they think? What would *I* think if *they* started poking around my life here?”

He paused, looking at me. When I didn’t answer, he continued:

“The places I’ve taken you, they’re like observation points—hidden spots in each reality. You can absorb the vibes so

that when you come back to your own reality you carry the memories with you—you're not actually *taking* anything away. That's allowed. Anything else would upset the balance. We each have the rights to our own reality and not anyone else's—not even if it's another one of *ourselves*; there's no way to change that."

Vincent fell silent and walked to the window, peering outside. Rain smeared the glass, made it look like ice melting.

How appropriate, I thought. The universe is weeping.

I went to him, placed my hand on his shoulder. "What about Shayla? If I tell her there's a way she can live a life without ever having Crohn's—you wouldn't turn her away, would you?"

Vincent tensed, and he turned to face me. There was a dangerous light in his eyes. "Don't go there, Ken. Everything I've ever told you about this—it's between you and me. You tell anyone about fear-stomping or alternate universes and I'll deny ever saying anything even remotely related. They'll never believe you anyway, and if they did, it's all just false hope. No one can do anything about it, and that's the way things are." He turned back to the window. "I can't help you anymore."

He was asking me to leave—I knew that, but I stayed out of desperation—out of sheer frustration. Grabbing his shoulder, I demanded he face me. "Just this once, Vin! One last time, then it will all be okay, see? God gave you this gift so you could *use* it! Don't be selfish!"

With a powerful shove, he pushed me backwards so that I fell hard onto the floor. The air was knocked from my lungs. "You don't *get* it, do you? *It can't be done!* If I just whisked us

all away to Shangri-La, you'd get nothing meaningful out of it. You'd come out the other side knowing that all you have to do is come crying to your ol' pal Vincent every time something goes wrong. You won't have suffered alongside Shayla, you won't have been there with her at all; you'll have sneaked off into some other world while another version of her still has to stay here and fight her own battles."

I slowly got to my feet. "Please . . . don't make me do this alone . . . please . . ."

"I've made mistakes," Vincent continued. "I was in love with you in that other world. We were best friends—more than best friends, more than anything I've ever seen or felt in any universe. I should have appreciated it for what it was and moved on, but I didn't. I've been painting over a crumbling canvas ever since . . . I can't do this anymore."

"But Vin—"

"Go *home*," he growled, and grabbed me by the shirt collar, shoved me towards the door. Each time I tried to turn around for an encore groveling he shoved me harder, ignoring my pleas until I was outside, at which point he slammed the door in my face.

"Damn you," I whispered, sloshing my way back to the car and sitting inside with the dampness all over me. I cried and cursed Vincent's name, prayed to God that just *once* he would understand what it felt like to be me. So what if I was being completely illogical? Vincent was just as bad!

Eventually I calmed down somewhat, resigned myself to the fact that there was to be no divine intervention, that I had to go back home to Shayla and face the unbearable. Worse yet, I had to do it knowing that I'd stooped to my lowest in

coming here to Vincent's and begging for a quick fix. I could have spent my time researching Crohn's, coming up with *real* ways for Shayla and I to cope.

Instead, I was bitter and alienated.

* * *

At a quarter to four I arrived back home to find Shayla awake and watching a rebroadcast of the evening news. When she saw me (wet as a lily pad) stumbling in through the front door, she flicked the television off and went into the bathroom for a dry towel.

"Where *have* you been?" she asked.

"Driving around," I replied, peeling off my soggy clothes and sitting at the foot of the bed as she helped me get dry. I wanted to tell her to go back to sleep, tell her she needed her rest and not to worry about me, but my brain was locked into self-pity mode. I stared around the room—the *only* room our studio offered (besides the bathroom). There was the television in front of me, propped on Shayla's clunky dresser; to the left, tucked into one corner, was the desk; to the right, humming away beside the bathroom door, was the small refrigerator that could barely hold a six-pack. No kitchen, no dining table, no chairs for guests—and this was our home, our life: Shayla McRae, suffering from Crohn's, and Kenneth Filatov, suffering from life—while meanwhile, in some other perspective, none of this misery even existed.

"You shouldn't have gone," Shayla said. "It's dangerous driving in the rain."

"Well," I said, spreading my arms, "I'm still here."

"You're moping again." She started massaging my shoulders. "And more neurotically than usual."

"Har-har."

"Did you tell him?"

"Tell who?"

"Vincent. About me."

"Who says I went to see Vincent?"

"I assumed that's where you went, judging by the way you were cursing his name under your breath a minute ago."

"Oh."

"Anyway, did you tell him?"

I grunted ferally. "Why would I do that?"

"The whole way home from the restaurant you looked like you wanted to."

"Well, I didn't . . . not really. This was something else."

"Oh. That other thing, then."

"What other thing?"

"Your relationship with him. Ever since your twenty-first birthday."

"I'm over the sex thing." I turned to face her. "Really."

Shayla studied me for a moment. "No, it's not that . . . it's something else you've had on your mind this whole time, something you won't tell me." She smiled and gave me a look as if to say, *tell me. I'll listen.*

I bit my lip, felt my pulse quicken—felt an imaginary noose tighten around my neck. Every time she talked to me like this, my insides froze up, and I was faced with the same dilemma: Do I bare myself to her, share my collection of fears and uncertainties so we can suffer together? Or do I keep it all to myself, maintain that illusion of stolid certainty until an

ulcer ate its way through the lining of my stomach?

I wanted to grab her, to shake her and hit her and scream at her to just let it go; I wanted to scream at her body, at her cells, at the malady festering in her intestines; I wanted to explode, implode, even—anything to defy this fear and anguish, this *not knowing* if she would live or die—and then, as she waited patiently for me to come around, she did something very simple: She took my hand in hers and squeezed gently, just enough so that I could feel her strength, her warmth—

—her love.

She could have had anyone, I thought. In high school, when everyone was pairing off, determined to find someone before their senior year, she was waiting for me. Why? Because she thought I was cute? Funny? Worth her time? Or was it because she was in love, so she didn't need a reason to be with me? Ever since the beginning she's had to put up with me, and yet she's still here.

She's still here.

And that's how it clicked. Nothing is ever perfect, but my love for her was, and I knew it was the same in any possible reality—whether we were rich or poor, healthy or sick, young or old. What I'd felt with Vincent had been a primer, a spark to ignite the flame. He'd never intended for me to fall in love with him directly (despite the fact that in another world we *were* lovers); he'd merely wanted me to fall in love.

I pulled Shayla into my arms and kissed her passionately. I felt the heat, like captured sunlight, rising off her body. I felt her pubic hair tickling my thigh, felt her pulse as she became aroused, and something came free within me, something I'd been suppressing for the longest while. I held her at arm's length, watching her smile, watching her muscles work as she

moved against me. It was sexual, yes, but it was also the most spiritual moment I had ever experienced, for here I'd been counting all the cracks and imperfections in my life when the beauty was all around me.

I just needed to *look*.

* * *

The phone rang just before dawn. Shayla and I were still tangled up together in bed. Though I tried to be careful about it, I couldn't help waking her as I reached for the receiver. Blaney was on the other end; her grief-stricken voice carried across the room.

Shayla gave me a questioning look after I hung up. "What was that about?"

"That was Blaney," I said, my voice faltering. "There's been an accident."

* * *

Dawn was a sliver of light on the horizon. For the second time that morning, I pulled up in front of Vincent's house. It was still drizzling as I crossed the street; I didn't mind much, for I was wearing the same clothes I'd worn to last night's dinner.

Vincent's parents were with him at St. Joseph's hospital. Blaney and Shayla had gone too, though I hadn't been able to follow. I'd gotten as far as the waiting room before succumbing to absolute terror and apprehension concerning Vincent's condition—so I'd hung back, moping around the waiting room and thinking that as long as I didn't actually *see* him,

there was a fanciful chance his injuries weren't real.

After a while, Blaney and Shayla had come to me and explained the situation.

"He's pretty banged up," Blaney had said. "A couple broken ribs, fractured collarbone, broken ankle. God only knows what he was doing driving around in the rain in the middle of the night."

She'd offered to make a run over to Vincent's place for his insurance information, but I'd cut her off mid-sentence and insisted on going myself—

—and so here I was.

I let myself in using Blaney's key. Vincent's roommates were still asleep (and blissfully unaware) as I slipped into the den and fumbled for the light switch. I started a disorganized search for Vincent's wallet, but my hands were shaking so badly I had to stop and sit down for a moment.

Maybe, I thought, I've been born into the wrong equation after all. Maybe Vincent was wrong and this is merely a dead-end life, a rough draft where he dies prematurely, Shayla becomes horribly ill, and I end up completely alone for ever and ever.

Maybe.

Or, maybe, as I'd so recently discovered while making love to Shayla, this life was perfectly okay. Maybe I'd just been demanding too much attention from the universe lately—and now I had it. Vincent would still be asleep, safe in bed, if I hadn't come here in the first place. My anxiety might have been contagious: I might have affected him enough with my worryings that he'd been unable to get back to sleep. If I'd only left things alone . . . but this is where I was, this is how things had turned out; I could only accept and live with it.

Resuming my search, I found Vincent's wallet lying hidden beneath one of the PlayStation controllers on the floor. I picked it up and flipped through, checking for his insurance card (which was tucked away behind his school ID). I couldn't help finding various photographs as well: photos of friends, family . . . several of me. There was also a piece of folded notebook paper, completely covered in handwriting, that happened to fall out. I shouldn't have wasted time prying, but I unfolded the paper anyway and found that it was actually a scribbled list of places and descriptions: *Bowling Alley on Euclid and Lincoln – Fear of nuclear war (CLOSED)*; *Disneyland – Fear of roller coasters (CLOSED)*; *Huntington Beach – Fear of sharks (CLOSED)*, and so forth. The title at the top read, "Kenny's Victories," and I realized I was looking at a checklist of my life. Every fear that Vincent and I had ever stomped was here—seventy-eight, in all. However, most interesting was the one at the bottom, a scribbled entry barely squeezed in beneath all the rest: *Irvine Bethel Church – Fear of death (OPEN)*.

I couldn't recall ever having faced down death, though now that I thought about it, death *was* quite a potent fear. Glancing at the entry again, I thought about it for a moment . . . and I wondered if Vincent had possibly seen all my emotional pitfalls in advance, from that early occasion when he'd removed an ailing daddy-long-legs from my bed right up to my twenty-first birthday suckfest.

"Closed," I thought. "Open." *Like gateways . . . places we've stepped into.*

Doorways.

* * *

I knew where the Irvine Bethel was (the Nguyen family had taken me there on several occasions). The area was mostly apartments and dormitories—UCI's sprawling campus suburbs—scattered along the San Diego Creek Channel. Pulling into the parking lot, I chose a slot towards the church entrance, where a row of baby sycamores, heavy with dew, stood watch. The air was still and damp as, with Vincent's note in hand, I left the car and strode towards the main building. Of course, I had no actual *idea* what I was doing here; I might have been looking for spiritual satisfaction, or for quavering, glowing doorways—I had no guarantee of finding either.

There was a courtyard behind the church; it was a miniature campus housing the community center and various continuing-education classrooms. I walked around for a while, looking this way and that, feeling ever more adrift as the overcast sky slowly brightened—until, quite by surprise, I saw it: the anomaly I'd been half-heartedly betting on.

It wasn't something that could be *seen* with the naked eye; rather, it was the *feeling* I got when I passed a park bench outside the eastern end of the community center. I stopped and stared, feeling a chill come over me, feeling the pull of an eternal expanse within arm's reach. I was sure, had Vincent taken me here for a fear-stomping session, that we would have sat together on the bench and I would have felt my latest worries melt into blissful oblivion. Maybe I needed him with me, or maybe I could do it alone simply by moving myself into the specified location . . . if this *was* a portal to another

reality, all I had to do was sit—

—and worry no more.

Instead, I sat cross-legged on the sidewalk and unfolded Vincent's note. My eyes darted over the list, though I wasn't reading; I was thinking about all the pros and cons, remembering all the times I'd supposedly "conquered" my fears by merely anointing them with the assurances of alternate realities. It had made my life livable, but it had not fixed the underlying problem.

I looked up at the bench again. *But this could be the last time, the chance to say goodbye to fear-stomping for good. This location is last on Vincent's list; all I have to do is sit there, relax a moment, and everything will be better.*

After all, once you got rid of your fear of *death*, what else could possibly bring you down?

I thought of Shayla, then, and knew she was probably still at the hospital and wondering where the hell I was. If I jumped worlds, she might not have to worry at all—or she might suddenly find herself the fiancée of a man who was somehow no longer hers, a stranger wearing Kenneth Filatov's skin, a doppelganger whose distant gaze would betray his origin during conversations . . . an alter-ego who would gasp and pant and look shamefully away whenever we made love.

I thought of Vincent, lying in his hospital bed and looking up at me whenever I visited. Would he notice the subtle differences, the face behind the face—would he know what I'd done?

Would he *know*?

Rising to my feet, I let out a long, slow breath and looked

around at the grass and trees. At some point during my reverie life had been restored to the world around me: Birds sang from their perches; cars moved to and fro on the highway; the sun poked through the haze and illuminated the glistening asphalt.

It's the only way, I thought, and I realized I'd come to a final decision while still driving to the Bethel: This life was for me, and I would live it to the best of my ability—good, bad, and ugly.

I crumbled Vincent's note and tossed it (gently) onto the bench. Then, turning and starting back towards my car, I shoved my hands in my pockets—and discovered the note, reverted to its formerly crumbled state, now occupying my right jeans pocket.

My brain hiccuped, and I faced the bench again. The piece of paper I'd tossed *there* was, of course, gone.

I pulled the new one from my pocket, unfolded it. Instead of Vincent's list, I was now looking at a letter (written in my own handwriting) addressed to myself:

Kenny,

I know it's been hard for you this past year or two. You've come such a long way, and yet there was still that one fear you could never quite name, the one thing you were always afraid would take you by surprise when you least expected it. When Shayla got sick, I knew it was time to face the unbearable, but this was something I wasn't sure how to help you with, exactly—until I realized the parallels between our two realities.

You came here twice before: once, when Vincent removed the spider from your bed; again, on your twenty-first birthday. Our two worlds overlapped and it became easier to see yours over all the others. I've since realized it was a fortunate accident, because I've gotten to know a part of myself that's inspired me in many ways. All the Kennys out there, we're all the same person, of course, but it's the memories and experiences that shape each of our realities and make us different.

Vincent has already explained to you how the universe works: action, reaction, cause and effect, parallel polarity, and so forth. You see, in my world, he was the student and I the teacher. I've cared for him, as your Vincent has cared for you, until this moment, until this test. Both of you had a similar choice, and I think you've both picked the right one—I couldn't be prouder.

Your life means something, in this reality and every other. Even if Vincent didn't have his gift of omni-sight, he might have done the same thing anyway, subconsciously. He will heal. Likewise, Shayla will flourish because she has your love. Your friends are whole because they have you; they, in turn, make you whole—this is no mistake. You just have to look.

*Your truly,
Kenneth Filatov*

P.S. Save this letter; it might be worth something to the quantum physicists.

My heart hammered in my chest. I looked up, looked at the trees and the sky and the buildings beyond; I smelled the air and felt the breeze against my skin—I felt the presence all around me, and I knew this was where I wanted to be. This was where I *belonged*.

I started back towards the car.

A Whisper from the Mirror

I don't want to die.

It is an irrational thought, one that flutters through my head from time to time, and I cannot figure out why.

Jarl says I have nothing to worry about. Indeed, I can hear him now, hollering through the wrought-iron door of my self-imposed fortress (in this case, the armory). He tells me I was born just this evening and so, like a newborn infant, my canvas is unpainted—I don't have to know fear if I don't want to.

But I do know fear. I do know that at this moment there is nothing so potent as that which holds my emotions hostage, that which keeps my limbs frozen solid.

Come, Espen. Open the door. You'll see. It will be okay. It's all so simple . . .

He's lying, of course. It is not simple at all, and my mind reels from it. How can I know anything but stifling dread after opening my eyes to a mirror reflection and seeing myself looking back with the magnitude of a complete stranger? I know I am myself, but I am also someone else simply be-

cause I cannot account for my actions prior to this evening's performance. I know there was *something* that came before—nothing truly begins from nothing—and yet . . . it is like the masoned walls of this chamber, opaque and impenetrable; I haven't the slightest notion of what might lie on the other side.

There is a world out there, but I am disconnected from it.

It can't be, I think. Getting to my feet I cross the armory, which has been converted for my company's use. All about are colorful costumes, props of all shapes and sizes, stuffed animals. I stop in front of a mirror, where flickering torchlight brings my reflection to life. It is me and not me; I am an actor, an athlete, an artist, a fool wearing a stolen skin—

—I look away. Jarl is calling to me again, banging softly against the door. *Espen*, he calls me. *Espen—of course it's your name. It's our name. You and I, together. Espen and Jarl . . . won't you open the door now?*

Moving away from the mirror, I continue to ignore him. I am not exactly sure what my name is—he says it is Espen, but I do not trust him. After all, he is the one being irrational, not I. He will tell me anything to get me to open the door.

I hate him. Like a brother I might have once loved through life until the tragic day when betrayal shattered the bond forever, I despise him and want him to disappear forever . . . at the very least, I want him to grow silent for a moment so I can *think*.

The torchlight seems to grow fainter—or perhaps it is my own eyes growing weary. I cannot remember the last time I slept or had any food. My stomach rumbles, my head throbs, but it is a preferable discomfort. I would rather be barricaded

in my little keep than exposed and vulnerable out *there*.

I sit on the cold stone floor to think, and I realize I have memories—stored up experiences dancing across the infinitesimal expanses of my synapses.

I close my eyes and see Jarl and myself, alternating between feats dramatic expression and athletic temperament. We are brothers, twin souls, almost the same person, at times. Performing before noble kings and teeming, enraptured audiences, we thrill and entrance; we are part of the troupe and part of each other. On countless nights between performances, when the caravan is parading across the desert sea, I see glittering sands stretching to horizons flecked with palm and jojoba, and stars humming softly in indigo skies.

I remember a woman, lithe and fresh, her hair spilling about my face as we embrace, laughing and touching . . . making love.

For a moment I'm drawn away into the ecstasy of it all. My life seems ever so vivid in my memories—not like now, not in this place of perennial twilight that seems to hang in limbo between worlds. I want to escape permanently into the recesses of my mind, but I know better than to fall asleep . . . I know that I must keep alert if I want to find my way out of this labyrinth.

I open my eyes and get to my feet. Jarl is banging some more:

Espen, please open the door. You are not well. I do not want to see you hurt.

I might have fallen, hit my head or been injured during a stunt, but I know who I am, and I know that somehow I have been kept prisoner before. All my precious memories, all the

passion and exhilaration of life and love—I was only allowed to watch while Jarl indulged himself. Good food, fine wine, voluptuous women . . . I know the taste of them all, and yet I have never been allowed to taste for myself.

Again Jarl calls to me, tries to convince me that it is my imagination gone wild. He is treating me like an imaginary friend, but I wonder if Jarl isn't a bad dream himself.

I flex the muscles of my thighs, one leg and then the other. I curl up my fist and watch the knotted serpents writhe beneath the skin of my forearm. *This is me*, I think. *Real as can be, alive and well and strong. I am no hallucination.*

Therefore, there can be only one conclusion.

Beside the open prop chest is a rack of swords and daggers (part of the magic show). I go to it; the stuffed animals watch me with cold, lifeless eyes as I draw one of the blades, take a few practiced swings in open air.

Yes, I will open the door for you, Jarl, I think, but you will not like what happens next.

Armed (and bristling from head to toe), I approach the door, reach for the lock. I realize, as the bolt slides back, that I have no idea what Jarl looks like. I should—but it is too late now. The door swings open—

—and I find myself gazing into another mirror, the reflection cluttered with random circus specters: painted faces, colored wigs, a musician, an archer, a fool, a gymnast—myself, arms outstretched, at the center of it all.

There is someone else too—an Elder. His hair and beard are white as snow; the many lines of his face have been woven into a mask of wisdom and compassion. I want to call him father, I want to call him God; his gaze catches mine im-

mediately and I am mesmerized, unable to look away.

“There, there, Espen,” he says, drawing me forward with an elaborate gesture of his hands, a subtle symphony of whispered gibberish. “Gentle, gentle Espen . . . it is all right now. Your family is here, see?”

The sword slips from my hands. I can hear it clattering on the ground as I step forward into the Elder’s embrace.

There are tears in my eyes.

“How did this happen?” asks the Elder, still stroking my hair, still murmuring his magic into my ear.

“I lost my character,” Jarl says, his voice subdued. I know he is as embarrassed for himself as he is for me. “I’m sorry . . . it will never happen again.”

Yes, I think, feeling the angst within me unwind. It was simple after all. I was lost and now I have been found. Oh, Jarl . . . How could I have doubted you?

I close my eyes as the Elder casts his spell, as I sift downward, the imagined form of my flesh dissolving into smoke, my jumbled ego settling into the silent abyss of death. There, Espen sleeps amidst dreams of the day he will awaken once again.

Fogy

“You must understand,” said Cleveland. “It’s nothing personal—we’re in *sales*, public relations. Our presentation is as important as our quarterly figures.”

“Of course,” agreed Demis, who, with Cleveland’s arm around his shoulders, slowly made his way towards the *Cleveland’s Wonderful World of Mattresses* exit.

“Our customers,” continued Cleveland, “have come to expect a certain, shall we say, *vibrancy* from their sales associates. They’re more comfortable dealing with people who share common ground, people who make a sale on a peer-to-peer level, no pressure, you know?”

Yes, thought Demis. *I know*.

Freshly tweaked and invigorated by whatever recent cosmetic treatments he’d lavished upon himself, Cleveland, fast approaching fifty, was looking better than most Fogies his age, and was twice as cocky for it. Demis, three steps past the big five-o (but unabashedly puritan in his refusal to augment himself with any sort of cosmetic or genetic enhancements), merely nodded, sighed, shrugged as Cleveland enthusiastic-

ally stripped him of his job and handed it to someone else, someone less foreboding, less experienced—a Babe, of course. Someone today's fortified customers could relate to as a casual friend and not as a know-it-all salesman. Which wasn't to say Demis was qualified to be placed into such a category—but he *was* older looking than was fashionable, and, as such, carried with him a certain authority that the terminally young majority tended to shy away from.

In short: He was driving business away.

The entrance door within reach, Cleveland reached out and pushed it open. “No hard feelings, okay? You need a recommendation? Consider it done, my friend.”

No, thought Demis. *I need a job*. He said nothing, however, as he loosened himself from Cleveland's grip and stepped through the door, stepped out into the early evening air, which was anointed with the busy, congested smells of the city. The shopping square was small, comprised of a liquor store, a deli, several computer and cell phone shops, and *Homer's Sports Pub*.

Friday evening, and the rest of the weekend ahead of me to wallow in my own misery. Wonderful—thank you, Cleveland. Thank you, God.

With Cleveland having receded wordlessly back into his kingdom of mattresses, Demis inevitably found himself walking towards the pub. He wasn't an intentional drinker; getting himself tanked was a clichéd habit he'd only accidentally acquired since, in recent years, he seemed less and less capable of maintaining a job for any length of time.

Homer's was a Foggy bar, and one of the few remaining privately-owned businesses on the block. Despite the appar-

ent aged nature of the bar's patronage, *Homer's* wasn't all that bad a place to whittle away one's time. The alcohol was varied and potent, the food—pizza and tacos, mostly—tastier than any pre-packaged fare, and there was a wall-screen video monitor in the back that broadcast no less than twenty-four simultaneous sportscasts around the clock. There was no dance floor for active bodies, no holo-grid for the athletically-inclined—just the subtle decadence of a dozen or so of the neighborhood's unfortified residents quietly drinking themselves into oblivion.

Demis went inside, strolled straight to the bar, where he commandeered himself a stool and ordered a pitcher of beer. Eugene, a heavyset man with curly gray hair, set a mug and a 60-ounce in front of Demis, who downed the first twenty ounces in several minutes' time.

Off to a decent start, he swiveled around on his stool and glanced around the pub. It was the usual fare, almost exclusively comprised of middle-aged men with graying or thinning hair, sagging jaw lines, expanding belt lines. These were the purists of modern-day Anaheim, the untainted, aged human meat that was rapidly becoming an unwanted novelty in a world lost to its own youth—

—which was why Demis was surprised to see a young man enter the bar, look around for a moment, then take the seat beside him.

Demis couldn't help but ogle: The man *looked* young, no more than eighteen, nineteen, maybe early twenties—but he had an air about him, a look in the eyes that betrayed his chronological age. Demis was certain he was a Babe. Or, at the very least, he was an actual youth who'd had a really,

really hard life. In either case, Demis didn't know whether he should feel sorry for the lad or if he should grab the nearest stool and crack it over the precocious brat's perfectly symmetrical head.

Ultimately, after a few minutes' consideration, he tapped the boy on the shoulder and said, "Tell me you didn't get lost looking for the arcade."

The boy stirred ever so slightly on his stool, glanced inquiringly at Demis, then down at the countertop as he scrutinized a small bead of spilled beer. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're a Babe."

The boy cringed. "Says who?"

"Says me. And chances are everyone else in this bar would agree, if pressed on the issue."

"Okay, then . . . I'm a Babe. Now, is that merely an observation or are you hitting on me?"

Demis frowned, felt two opposing emotions flop over each other. "Well, no, of course not. I was just . . . I mean—you got a name?"

"Chro. You?"

"Demis." Another swallow of alcohol, another wrestle of the emotions governing the pros and cons of getting into a fistfight with a Babe for the hell of it—indifference, at last, prevailing. "So, you're tweaked, right?"

"Yes, if it matters. I am."

"Tell me what it's like, then. Tell me what it's like to be forever young, to be perpetually vibrant—to be a Babe."

Chro snorted. "You watch TV?"

"Sure."

“Then you know the eleven o’clock news demographics. I’m an odd-job whore who lives in the butt-crack of Anaheim and who spends his free time cleansing his liver in cheap scotch.”

Indeed, thought Demis. Silence ensued for several minutes as he split his attention between ordering a small pan pizza from the electronic servant (Eugene had busied himself in the kitchen) and watching Chro swirl the last bit of scotch around the bottom of his glass.

Eventually:

“You want another drink?” Demis asked.

“No,” replied Chro.

“Are you sure? My paycheck’s already shot to hell for this week.”

Chro laughed, shook his head again.

Demis shrugged, waved the electronic servant out of the way; it buzzed obediently and whizzed off to some other part of the pub. The device came in handy, though he’d never acquired a taste for interacting with machines unless absolutely necessary (he didn’t *mind* the servant hovering nearby, ready to dispense beer or peanuts, but he did prefer ordering directly from Eugene or, even better, from Elena, the pub’s resident flesh and blood brunette).

“*Chro*,” Demis said. “What the hell kind of name is that?”

“It’s short for ‘Chronos’,” replied Chro, chuckling lightly.

“And you have everyone call you that? Friends? Co-workers?”

“Sure. It’s my name.”

“I see—and what sort of work does one get these days with a name like *Chronos*?”

Chro looked at Demis as if he should have known better (which he did). Asking a Babe what his line of work was, well . . . it went without saying what any proper Babe *did*, what his intended purpose was. He was either an athlete, a model, or an actor—Demis knew that (though Chro may or may not have been involved in sex deals, depending on his management). Maybe not by heart, but certainly by decree of his parents, who'd probably noticed his good looks from the day he earned his first Kindergarten kiss. Most parents took that as a sign—make the investment (whether or not the child is enthusiastic about it), start the training, and by the time their social prodigy entered his teens he was a coveted money-making tool.

Regardless, Demis thought Chro was beautiful, and not out of any sort of belated expression of suppressed homosexuality. Demis was straight as an arrow—but Chro could pout, could drink himself into a stupor in a place like *Homer's*, and he would still be the most appealing item on the block. Six feet tall, glamorously muscled, with a shock of blond hair augmenting an exceedingly handsome face; the world was his oyster.

And yet here he is, Demis thought, *wasting away beside a balding, pot-bellied ex-mattress salesman such as myself*. It was almost painful to look directly at him for any amount of time—it reminded Demis of his current status in life, how Chro (and others like him) was so terminally *young*, while Demis, at fifty-three, had entered the robe and slippers phase of his life. In another fifteen, maybe twenty years he would graduate to cane and Metamucil; a decade more and he would do all his living from the comfort of a wheelchair.

"It's ludicrous," Demis said, though not entirely without humor. "I mean, what I could do with genes like yours. Alas, my parents had it stuck in their heads that I would be raised *naturally*. We never drank the tap water, never ate the fortified foods. Everything had to be fresh, locally-grown. We had a small farming project out on our balcony—a *balcony*! I grew most of my own meals from the time I was old enough to hold a trowel." He spread his arms wide. "A lifetime of prudence and this is the body I have to show for it, whereas you, *you* . . . a lifetime of epigenetic conquests and social revolution has sculpted you to perfection."

Chro shrugged. "It's a package. That's all."

"A *package*." Demis grunted loudly, waved his glass at a pair of Fogies sharing a drink several seats down. "Hear that? Adonis here considers himself to be store-bought goods!"

Chro blushed, lowered his head. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

Demis snorted and settled himself again.

Momentarily, Elena came over, and she smiled at him as she unloaded the latest in a barrage of beers, gins, and vodkas.

"It's going take an entire night to work all this off," she said with a mischievous wink.

Demis chuckled. He had a semi-serious thing going with Elena—a partnership, though for the past handful of years they'd been seeing each other less and less often. "Sorry, sweet thing. I'm out of commission tonight." *I've been out of commission for a good many nights*. "Maybe we can set something up for next weekend."

Elena pouted playfully and pecked him on the forehead—*God, she's cute*, he thought. She was probably a decade or so

younger than he was (he'd never worked up the courage to ask her exact age), not quite old yet, and not quite young, as far as Fogies went—but her skin was still silky smooth, her face firm despite the appearance of the tiniest of wrinkles around her mouth and eyes. She worked out often, kept in shape the old-fashioned way: free-weights and a treadmill. It worked for her, gave her that genuinely youthful look, innocent, almost—though she knew how to take care of herself, in bed and on the streets.

She nodded at Chro. "Who's your friend?"

"His name's Chronos," Demis replied.

Chro nodded, smiled politely enough.

Elena said to him, "Are you sure you're in the right place, honey? There's a nightclub for Babes down the way."

"Yeah, I know," Chro replied, "but I heard this place serves organic—I've never had real food. Not really."

Elena snickered, looked at Demis. "It may be organic, but that doesn't mean it's not fattening." She leaned forward and poked him in the belly; when he swatted at her, she deftly dodged out of the way and busied herself at the opposite end of the bar.

For a moment the familiar burn heated Demis' skin as he became painfully aware just how much he resembled a pear. He thought of how much work it would take to drop a few pounds, to woo back his migrated hairline—but then Elena, returning to her post behind the counter, put on her well-rehearsed pout as she again leaned forward and kissed him on the nose. "Don't fret, Demis! It was a *joke*. Now, relax. Enjoy yourself. I don't want to see anymore gray in that magnificent head of hair you've got there. Call me tonight if, ah, you find

yourself back in commission.”

Unbelievable, Demis thought. *Simply unbelievable. She can let me slobber over her for five minutes before falling asleep, or she can have Chro here conduct an orgasm tournament until dawn, and she still picks me. Unbelievable.*

“Sure thing,” he responded, and she was off again, serving pizza and beer to the fat and ugly.

Chro said something about appreciating the opportunity with a woman like Elena; Demis was only half-listening. His eyes were glued to Elena’s backside as he stuffed slices of pepperoni and onion down his throat and tried to recall a time when he would have waltzed right up to her and gallantly carried her off to bed. They’d never been more than weekend friends, and yet somehow had remained monogamous for nearly a decade. Elena, with her angel-face, her perfectly rounded breasts and pert bottom; Demis, somehow still handsome, still appealing to her despite the ever-vigilant ministrations of Father Time. He could have gone either way with odds like that—but he’d already reached a decision regarding what he would do with himself if he ever became what he was now.

Time to go, he thought, at last rising from his seat. He’d finished off the entire pitcher of beer (and somehow crammed the entire pan pizza into his gut as well); he was bloated and more than ready to call it a night.

“A word of advice, kid,” he said, patting Chro on the shoulder. “Don’t come by here too often—you’ll only end up making the rest of us feel worse about ourselves.”

With Chro’s dubious expression lingering in his mind, Demis left the pub and went to kill himself.

* * *

Funnily enough, it was a recent magazine article that occupied his thoughts while in limbo:

How did America become a nation by way of prescription? I'll tell you: In the mid-21st century, Congress approved a revolutionary (no pun intended) bill that streamlined advances in epigenetic medicine—thus the Neo Health Revolution was born. Suddenly America was no longer lagging behind the rest of the world: Through a vigorous reform of infrastructure, epigenetic fortification became the shiny new standard. County water supplies, homogenized dairy products, popular cereals and packaged foods, dietary supplements—the staples of modern society were upgraded to include specific enzymes that altered the chemical tags attached to cellular DNA and histone complexes. Fortification provided many advantages over standard treatments in that any given disease or condition was manipulated at the source; the blights of our grandparents' time—genetic and otherwise—were decimated.

A decade after the Revolution began, the results manifested themselves in the form of an American workforce that was happier, healthier—stronger, overall. Business was bolstered, the military was picture perfect, and society in general . . . well, it certainly changed.

Most of us agree the change was for the better, but having a robust immune system, impervious to entrepreneurial microbes, sexually-transmitted diseases, and many carcinogens, has become reason enough for many a fortified youth to gravitate towards increased negligence regarding diet and sexual habits. Gluttony and promiscuity are now more common than ever, as eating the wrong foods (or

eating too much) no longer results in allergic reactions or obesity. Casual sex no longer carries with it the risk of sexually-transmitted disease—the burden has been lifted from the various medical establishments and placed squarely upon the law-enforcement community.

Ultimately, fortification is to blame for the inevitable appearance of an American neo-culture: the Babes. These are the Revolution kids, the young men and women who have been delivered into a disease-free world and who have grown up with perfect bodies, perfect health. They have no consequences (beyond the emotional) to deal with, and so they shun marriage and instead favor cycling through a variety of partners. Illegal drug use is prevalent in cities with prominent nightclub scenes, where Babes often work both ends—the entertainers and the entertained.

Despite this, apathy towards the non-fortified minority continues to grow. “Fogies” has become a household term for those born before the fifties and sixties, those who have been too ignorant or too afraid to convert themselves or their children to the fortified lifestyle. Whenever there is a flu outbreak, it is the Fogies who are blamed, the Fogies who must be wrangled up for costly vaccination programs. Many avenues of employment have become increasingly closed off as companies large and small now refuse to funnel insurance funds into contingencies that are easily preventable through fortification.

Consequently, modern society can easily be grouped into two distinct categories: The Fogies, who have been raised properly by their parents and who, for the most part, have no problem with themselves and others around them—as they are; the Babes, who have been raised by America’s institutionalized pop-culture, and who value physical beauty and self-gratification above all else.

Modern Man has clawed his way out of the primordial muck and, through the ingenuity and advancement of science, has learned to shape the world to suit himself. His children have continued the legacy, refining and upgrading throughout the generations and pushing human evolution ever onward by way of love, friendship, justice, equality, efficiency, mass-production, big business—prescription.

* * *

Demis had planned on defaulting to some lower heavenly plane or, failing that, occupying a quaint corner of purgatory and selling road maps to hell. Instead he found himself very much embedded in the flesh, swollen and hungover in an ordinary, Spartan bedroom that looked vaguely familiar.

Sitting up, he extricated himself from a cocoon of patterned comforters and sheets and tried to stave off a wave of nausea. There was a jumble of mismatched images running through his head: He remembered stumbling out of *Homer's*, into cool night air heated by gasps and sighs of elation as a pair of impassioned Babes clutched one another in the shadows; at one end of the parking lot, an immortal punk, dressed in khakis and chains, had been beating the shit out of his skateboard as he practiced grinding the curb. Demis remembered the reflection of his own face, pale and ghostlike, in the car window after he'd attached the spare hose to the exhaust pipe, as he'd opened the door and deposited himself in the driver's seat with the motor running, the putrid fumes building, pressing in on him, leeching his consciousness second by second, minute by minute—and then, when he'd

at last felt himself slipping into the deep dark, Chro had been there, an angel, a demon, a living sculpture of the gods saying something as he'd jiggled the lock, started banging against the window—

—*the bastard*, thought Demis. *The pretty-faced brat! He's foiled my plans!* He glanced around the room—Chro's room, no doubt.

Following a step-by-step process that involved several minutes of moaning and groaning, Demis got out of bed and into a standing position. His pants and shirt had been washed and were hanging neatly from a rickety-looking clothes rack. He dressed, left the bedroom, and followed a narrow hallway that lead into the kitchen and living room area. Chro, hair tousled, pajamas rumpled, was standing in front of the stove and fixing breakfast.

Demis stumbled onto a nearby stool and pointed an accusing finger at him. "That was you last night, wasn't it?"

Chro looked up, and he smiled ever so slightly. "You mean the snoring?"

"No, no," Demis grumbled, grasping the sides of his head. "After *Homer's* . . . I went out to my car to—I was trying to bow out gracefully and you had to screw it up!"

"You were dying, Demis."

"That was the point!"

Chro leaned against the counter. "Is that how you wanted it to end? Parked in some ghetto parking lot and covered in a pool of your own vomit?"

Demis winced. "Vomit?"

"And urine."

"Jesus, *urine*? I—never mind. What do you care anyway?"

"It doesn't matter why I *care*. I happened to be the one who found you. I carried you home."

"Carried?"

"I don't drive—besides, we're only a couple blocks from *Homer's*."

"You should've minded your own business. You should've just left me."

"Why?"

"*Look* at me!" Demis spread his arms wide. "I'm fat, I'm *old*, my hair—what's left of it—is gray and dried out! I've spent the last decade trying to make a career out of selling *mattresses*, for God's sake! I spend all my free time at *Homer's*, medicating myself with a pitcher of beer and a pan pizza. What possible use am I to society?"

Chro laughed, shook his head. "You really think you're useless? *Really?*"

Demis was tempted to consider the question for a moment (it *had* been at the back of his mind these last handful of years, hadn't it?), but then he reminded himself: He was disgruntled, the sole proprietor of an attempted suicide—fate had blocked his one true attempt at success.

He said, "Don't start with the psychological crap. I don't need it—I don't need you playing Big Brother either."

Chro frowned and bowed his head, slouched his shoulders. "Fine. Whatever—I overstepped my boundaries. Sorry for ruining your *suicide*."

"Damn straight—"

"It's just . . . in the pub, we got to talking and all—what I mean is . . . not many people talk to me just for the sake of conversation, you know? I just thought we . . . you and I . . . I

thought we hit it off really well.”

“Christ,” spat Demis, rolling his eyes. A part of him felt sorry for Chro, especially if there was the slightest chance he really *was* just a lonely youth with no one to talk to—but no, Chro was a Babe, and he was probably much older than he looked. Old enough to take care of himself. Helping those in need was fine and dandy, but Demis didn’t need an obligation at the moment.

An uncomfortable silence passed between them. Then:

“Are you gay?” Demis asked.

Chro shook his head. “No.”

“Good—that’s half the battle. Got any bottled water?”

“Yes. I use it for my houseplants.” Chro reached into the cooler, pulled out a plastic jug and handed it to Demis.

Demis held the jug up high and proposed a toast: “Here’s to good health, yours, mine, your plants’.” He took a grand swig.

Chro’s face brightened, and he laughed. “I take it being alive isn’t all that bad, then?”

“Things could be worse,” Demis replied. “You did what anyone else would have done, I suppose. At least we’re suffering together.”

Chro walked out from behind the kitchen counter. “Come on,” he said.

Placing the water jug on the counter, Demis followed him across the living room and through a sliding glass door. He found himself standing on a sunny balcony.

“Look how peaceful the morning is,” Chro said.

Demis gasped, assaulted by sudden recognition. “I live here!” he said, and peered down the way, glimpsing familiar

sidewalks and buildings. He wondered how long Chro and himself had been sharing the same apartment complex without ever bumping into each other.

“*Look*,” Chro whispered, gesturing at the sycamores, at the sky. “It’s Saturday morning, right? You don’t have anything better to do? Then *look* at what’s around you—enjoy the silence before everyone else wakes up, before it gets *busy*.”

Demis looked, saw cracked sidewalks, lopsided shingles, peeling paint—half-repaired garden bots, their water nozzles softly humming, stumbling across the overgrown lawn. The place was five years, maybe ten, from slipping into permanent disrepair. He found the scene alarming rather than peaceful—but Chro nevertheless seemed at ease taking in all the entropy.

“I thought Babes were all about action,” Demis said. “You know—adventure, flash, sex, clubbing all day and night.”

“There are the pop whores,” said Chro.

Demis grunted.

“But then, some Fogies are just as bad.”

“Yes.”

Chro kept silent for a moment. Then he asked, “Demis, why did you want to kill yourself? I mean, really—was it just because of, er, the way you *look*?”

Demis laughed. Suicide, the morning after, sounded so silly now. “I don’t know. To be honest, I couldn’t care less how many pounds overweight I am, or how many hairs are missing from the top of my head. It’s just something I think about every Friday night—you know, no wife or kids to go home to. I’m stuck with myself.”

“Why stuck?”

Because I'm genetically segregated. "The usual reasons, I guess. It didn't seem to matter when I was younger, but once I hit forty and my age really started to show, I realized I'd waited too long to decide whether or not I cared that I was a Foggy. My parents raised me that way, and that's okay—it was before the Revolution, and that's all they knew. I told myself it would all make sense eventually, leading an untainted life, but before I knew it I'd waited too long—I was fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two . . . fifty-three. I woke up one morning having come to a decision, but it was already too late."

"You wish you'd been raised as a Babe."

"Yeah . . . I do."

Chro furrowed his brow. "Why?"

"*Why?* Oh, gee, I don't know—money, beauty, long life, eternal happiness. Something along those lines."

"Money doesn't buy happiness, and beauty guarantees neither."

"Ah," Demis said, "but money opens a lot of doors. The same applies to everlasting beauty and youth. There's always a market for a fresh face, a chiseled body. A Babe has choices, opportunities."

"No more so than your average Foggy."

Demis snorted. "Easy for you to say, looking like you do. You haven't lived a normal life."

A look of profound sadness swept over Chro's face. "No . . . I haven't. Yesterday was my fortieth birthday, and I still don't know what it's like to be more than a *Babe*, a category, a *package*."

"*Forty?*" Demis gasped. "Christ almighty, you look like a college kid!"

“Exactly. I look young, and so I’m treated like someone who’s young, someone who doesn’t have a care in the world, someone who couldn’t possibly take life or love seriously because he hasn’t lived enough to know any better—but I *have*. I have”

Demis didn’t know what to say, for it was true: Wrapped in that ageless body of his, it was hard to think of Chro as anything but, well, a carefree youth. On TV, the Babes were shining, glowing models or athletes, beautiful and prosperous and very nearly godlike; here and now, the effect was more subtle—there was personality behind the appeal.

And nothing was more potent than a six-foot-tall blond Adonis, all lean muscle and impeccable proportions, slouched in dejection as the first crystalline tears began to trickle down his tender cheek.

* * *

“My career was spawned in the typical pop-culture fashion,” Chro explained as Demis watched him poke at a breakfast of rice noodles, stir-fried vegetables, and scrambled eggs. (None of it was organic, so naturally Demis couldn’t eat—and besides, considering last night’s binge session at *Homer’s* . . . he’d be able to go for the entire weekend without solid food.) “Like most Babes, I started out as an investment. My parents were exuberant over the idea of raising a prodigy. They were both fashion models themselves, in their early twenties when the Revolution began. They’d dabbled on the fringes of mainstream success, doing mostly local shoots and runways. The money was good, but never phenomenal. They seemed to

think they could only carry themselves so far, that it made economical sense to have a child and to refine it, infuse it with all the latest medical advances—improve upon their basic designs.

“So, thirty-six days into the year 2055, my template was assembled, my father’s sperm and my mother’s egg harvested for controlled gestation. Nine months later, I was born, healthy, beautiful—perfect.

(“*Perfect*,” Chro reiterated with only the mildest of scowls. “That’s doc-slang for a newborn with a template likeness factor of ninety-eight percent or higher.”)

“I drank my formulas, took my pills, and, from day one, I lived the life of a Babe. On a daily basis, my mother and father surrounded me with literature, educational computer programs; they read to me, taught me language, mathematics, music; they impressed upon my young limbs the mantra of calisthenics, aerobics—they made sure I was constantly active, brain and brawn.

“In the gym, I was a natural. My template had an athletic predisposition, so I built muscle, burned fat quite efficiently, and had good balance and coordination. I was, however, an academic klutz, and this became more evident as I struggled to move up the ranks of the elementary school system. More often than not, my grades were strictly mediocre—enough to avoid getting flunked, but not so abysmal as to warrant special treatment from my various teachers, instructors, and coaches. Nevertheless, my parents kept up with the studies, the training, the pageants, and the yearly interviews. I earned decent prize money in the pageants, but none of the industry agents ever picked me up because they wanted the total pack-

age, not just a hardbody without a brain.

“I was almost thirteen—nearly a year behind everyone else—when I reached my final year of elementary studies, and still my desk skills were abysmal—but I *was* developing in other areas. When a would-be Babe is younger, the industry agents focus mostly on good looks and smarts, but there’s also the amatory factor, the potential for a Babe to excel in the sexual arena. This is a supplemental test performed at the end of a Babe’s elementary term.

“You don’t talk about it much, but a lot of would-be Babes get, shall we say, ‘bedroom training’ along the way. You can find accredited clinics in the phone book. Mind you, my parents never intended for me to actually *use* any of it. It’s just part of the whole package any good Babe receives.

“Elementary finals—the make-or-break test of a Babe’s abilities, and ultimately a clincher for what area of employment he will inevitably be placed into—came hard and fast. A local scouting agency, in search of fresh meat, set up their tents at my school and held auditions throughout the day. As usual, I started off strong on the runway show, did very well in the athletic circuit, but got the usual headaches during the written tests, choked during questionnaires. However when it came my turn with the bedroom instructor, I passed with flying colors. I was scooped right up, offered a scholarship to the Los Angeles Refinement School, with an emphasis on amatory services. My parents were somewhat disappointed, but I didn’t care because I suddenly became useful—I was *good* at something.

“My studies at LARS began in the summer, my Genetix® therapy was started, and my template was tweaked. Every

muscle fiber, fortified—*primed*—since birth, was developed to its optimum potential; every ounce of unnecessary fat was skimmed off. My metabolism was reprogrammed so that my body would permanently retain that coveted lean and muscular look regardless of inactivity, diet, or the natural deceleration of age.

“I graduated at the top of my class, went on to work for an intimate companions agency for nearly a decade. Business was steady, and the money was good—but the fact of the matter was that I made a living by having sex with people. Every day and night, I was on call. Parties, anniversaries, college dorm room sessions where virgin girls wanted to use me for practice before they went to find someone *else* to love . . . all of my clients were, of course, screened beforehand to ensure prior fortification against disease—but it still felt excessive, and the shame associated with my trade was multiplied with every skilled culmination I wrought.

“It’s supposed to be purely business. You’re supposed to treat each occasion, each *client*, objectively, but it’s hard once the novelty wears off. My physical stamina never failed, but I was weary.

“When I was twenty-six, something clicked, and it hit me (as it does many a Babe) that I was really just a well-paid whore, raised from birth in a world without excuses. All Babs are, whether they’re touting the latest clothing line or beauty product, dancing naked in some nightclub, or sweating between the sheets with someone they’ve only met minutes before. The truth, for me, had always been evident, the promise too good to be true; having experienced the life of a Babe firsthand, I knew it wasn’t a game I wanted to play

anymore—I wanted out.

“My manager—my *pimp*—sat down and had a talk with me. He waxed poetic the usual quotes and statistics regarding an intimate companion’s income and lifestyle. He reminded me that I couldn’t catch anything, as far as diseases went and that it was better for my clients to sleep with me, a *certified* fuck toy, to satisfy their needs or curiosities. But I wouldn’t have any of it. I was through—and so I was fired, my contract torn up, my severance package flushed down the toilet. And here I am.”

Demis sighed, watched as Chro left the breakfast table and went to wash his plate and fork in the kitchen sink. “Still, you have your health. You have the goods—I’m sure you’ve had no trouble getting other jobs. What employer wouldn’t be charmed to have you under their wing?”

“Finding work is a lot harder than you’d think,” Chro said over the hiss of the faucet. “I’m an athlete, a model—a sex toy. What business do I have applying for a job at the local department store? And there are other problems, insurance details that come along with the package . . . nobody in the mainstream wants the liability.” He shook his head. “You think of yourself as just a Foggy, but you can walk into work on Monday morning without having to deal with the stereotypes, the solicitations, women making every excuse to meet you out back for a quickie, as if you’re just raring to go every minute, every hour of every day.”

Demis grunted. “It isn’t any better on my side of the tracks—that’s for damned sure.”

“You don’t know what you have, then.”

“I know what I’ve been stuck with,” said Demis. “Jesus,

you're just like everyone I used to hate in high school, back before all the Revolution shit hit the fan. The jocks who always got the girls, the nerds who could breeze through calculus like it was bathroom reading, the drop-dead gorgeous teenyboppers who always thought they were too fat; nothing was *wrong* with any of them—I'd kill for what many of them had!"

Chro turned off the tap and dried his hands on his T-shirt. "No you wouldn't."

"Give me the opportunity! Don't you see? Every minute I have to look at you I'm reminded of what I don't have, what I can never achieve! Everyone around me is an image of perfection, while I'm stuck in this body, this pathetic mass of rapidly-unraveling DNA."

Chro bit his lip and, for a moment, looked like he might throw a fit of some sort—however he seemed to catch himself in time.

He said, "Look . . . I've got things to do."

Demis stood up. "Yeah, I've already taken up too much of your time. Besides, my car's probably been towed, if it hasn't been been stripped clean by the ghetto punks. I should handle that—and I've got laundry."

Feeling the slightest bit ashamed for being so curt, he headed for the door. He shouldn't have cared—he didn't even *know* Chro, yet there he was pausing, hand on the doorknob, wanting to say something—*he's saved my life. There's got to be something there, some reason, a significance—oh, hell. This is ridiculous. Now I'm just making excuses for myself, trying to make my life more meaningful than it really is.*

"Take it easy," Demis said.

He left Chro's apartment.

* * *

The neighbors were going at it full-force when Demis arrived home. Kicking off his shoes and throwing himself onto the sofa, he couldn't help but listen to the sound of the woman's passionate cries, the man's feral grunts. The two of them were Babes, polite enough as neighbors went, but oblivious to the impropriety of making unedited love at noon.

It was sickening.

Demis opened a window, picked up several pieces of discarded clothing off the floor. He dropped them into a pile near the coffee table and went into the bathroom to brush his teeth. When he caught sight of his haggard reflection in the mirror he swallowed hard, decided he needed a shower and a shave. However, even after he'd scrubbed himself clean, applied a variety of grooming techniques, he still felt soiled, as if the wrinkles in his face had become stained with soot.

Inevitably, he made his way into the kitchen, where he took a clean glass from the cupboard, filled it from the tap and stood trembling, an 8-ounce salvation clutched tightly in his hand.

Drink, he thought. *Go ahead. You pay your taxes, right? Why shouldn't you partake?* He held the glass up to his lips and took a deep breath, wondered if, by any slight chance, the enzymes would be able to reverse what damage time and fifty-three years of epigenetic abstinence had done. Certainly a body like Chro's was out of the question, but maybe there was a chance at a patchwork redemption, a cleaning of the pipes, so to

speaking. On TV, the experts always bickered over the effectiveness of post-adolescent fortification—they never admitted to the truth, one way or the other. On afternoons like this, when Demis felt so stifled he started grasping at imaginary solutions . . . perhaps the impossible was possible. He imagined the tap water surging through him, washing away the excess fat, smoothing the wrinkles, re-seeding his scalp.

He *wanted* to imagine.

With a sigh, he poured the water down the drain and left the sink, left his hopes for another time.

He dressed in jeans and a Hawaiian T-shirt. Out in the living room once again, he started to organize the laundry, considered seeing about his car, but instead found himself reaching for the telephone and dialing Elena's number.

* * *

He met her down the block, at a corner coffee shop. They sat together beside the window and steeped their organic teas in bottled water bought from the neighboring grocery store. All around them, beautiful people in stylish clothing chattered with one another, on their cellular phones, through their notebook computers, and even in the midst of all the ambient youth, Demis thought Elena was the most beautiful creature currently incarnated on God's green Earth. She wore a flower-print camisole, bell-bottomed khakis, and sandals—she looked absolutely gorgeous, enough so that Demis didn't feel too bad about his own corroded appearance because he knew *he* was the one sharing a table with her.

"You know," Elena said, leaning forward and smiling, "it's

been so long since we last hung out together.”

“Yeah,” said Demis. He started to lean forward, but worried the backs of his thighs might become too prominent, and so shifted himself awkwardly to one side so that the folds of his shirt hung somewhat evenly over both his abdomen *and* his lower back. “It’s been too long, hasn’t it? I mean, I try to keep you and the rest of the crew at *Homer’s* in business with my sponge-gut . . . sometimes I forget drinking isn’t the only way to spend one’s weekend.”

Elena, still smiling, cocked her head to one side. “*Sponge-gut?*”

Demis made a puffy face and gestured at his stomach. “Yeah. The Bottomless Pit—haven’t you heard? It was all over the news.”

“Silly,” laughed Elena. “You keep making fun of yourself like that and one night your gut really *will* make the eleven o’clock news.”

Demis shrugged and tasted his tea, stirred in some honey. A perky blond passed by, smiling prettily at him; he reacted instinctively by tightening his gut and blushing bright red.

“I wasn’t sure I’d see you this weekend,” Elena said, missing (or choosing to disregard) his vanity. “The way you left so early last night. You looked . . . tired.”

Tired? Demis thought, clearing his throat. *I was dead—I should be dead, but here I am performing an encore for some god-forsaken reason. God, I feel like a grizzly wandered down from the mountains.* “Oh, you know how it is. End of the week and all.”

Elena nodded. “So, what was up with that blond kid—his name was Chro, right? He looked pretty out of it.”

“He’s your age, believe it or not,” said Demis.

“Oh, so he’s twenty-five?” Elena jested.

“He’s *forty*.”

Elena blanched, glanced self-consciously over her shoulder. “Geez, Demis. I love the way you just blurted that out.”

Demis felt his cheeks burning. “I, er, I didn’t, uh, mean anything by it. I . . . sorry, that is.” He sat up straight, tightened his gut, absent-mindedly brushed a nonexistent wisp of hair out of his eyes—

“Demis, is there something on your mind?”

He shook his head, though he knew it must be obvious from the way he was acting that there wasn’t just *something* on his mind; there were *many* things. He felt like one giant emotion swimming around inside a gigantic, quivering, human-shaped jelly donut. He wasn’t fooling anybody, especially not in a café where, between excited conversations about acting, modeling, parties (past and planned), everyone seemed so *natural*—and here he was, stuffed into outdated threads and trying to pretend he was having a good time when really he was sweating bullets, catching every youthful stare, every raised eyebrow, as if the whole world was critical of his predicament—

He grabbed Elena’s hand, nearly knocked over his chair as he stood up. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Outside, it was hot, but the open air (while only semi-fresh) was soothing nonetheless. Elena sipped her tea and held Demis’ hand. Together they walked westward along Yorba Linda, and Demis explained what was going through his mind with about as much clarity as the fine print on a car

loan. At every street corner he imagined Elena tearing away from him and flailing her arms above her head in exasperation, but she stuck, patient as ever, until he was through.

At Harbor, she sighed and asked, “So, what is it exactly, Demis? Are you afraid of getting old? Are you afraid of dying?”

“No,” replied Demis, shaking his head. “It’s . . . I suppose I’m afraid of having made the wrong decision. I’m afraid that in a few short years I’ll be looking back on a life that hasn’t been lived.”

“You’ve lived a very good life.”

“It could’ve been better.”

“Everyone says that—but you’re still a decent, kind, compassionate man. Who cares if you’re a Fogy—if *we’re* Fogies. It isn’t a contest, you know.”

“Still, at the very least, I thought I’d age gracefully,” Demis said. “I thought by the time I was fifty that I would *feel* fifty, that I would have lived enough of life to be ready for the whole downhill slide into middle age, arthritis, decrepitude.”

The light changed. Elena leaned her head against Demis’ shoulder as they crossed the street and passed a juice joint where a group of youths-and-or-Babes—their enunciation flawless, their bodies sculpted to perfection—discussed politics, business, and art over frozen beverages. Just beyond the patio, the windows of the café were cluttered with advertisements for this and that, each product touted by a svelte boy or girl with clear eyes, stunningly perfect teeth.

“Look at that,” Demis said, nodding at the gaggle of Babes. “Morning sunrise, flowers in springtime, their whole lives lying in wait. You could have any one of them.”

Elena stopped, held Demis by the shoulders as she faced him full. “You keep forgetting: I’m not a Babe—and besides, I don’t want any of them. I want *you*.” She leaned in, then, held the back of his head as she gave him an open-mouth kiss—outward public affection, Babe-style, right there in front of everyone. A moment later, when she let him come up for air: “Come to my place, Demis. Please.”

* * *

It had been so long, he’d made so many excuses that he hardly recognized Elena’s apartment as they stepped inside. He might have commented had not Elena immediately slipped into his arms and started showering him with kisses as she groped at his clothes.

Somewhere deep down inside, something stirred, and Demis willed himself to reciprocate. He played back his own sexual handbook (first penned during his adolescence and revised numerous times throughout his adulthood) as he kissed Elena here, touched her there, helped her strip naked as she peeled away his own protective threads. Together they stumbled into the bedroom, where Demis lay her down on the bed and nervously kissed his way up her arm, to her shoulder, her neck, down to one breast, then the other. A few more nibbles and he moved down between her thighs, where he warmed her with quivering lips. Every so often she would gasp or cry out softly; he was only half-sure he was doing things right, though after only a few minutes, she pulled him up and wrapped her legs around him, grasped him by the buttocks and pulled him in close, waiting expectantly for him

to respond in the masculine fashion—and when he didn't, when he suddenly realized something was wrong, when he felt Elena's hands trailing down his bloated belly and grasping his flaccid penis, stroking and massaging to no avail, he thought he would die right then and there.

He was so concerned over his performance that he couldn't perform.

He pulled away from Elena, sat at the edge of the bed and sulked silently. *Too tense—too intense . . . can't even get a hard-on.*

Elena crawled behind him, wrapped her arms around his abdomen and kissed his shoulder. "It's okay."

Demis tensed, made as if to get up.

"Really," said Elena, holding him tight. She pressed herself against him; her skin was hot, slick with sweat—the manifestations of an averted orgasm that, no doubt, would have sent her through the roof, had Demis had the potency to follow through. "This isn't an algebra test. We can just cuddle."

Demis flinched again, forced himself to his feet. "Casanova didn't score any points by *cuddling*." He gathered up his clothes, started dressing.

Elena scooted to the edge of the bed. "There are ways to deal with it. Exercises, practice—pills."

Ways to deal, thought Demis. *Ways to put off the inevitable—cope with the problem by drawing more attention to it and then pretending it's no problem at all.* He'd felt Elena's heat, the abundant moisture of her arousal, so evident after only a few minutes of foreplay—and all the while, despite such exquisite stimuli, he'd remained completely impotent, a dried-out husk. "I don't want you to have to put up with me. You de-

serve better.”

“I’m not ‘putting up’ with you.”

Demis paused for a moment, watched Elena as she left the bed, stood before him in all her glory, all bare skin and sweat glistening off shoulders and breasts, her womanly scent evident beneath her chamomile body spray; all the ingredients to get him embroiled were there, but instead he felt guilty, like a dirty old man who knew better than to be trying to get between the legs of an innocent youth—even though Elena was in her forties and had been his girlfriend all these years. The decade between them shouldn’t have mattered, but it did, and suddenly, here and now, they were generations apart.

He left without saying a word.

* * *

Back inside his apartment, Demis locked the door, closed all the windows and drapes, and sat slumped on the sofa. At first he intended to take a nap, but instead found himself staring at the wall and listening to the sound of his heartbeat. With each pulse of blood, he seemed to age a little more . . . a little more . . . cells still replicating themselves, but slower and with more errors each time.

Time passed with excruciating slowness. Demis remained resolute in his position on the sofa until the next door neighbors started fucking noisily again (had they nothing better to do?)—at which point he covered his ears, hummed a tune. Prurience won out, however, and he found himself listening to the woman’s gasps and imagining it was Elena, imagining himself doing things right, doing *her* right.

An erection suddenly raged in his pants.

Right, he thought, leaving the sofa and heading for the door. *No problems when I'm a spectator, but when it's my turn in the sack . . .*

He went for a walk, passing neighbors' patios, catching a glimpse here and there of a fresh-faced family having lunch, listening to music, or watching television. The young people always kept their windows and sliding glass doors wide open, as if displaying themselves at an exhibition. The Fogies' windows, however, were always draped and darkened—privacy exacted with a vengeance.

Demis made a circuit of the apartment complex. Then, coming to a decision, faltering, coming to a *second* decision, he made his way to Chro's place and banged on the door. He was almost sobbing because he knew if Chro wasn't there he'd simply collapse onto the doormat and weep for hours.

Chro, it turned out, was home, though he seemed to have been caught off-guard as he answered the door, for his face was flushed and he was slightly out of breath. He was also wearing nothing but a cotton bedspread, which he'd wrapped about his waist.

Demis forewent the standard greeting and stepped towards the door. "I need to talk to you . . . please."

Chro glanced over his shoulder, looked back at Demis, bit his lip, and nodded. He stepped aside. "Sure. Come in."

"Thank you, thank you," Demis mumbled, entering.

Inside, Chro directed him to the sofa. "Sit tight for a second. I'll be back."

Demis nodded, took a seat and waited as Chro disappeared into the bedroom. A few minutes later he reappeared,

a petite-looking woman at his side (the two of them seemed to have hurried into their clothes). The woman glanced questioningly at Demis before whispering something to Chro and then leaving the apartment.

“A client,” Chro explained, blushing. “I told her you were my manager.” He laughed and, after a somewhat awkward moment of silence, sat himself beside Demis. “So, what’s on your mind?”

Demis ran a hand over his balding pate. “You have connections, right?”

“Connections?”

“Yeah—in the industry, I mean. Referrals. People who know people who can fix me.”

“I’m, er, not sure what you mean.”

“This”—Demis gestured at himself—“*all* of this. I don’t want to be a Foggy anymore.”

“Reconstruction, huh?” Chro sighed. “If only it were that simple.”

Demis persisted: “Lee Silver fractured his spinal column during the filming of *Hostile Takeover*. He took a month off, went to an epigenetics clinic in South America, and was back on the set, good as new, to finish the project on schedule. Ernesto Ghirardelli, at sixty-two, got twenty years shaved off for *The Shepherd’s Song*, his comeback. I read about it in *People*.”

“That’s all post work,” Chro said. “On film and in the doctor’s office. They can do touch-ups, but it’s still just cosmetics, makeup, and probably more than a few digital enhancements. As I recall, Lee Silver never did an action film ever again.”

Demis felt his stomach turn over. He wanted to grab at

more examples, but he already knew what Chro's reaction would be. "So then I'm just an old fart who's utterly and completely screwed. Is that what you're telling me?"

"As far as I know," said Chro, "you have to have been fortified since childhood, or, at the very least, since early adolescence, to be able to achieve the results you're looking for."

Demis slouched his shoulders and was sure he felt himself deflate several cubic inches.

"I'm sorry Demis, but you're stuck with yourself."

Demis looked at Chro. There was a sly (though not unfriendly) smile on the boy's face—*as if he thinks he's dispensed some minor bit of wisdom and uplifted my spirit. Silly kid.*

Chro caught his scowl. "You think I've got it good, don't you?" He got up and started pacing around the living room. "Bitches day and night, actually getting *paid* to fuck or dance naked on some stage where the women ogle me like I'm a god, but that's only how it looks to the spectator. From the outside looking in. You've heard my story. I'm sure you've heard others—you know how we all make the best with what we've got. For me, it could've been sports, religion, the family business; instead my parents, for better or for worse, raised me to fuck. So that's what I do—but it's not *me*."

"You don't get it, Chro—"

Chro held up his hand, started into the bedroom. "Come with me," he said, and disappeared through the threshold.

There was a moment of indecision as Demis considered the rather distasteful possibilities associated with spending any amount of time alone in a bedroom with another man, but, then, Chro *bad* said he was straight, and he *bad* just been lavishing his attentions over a female client . . .

Demis went into the bedroom. Chro was tidying up the bed, which was quite rumpled. Besides the clothes rack, the room was just as spare as he remembered, though it was far from empty, for scattered along the opposite end of the room, near the window, were a variety of open sketchbooks, and cotton fiber sheafs. In the corner was an easel with a half-finished piece glinting in the subdued light.

Chro wadded up a discarded cotton comforter, tossed it onto the bed. "Excuse the mess," he said. "It's, well, you *did* catch me in the middle of an appointment—but she'll reschedule. They all do." He knelt over one of the sketchbooks, flipped idly through the pages.

Demis stepped across the room and stood glancing over Chro's shoulder. Momentarily, Chro handed him the sketchbook he'd been perusing; Demis flipped through, saw a collection of drawings done in charcoal, pastel, and colored pencil. The material was abundant, but the style was lacking. Demis was no aficionado of the arts, but Chro's work looked like something a child would have done. There were portraits, still-life renderings, abstracts, and in every case the proportions were off, there was no proper depth; hands and feet had too many or too few angles, facial expressions were rudimentary—still, there were so many pages it was obvious Chro had put a lot of effort into his work.

After a time, Chro handed him a stack of watercolors. "I work on this shit every chance I get. I've been doing it ever since I was a kid."

Demis examined the watercolors and found similarly disappointing results. He handed them back to Chro and shrugged. "Hey, no shame in trying, right?"

Chro cast a wistful gaze at the paintings. “When I was finishing up my elementary term, I remember every lunchtime my friends and I would sit outside on the bleachers and draw. There were two of them who did comics—professional-looking shit, like any Marvel comic book you’d find on store shelves. They had real talent, and I remember it came so easily to them . . . like breathing. I loved comics too, and I remember I got my parents to part with some of my pageant money so that I could buy a really nice sketchbook. I wanted to fit in with the group—I even had this fantasy that we would one day start a comic studio together, but I was never any good. I tried, and my friends were as supportive as they knew how to be, but it always came down to one of them patting me on the shoulder and telling me something like, ‘Don’t beat yourself up about learning to draw, because every weekend you get to fuck hot chicks for extra credit.’ Well, first I’d correct them, tell them it wasn’t *fucking* but *guided intimacy*, and then I would launch into a speech about how easy they had it, they could do whatever they wanted and I had to stick to my parents’ plan. I don’t know why, if I talked like that so much, I didn’t just cut all ties and disappear into the woodwork. I might have had the balls to run away, or to rebel against my upbringing, but I was never as bold as I wanted to be. I never made anyone else understand—I can do what I’ve been programmed to do, but I’ll never see any of my work in an art journal, or out on tour. I have to live with that, and it’s okay, because I’ve learned to live with myself. I have to pay the bills, but I can also hole up in here in between and draw or paint ’till my heart’s content. The recognition isn’t as important as the act.”

“Yeah,” said Demis, snorting. “That’s why you turned up at *Homer’s* last night. *Living with yourself*.”

“Everyone has a bad day.”

“And I’ve had a bad decade.”

Chro ran his hands through his hair and let out a long breath. “We’re getting nowhere.”

“Agreed.” Demis started out of the bedroom, but stopped halfway to the point as he imagined himself alone in his own apartment and pondering everything that was wrong with his life. As awkward as it was, he actually felt more at ease imposing.

Turning to face Chro again, he said, “You know, if I go home I’m probably just going to spend my time planning another botched suicide.”

Chro paled. “You mean—last night, at *Homer’s* . . . I thought you merely had too much liquor in you. You’re not *really* . . . should I, er, call someone?”

“Jesus Christ, no,” snapped Demis, waving Chro away from the phone. “I just need someone to talk to—and not a \$200-per-hour someone.”

Chro nodded, fished a wristwatch out from a pair of pants lying on the floor. “Okay, then. But I’ve got dance practice at three.”

“I don’t mind tagging along.”

Chro smiled. “Cool—but you’ll need bus money.”

* * *

It was a half-hour ride to the dance studio. Squeezed into a window seat, Demis stared out the window as the 24 line

zoomed westward along Yorba Linda, past liquor stores and gas stations and shopping centers, past pedestrians waiting for the bus, children migrating in large groups towards the movie theaters and arcades, teenagers and adults (virtually interchangeable) striding boldly and with an unshakable sense of purpose. Everyone, the children, especially, seemed to be exceedingly mature and focused—employees in training, Demis realized, of the Societal Machine, always turning out prim, proper, socially and sexually-educated candidates for the more advanced courses that would come in the refinement schools, where those who “had it” got promoted, went on to accept their trades as professionals in their designated field. The ones who didn’t make the first cut were still optioned off in secondary trades, like escorts, exotic dancers, intimate companions—and that’s how it went: first class was clean, second class was dirty, and third class . . . that was where Demis fit in.

The people who’ve tried and failed, he thought, or who’ve never tried at all—ordinary people who sweep the floors, wash the windows, and sell mattresses at rock-bottom prices. Damn it, I haven’t seen a wrinkled face or bald head all day.

He turned away from the window. Beside him, Chro was popping a cream-colored pill into his mouth and washing it down with a sip of bottled water.

“It’s a stabilizer,” Chro said, noticing Demis’ curiosity. “The gene therapy’s pretty rough—it works, but you’re on meds for life. They keep your DNA from reverting.”

“Reverting?”

“Yeah. Everyone’s got their baseline template. When you’re tweaked—even if you’ve been properly primed as a kid

—your cells deviate from the norm, but there’s always a pull for the cells to revert to their original programming where every time your cells divide, the chromosome tips get shorter and shorter, resulting in cellular deficiencies, mutations, and the like. Gradually the tips get so short that they basically unravel, and that’s when you die. The epigenetic shit tricks the chromosomal code into thinking it’s only replicated a set number of times, so the tips stay at a certain length—problem is, the same thing happens with cancerous cells, which have a habit of ganging up and causing trouble. So, taking these pills every day suppresses the wrong codes from copying themselves whenever a cell replicates.”

“English, please,” said Demis.

Chro flashed a toothy grin. “My meds keep me from turning into one huge cancerous tumor.”

“Oh . . . I see.” There was a bitter taste at the back of Demis’ mouth—he’d never really paid much attention to the specifics involving Babehood. Oh, he *knew*—it was hard not to when the news stations did daily stories on the horrors of botched tweak jobs—but, much like wanting to own a fancy sports car despite the poor safety rating, that didn’t mean he assimilated every negative nuance associated with the Babe ideal. “And it’s the same for all like you?”

Chro nodded. “But I guess it’s no different from depending on foreign farmers for food or having reservoirs a hundred miles away pumping out our water. California’s a desert—we’re all raised to survive by depending on the system.”

Demis didn’t say much for the remainder of the ride. When they reached the dance studio, he quietly followed Chro inside and set himself on a stool. The place was little

more than a tidied warehouse, with cheap linoleum rolled out across the floor, dusty mirrors fastened to the walls, and patchwork piping criss-crossing the ceiling. Demis watched quietly as several other dancers (all Babes, as their conversations betrayed) chatted and joked with one other as they warmed up. One or two smiled or waved in his direction, but for the most part he was a voyeur, taking it all in without actually fitting in.

Momentarily, Chro, now dressed in sweatpants and tank top, strode out into the middle of the dance floor; a nod at the others and the rehearsal began. It was part hip-hop, part break dancing, part lap dance. Riveted to his stool, Demis watched a troupe of beautiful bodies dance, twist, writhe and shimmy in tune with some nameless drum n' bass track. It looked like a lot of work, but he could just imagine what it felt like to be at the helm of a magnificent dancer's body—the exercise wouldn't matter so much because he'd have the *results*. He'd actually *want* to sweat and pant his afternoons away . . . even if he didn't really care for dancing.

At six, the troupe broke for the evening.

"So," said Chro, toweling his face and neck. "What did you think?"

Demis stood, cracked his back. "I wouldn't be the one to ask—it's not my line of work."

"Nor is it mine," Chro laughed. "But I take what I can get, you know? Today it's one thing, tomorrow it's something else."

Yeah, thought Demis. *Must be just terrible to have a variety like that*. He said nothing.

After a moment, Chro sighed and said, "Still not feeling

right, huh?”

Demis was tempted to respond with typical sarcasm, but instead found himself feeling slightly ashamed—after all, he’d spent the entire day trying to drag Chro down to his level. Now he was a failure *and* a nuisance.

Chro, ever the abundant fountain of optimism, shook his head and started towards the exit. “Come,” he said. “I want to show you something.”

Demis followed him outside. “Let me guess—you’re going to take me to some old folks’ home and show me just how *young* I am compared to them? How bad things *could* be?”

“No,” replied Chro. “We’re going to a Babe orgy.”

Demis fell silent. He’d never been to a Babe orgy, though Elena had once invited him to go with her to one. That had been years ago, when Demis was still in his forties and not yet a lost cause. He’d turned her down—there was, after all, the provocative video footage on the news. However, part of his mental regime included a healthy dose of ignorance; it was always easier to imagine the ideal than to see it prancing around on display, right under your nose.

A fifteen minute walk brought them to the *Soap Dish*. From the street it looked like a fancy department store, with sleek, flexible-looking mannequins in the window. Chro seemed to have tenure with the doorman, who let them in without an ID check. Inside, the place was packed—a 24-hour brothel comprised of a bar, two dozen tables scattered along the club’s periphery, and, in the middle of it all, a dance pit. Lit from above and below by flashing neon lights oscillating in tune with a thundering trance jukebox, Demis couldn’t make out much detail at first because the pit was overflowing

with soap suds. He'd catch a bare arm here, a glistening breast there, sometimes a well-shaped leg or thigh. The clientèle were all Babes, and they were unabashedly nude as they mingled, dancing, grinding, and, yes, fucking, right alongside one another. There was laughter, there were gasps and cries of pleasure; every so often a ruddy-cheeked man or woman climbed out of the pit and padded gleefully over to the bar to order a drink or to simply take a breather before the next dance track, the next partner.

"We can't get sick," said Chro, standing beside Demis at the mouth of the club. "There are no unwanted pregnancies. When we get bored with one partner, we move on to another, and so on down the line until every guy and every girl has cycled through the majority of the joint. Some places even keep score and offer prizes for those who break any records. Sometimes I make a little money in the pits."

Demis swallowed, watched as a pair of Babes left their table, slid into the dance pit, into each other's arms as they began an entirely new dance, tongue to tongue, hands smoothing shiny-slick skin, palpating heaving breasts, chiseled pecs, gliding lower, down to the divine juncture dusted by impeccably-trimmed pubic hair—

—Demis looked away, disgusted by it all, disgusted at his own masculine reaction swelling in his pants.

He made a beeline for the exit.

Outside, he stood at the edge of the sidewalk and watched the sun as it slowly dipped behind the downtown horizon.

Chro joined him shortly; he put his arm around Demis' shoulder. "Stark, isn't it?"

Demis nodded. "I'd heard the stories, and you know they

never *really* show you what's going on in the news . . . to do that, out in the open, and with strangers . . . I can't believe I never *knew*."

Chro grimaced. "Aw, geez—I'm not trying to burst your bubble or anything. I just wanted to show what it's like—what *we're* like. If you were a Babe, you'd have to *be* a Babe."

Demis felt himself surrender, first on one emotional level, then on another—he realized he didn't know how to get home on the bus. "If it's not too much trouble, I'd like to go now."

Chro nodded and walked with him to the nearest stop, which was vacant. He sat, wallowing in a hesitant sense of closure, as they waited for the bus. *At the very least*, he thought, *I'm exhausted enough to go right to bed and sleep like a rock until Monday . . . figure out what to do next from there.*

"Hey, Chronos."

Demis looked up. There was a man stumbling towards the bus stop from the direction of the Babe club. He seemed to be drunk.

"Chronos," the man said. "Chro of the Magnificent Cock, Chro whose name can only be called out in a fit of passion—Chro the Cunt-Master!" He stepped up to Chro, boldly placed a hand on the Babe's broad shoulder. "My wife tells me you come here often."

"Not really," Chro said.

"Bullshit! You come here all the time, and she does too—you come together, and that's the problem!" Face to face now. "You're screwing my wife."

Demis felt himself tense as the man grabbed Chro's shirt-collar. He was middle-aged, fit enough, but obviously unfortified—and he seemed bent on retribution.

“Sir,” said Chro, taking the man by the wrists and shoving him back. “You must have me confused with someone else.”

The man quickly regained his balance and planted his feet firmly as he fumbled in the front pocket of his blazer.

Oh, Christ, Demis thought, jumping to his feet. He sidled to the opposite end of the bench as the man pulled out a handgun and aimed it squarely at Chro.

“I know who you are,” said the man. “I’ve been watching you since I found your picture on my wife’s cell phone. You and Joon together, in that sex pit they got back there.”

“Just relax, man,” said Demis. “We can work this out.”

Chro’s attacker laughed bitterly and spoke to Demis while keeping his eyes focused on Chro. “You’re a Foggy, just like me. You know how it is—all the women want Babes. I thought I was enough for my wife, I thought I could make it work, me a Foggy and she a Babe. But I got old, and she got bored.” He took a step towards Chro. “I’m doing this for *us*.”

Demis swallowed hard. Any moment now he expected to see Chro’s forehead split wide open, his youthful beauty splattered against the concrete. He was so upset that his bladder loosed itself; amidst the agonizing quiet of the empty bus stop there was suddenly the sound of urine trickling from his pant cuffs.

The man with the gun looked at him, an incredulous scowl on his face. “Lord in heaven, did you just piss yourself?”

There was no time for an answer (not that Demis could have, even if he wanted to), for Chro suddenly stepped forward and knocked the gun from his attacker’s hand. Then he grabbed the man by the back of the head, forced him forward

as he kned him hard in the face. In a moment the man was lying comatose on the sidewalk, a small pool of blood forming beneath his head.

“Come on,” said Chro, starting down the street. “We’ll find another bus stop.”

Demis disregarded his shame and fled alongside his partner. Not one word slipped between them until they were a good ten minutes into the ride home—at which point Demis, deftly covering the stained leg of his pants with his arm, cleared his throat.

“Did you fuck that guy’s wife?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Chro said, shrugging and looking the other way. “Probably.”

They said nothing more for the duration of the ride.

* * *

The neighbors were uncommonly quiet that evening as Demis stood in front of his kitchen sink. He’d filled a glass with water from the tap and was now holding it in his hand, contemplating, staring at nothing and trying to decide whether or not he was thirsty—*really* thirsty. He thought of calling Elena, making up, maybe spending the night with her, ready for Monday, ready to whittle away the week looking for work, finagling with the manager over rent money—

—he lifted the glass to his lips.

It was a ludicrous idea, Babehood at this stage of his life, at this point along his well-worn path. He might have died at the bus stop, or, at the very least, been critically injured; that alone should have decided his fate for him . . . and he sup-

posed it had. After all, he'd come directly home after the incident, hadn't even cleaned himself up before flicking on the light, grabbing a glass, and poising himself on the brink.

Fuck it, he thought, and drank deeply, wiped his mouth on his sleeve when he was finished.

He set the glass in the sink and went for a shower and a change of clothes. Then he grabbed his coat, headed for the door.

With any luck, Elena would be in the mood for Chinese food.

The Path Between

Golden Rod Park was most beautiful on Service Day. With the sycamore and acacia bowing ever so gracefully to a gentle breeze tinged with lemon and honeysuckle, with little church girls in summer dresses skipping from bench to bench and offering peace flowers to whomever they met, it was just enough to lull the weekend crowd out of their routines. Out of their cubicles, out of their houses and apartments, citizens and veterans (who, if you looked carefully, were speckled strategically throughout the park) from southeast White Hall congregated this one day a month to enjoy their community-appointed observance for the afternoon.

James DeHaven sat cross-legged on the grass and, sketchbook propped in his lap, tried to capture a superficial scene of tranquility. He was supposed to be relaxing, absorbing all the privileges of his civilized lifestyle so that when he next checked in with his head-doctor he would have a collection of sketched improvements as proof of his gradual psychological evolution. Instead, he found himself drawing the usual dark, morbid, foreboding things: Churches on fire, homeless people

lying half-dead in alleyways, vast cities laid to waste by gargantuan mushroom clouds; he'd already wasted a third of the pages in his book on the grotesque caricatures and obscene pop images that, while perhaps counterproductive, were spot-on representations of what he felt inside.

Be happy, he told himself. *Look around, see everyone else smiling and talking and laughing. For once in your life ignore that rotten spot in your brain and come up with something that won't make your editor want to shoot himself in the head.*

Looking up, he caught sight of a ruddy-faced little boy kneeling on a patterned blanket and blowing bubbles while his mother unwrapped a picnic lunch. James set his pencil in motion, rendered the boy in tatters, his arms and legs caked with mud, blood, feces. Instead of a picnic blanket, he sat on a scattering of food stamps. In his hands: his mother's severed head. Just above the head, a text bubble that read: "I'm nobody."

James almost laughed out loud. *Political commentary, or mental meltdown?*

Whatever it was, whatever brooding results had forcibly manifested themselves through his muse, it seemed to be yet another reinforcement of his manic depression, an accumulation of mental soot slowly corrupting the gray matter inside his skull. He was twenty-eight, out of school, nine months into a comfortable career as a graphic artist for a metropolitan magazine, and three-hundred twenty-six days into a long-term relationship with wonderful, beautiful Carol. He had a decent apartment, decent money, decent sex—all the things a man his age supposedly desired.

Yet it wasn't enough.

He turned away from the picnic blanket, widened his gaze and began a new page in his book. He started on the White Hall skyline, with its sleek, glowing, almost angelic architectural shapes and gently-sloping urban textures. He did an outline first, an abstract template that, considering his composition style, might have done quite well on its own. The more he drew, however, the more his sketch inevitably turned anti-establishment: a smudge of blood across a billboard depicting a nude woman whose nipples served as hanging pegs for matching dollar signs; an open apartment window revealing a domestic abuse scene between a father and his son; a politician urinating on his audience at a citizens' rally.

Same old, same old, he thought once he'd finished. He flipped back through everything he'd done over the course of the morning. *Not a single keeper*.

"Happy Service Day."

James looked up and saw one of the church girls standing over him. She had a collection of long-stem roses in hand, one of which she handed to him.

"Fuck off," he said, taking the flower. The girl, no more than ten, smiled prettily at him; she smelled like sun and air and jasmine—she was so damned fresh and pure that James wanted to vomit, to cast her bouquet to the ground and trample it with his feet, then hurl the whole mess into her freckled face.

"You're silly, Mister," she said, another example of the infuriating ignorance that seemed to plague White Hall to no end.

James watched her skip gleefully away and imagined a

thousand different kinds of insects nibbling at her bare feet. Then, snapping the stem of his gift-rose in two, he placed it on the grass beside his sketchbook and began rendering its broken form. He was only halfway through when the air came alive with a harmonized mechanical hum. He looked up and saw the Pacific Fleet flying overhead, a layer of shiny metal fighters—thousands of them—moving across the sky in formation. Their mighty engines comprised White Hall's celebrated symphony of war.

Purpose for the pinheads, James thought. Seeing his fellow citizens (those who were sitting) getting to their feet, he did the same and, rose in hand, pricked his finger, summoned blood, presented his rose, his wound to the sky. Blood for blood, patriot for patriot. In the background, the park's PA system came alive with a standard citizen's march.

The flyby lasted several minutes. When the last of the fighters had disappeared over the horizon, everyone returned to normal, with smiles replacing curious frowns, and laughter filling spaces of somber silence.

They don't understand what it means . . . they just go through the motions, then it's back to lunch, back to Frisbee.

James settled himself on the grass and treated his wound with a bandage from his knapsack. Afterward, he began adding the Fleet to his White Hall sketch.

"You have the muse."

James looked up again. A tall, willowy man dressed in white robes was standing over him.

A Node circuit.

"Thanks," James said, shrugging, "though all too often I don't know what to do with it."

The circuit chuckled amiably. “My name’s Lon. May I join you?”

“Sure.”

Lon arranged himself on the grass beside James, whose nostrils flared at a most peculiar odor—an elusive sort of musk mixed with something camphoric. It wasn’t entirely unpleasant, but it did set James’ senses ablaze, and he wondered why he hadn’t noticed the circuit before. Such people were not at all uncommon on most Service Days (they dealt in propaganda, collecting donations, recruiting citizens for community service); though James had a habit of ignoring circuits as he did door-to-door salesman or corner Liberty Fund collectors, he usually knew whether or not there was one in his vicinity. This time, however, he’d been taken quite by surprise.

“A fine afternoon,” said Lon. “May I have your name?”

“James.”

“Ah. You’re an artist?”

James nodded, prepared a brief list of dismissals, should the need arise. “I work for *Chroma Key*. That is, when I’m not sitting in the park and wasting paper on doodles.”

“Every mind needs an outlet,” Lon said, fixing his gaze on James’ sketchbook. “May I see?”

James’ instinct was to politely refuse; instead, he found himself yielding to Lon’s request as he handed the sketchbook over. Lon flipped to the beginning and studied James’ work with great attention, page by page—and as Lon studied the sketchbook, James studied Lon, wondered how much of the man’s appearance was merely cosmetic and how much was a physical manifestation of what was surely an angel or ghost in

human form. Lon was painfully pale, with the ash-colored hair and long, elegant features that were typical of most Node workers. His lips were blood-red, his eyebrows black as coal; the contrast was quite provocative.

"I can see you've been following a theme with your work," Lon said after a time, handing back the sketchbook.

James shrugged. "It's my therapy. I'm supposed to fill the entire book with happy, cheery images before my next head-session. I'm under quota."

"Not at all," said Lon. "Humanity has long since outgrown its innocence. Our community exists because of tribalism, not benevolence. You've memorized the White Hall Indoctrination?"

"Yeah. All citizens know it."

"Then I would say someone of your make would have been in far more trouble if he *had* filled his book with converse imagery. You would have been feigning ignorance."

"Tell that to my editor," James said, chuckling. "Blood, guts, and gore don't fare too well when you're trying to sell ad space to sports car manufacturers and cell phone companies."

"Ah, but conformity is often a far less effective method of recruiting prospective customers, is it not?"

"Not really. Everyone has the same list, and morbidity's not on it."

A breath escaped Lon's crimson lips—an echo of laughter. "The pleasant and the unpleasant are two sides of the same coin, as they say. Most individuals can justify their lifestyle by surrounding themselves with material comforts, but others—a precious few these days, I might add—will always feel the truth in suffering, fancy car or not."

“That would be me,” James said, sighing.

Lon fell silent for a moment. Then, gazing at some minuscule point across the lawn: “You come here often.”

James shrugged. “On Service Day, mostly. It’s my modest way of exercising my rights as a citizen, I guess.”

“I’ve seen you before, always alone, always brooding.”

“My wife’s the indoor type.”

Lon chuckled again. “I am neither your psychiatrist nor an etiquette officer.”

“But you *are* here to recruit people. Me, perhaps.”

“Perhaps—unless you’re averse to the Node’s function?”

“No, it’s not that.” James kept his temper in check, wondered again why he hadn’t noticed Lon before today. He didn’t like being watched, studied, or even casually observed. “I get the feeling you know more about me than I do about you.”

“Yes,” Lon said, “one such as myself is privy to the city’s central database—but it isn’t your profile or your salary that’s persuaded me to approach you.”

“Oh? What, then?”

“I sense a longing in you. You wish you’d joined the Fleet.”

True enough. “I registered when I turned eighteen. I passed the physical just fine, but they didn’t like my head.” James laughed and tapped his finger against one of his temples. “Manic depressive, they said. I was shipped right back home for pills and therapy. I met my wife during a group session. Her name’s Carol; we’re miserable together.”

“Correction: While in close proximity to each other, you think the thoughts of a soldier, and she thinks the thoughts of

a citizen.”

“That’s a nice little knack you’ve got there—but you’re right. I can scream all day at the artificiality of the human condition or I can pretend to immerse myself in the illusion, and always it’s the same. You’ve seen my drawings.”

Lon sighed, seemed to study James harder even though he was physically looking the other way. “I see a misunderstood soul contaminated with the residue of a dying mass consciousness. While other young men and women have the privilege of ignorance, you’ve been relegated to pacing the cage, unable to sleep alongside your brothers and sisters—you are no ordinary citizen.”

James swallowed, feeling a feather-touch somewhere deep inside himself. “I’m no clairvoyant either.”

“But the work interests you.”

“Er, what sort of work, exactly?”

“Node work,” Lon replied, facing James again.

“What, accepting donations, handing out brochures—that sort of thing?”

“I’m approaching you as a prospective circuit, James. Surely the subject matter of our conversation has revealed my ulterior motive.”

James supposed it had; he’d been unconsciously skirting the issue. “Wow. Circuits are supposed to be the city-appointed stewards of civilization’s most impure fallacies—the channels through which every last nightmare, sin, foul intention, and broken dream passes before it’s processed by the Node’s alpha circuit. You’re telling me you get your recruits off the *street*?”

“We hone in on those with a specific inclination towards

the esoteric, those with the gift of perception . . . and when we feel the time is right”

James suddenly felt himself grow chilled as he blinked a few times, studied Lon in an entirely new light. Every good citizen knew of the Node’s existence, as well as its purpose; it was, however, unpopular—physically stressful, even—to discuss it openly, despite the fact that it was a socially-oriented institution. James had never held a conversation with a circuit before, but, like most, he’d always assumed a certain amount of apprehension was required to handle such folk—

—he didn’t feel it now. He should have been recoiling in horror, or at the very least repenting as he handed over a citizenly donation, but instead he felt an electric thrill. Something that had been dormant in him for a very long time now came alive.

“I should be afraid,” he said.

“No,” Lon said. “The Node offers empowerment to its candidates.”

“*Recruits*,” James corrected.

A smile spread across Lon’s face. “If you put it that way, we’re all recruits, aren’t we? Components of the social machine. Most people are too busy or find it too painful to ponder such truths, but I think you understand completely. I think you’ve understood all too well these past few years. The problem is, there are no job fairs, no want-ads for the morbid, are there? We work to keep White Hall’s presentation spotless, and someone such as yourself is relegated to being an untapped commodity, suppressing your true nature day in and day out as you try to convince those around you that you’re *normal*. I can help.”

James blinked, held his breath—

“I can offer you a job.”

—and nearly choked on his own unrealized joy. Tears blurred his vision; he was trembling. “I . . . I don’t know what to say . . .”

“As I said, there is no protocol for this sort of work, no resume to pad. A circuit absorbs what the community rejects. We feed on the mental and emotional refuse cast out by all the murderers, rapists, politicians, holy men, scientists, doctors, teachers—I could go on *ad infinitum*, but I think you know exactly what we do. You’ve absorbed your share over the years.”

It was true—James’ sketchbook was undeniable evidence. “Growing up,” he said, “I was always under the impression that the Node was someplace you were sent if you broke the law, something to be afraid of.”

Lon’s subtle laughter danced on the breeze. “Oh, there are stories, and then there are *stories*. But such is life. White Hall may be the largest city in the Western Quarter, devoid of crime and poverty, but only because of regular maintenance performed by a select few.”

“And you’ve selected me?”

“For an ordinary citizen, such an experience would be most unpleasant, but for you . . .” He reached out and took James’ hand—

—and he nearly cried out in ecstasy as the onslaught washed over him, a thousand images, sounds, flavors, smells, and sensations at a time. For a brief instant, he was shoulder to shoulder, soul to soul with fifty million citizens: He was a store manager contemplating how to skim fifty dollars off a

cashier's terminal, a bank teller hoping the security cameras wouldn't catch him and his girlfriend fornicating against the vault door, a closet-rapist thinking of what to whisper into the ear of his first victim as he performed his filthy deed. He was a father trying to make excuses for missing his daughter's school play, a husband trying to explain the scent of another woman's perfume on his clothes, a politician breaking into a sweat during a press conference; he was gout, he was influenza, he was the unchecked fungal infection running rampant between the toes of an unfortunate construction worker. He was anger, jealousy, fear, and suffering. He was every bad person he'd ever wanted to be, and he was doing every bad thing he'd ever wanted to do.

When it was over, he was merely James again, sitting alone on the grass with Lon's business card in his hand, and the faint camphoric odor lingering in the air.

He hadn't noticed the circuit's exit.

* * *

The odor stayed with James throughout the rest of the day, which seemed to progress in rapid succession, like stills in a slide show. One moment he was gathering his things to leave the park, the next he was sitting in a café on the corner of Citizen Street and Partisan and half-heartedly poking at a salad. He sipped his tea, rolled a piece of cucumber around in his mouth; his attention was focused solely on the utterly spotless countertop, the ultra-polished eating utensils. The place was too clean, without a doubt. It made him feel like an oily excretion squeezed from an unsightly pimple.

It was too much and not enough to bear, and so he dropped the remainder of his meal into the trash dispenser, left the café and went for a walk along the downtown promenade. He passed impeccable storefronts, moved alongside seamless streets intersecting perfectly-isometric city blocks. White Hall was filled to the brim with perfect objects and perfect people, and though James was a member of this particular society, though he was a citizen and therefore himself perfect, he did not feel at home. Not in his community, not in his clothes, not in his skin. Even time itself seemed to sleep beneath his feet as he wandered in a daze, looking at but not talking to anyone as an after-lunch stroll turned into an hours-long jaunt through the concrete design. When at last his feet and legs refused to carry him any further, he hailed a taxi.

“Take me home,” he sighed, depositing himself into the passenger seat and waving his arm over the paybox. The reader scanned his personal information and in no time the taxi was cruising along the various side streets, giving him a replay of much of his day.

James stared out the window, watched the city go by in a blur. Above, the night sky was darker than it had ever been. There were stars, yes, but it seemed the rest of the galaxy, the rest of the universe, even, had receded a few thousand light years since the previous night—as if God himself might have given up on the lone celestial body called Earth that had so long ago fallen from grace.

Shifting, James closed his eyes and felt his mind turned over. Time fell away like deciduous leaves from a tree. One moment he was weightless, contemplating the eternal ex-

panse, the next he was once again packed tight into matter—air, water, earth, steel girders flanking vulnerable wood and concrete suburbs hidden in the shadow of the city. Himself: flesh and bone, 5'10", raven-haired and eagle-eyed, quivering to the touch, wrapped in bed sheets and pressed against the warm, slick skin of his lover as he spilled himself. Imagining the distinctive camphor in Carol's hair, on her skin, between her legs, his climax was a cosmic hiccup that brought about the most decadent inversion of physical and emotional pleasure, a conglomerate of all the broken dreams, lost wars, monsters of science—he concentrated hard, imagined himself eating Carol out, popping nonexistent pustules with his teeth, lapping away at a viscous discharge. The results propelled him across an immeasurable divide, from Golden Rod on Service Day to a deep morning only hours afterward (chronologically) that felt as if it were years ahead of where it should have been.

Carol, by now thoroughly strung-out with the aftereffects of James' uncommonly powerful lovemaking, mumbled something about her affection towards him—but her comments were lost in the background as James left the bed, went into the bathroom to urinate.

Glancing in the mirror, he hardly recognized the face staring back at him, and he wondered just where his day had gone, wondered if perhaps it had been his reflection and not actually *him* who'd spent yesterday morning sitting in the park and talking to . . . someone. He couldn't quite remember. A friend, he thought; someone who'd cajoled him into going for a job interview at the Node, which seemed strange because as far as James knew, it was only government officials

who worked there.

Besides, he already had a job at *Chroma Key*—but it seemed so far away, a distant memory, another life, a burden without respite, for despite the Citizen Reform Act of '06, the vigorous preemptive crime initiatives, a wide variety of medicines, food supplements, and housing projects to augment the modern reformed citizen, the civilized world was shrouded in entropy. The rush for power and money and the last drops of oil and water rapidly evaporating from a planet stricken with an ecological progeria was still *the* driving economical force in the Western Quarter—and yet gone were the coastal beach towns, the valleys and vineyards of Napa; many of the once-abundant prizes were gone, as were many of the cities and towns whose residents had long since fled to whatever communities would accept them. The rest had been swallowed by the No-Zones.

James had been lucky: He'd been born to parents whose jobs kept them within the political circle (his father was a campaign manager, his mother a secretary for the governor). White Hall was a young city, a pretentious ideal that didn't deserve to flourish when so many others (immigrant and lower-class worker communities, mostly) withered and died or became No-Zones—and here he was, an *artist* of all things, a nightmare-dreamer hiding under the wing of a layout editor for a magazine dedicated to pop culture.

James showered, and was ready to slip back into bed when his olfactory self became alert to the camphoric odor he thought he'd lost to memory—

—*Lon. His name had been Lon.*

The doorbell rang.

Carol, once a handful of feet but now a million miles away, mumbled something in her sleep about his interview and drew the sheets around herself.

James glanced at the clock. It was quarter to one. He vaguely remembered making an appointment for one-thirty as he threw on sweats and a T-shirt, answered the door and found a beefy-looking brute on his step. The man had a friendly face, but his overtly hulking frame gave him the air of a hired goon. Like Lon, he had a potent odor about him that his cologne was not entirely successful in masking.

"How do you do, Mr. DeHaven?" the goon said. "My name's Franklin. I've been instructed by the Alpha Circuit of White Hall to deliver you for an interview this morning."

That's right, James thought. They said transportation would be provided. He just hadn't expected it to be in the form of Franklin, carrying the unspoken promise: *Cooperate, or I'll beat the shit out of you and carry you over my shoulder.*

He'd made an appointment.

James stepped back from the threshold as Franklin let himself in. "Excellent. Right on time."

"Nice place," Franklin said, adjusting his tie. "You an artist?"

James blinked. Suddenly he was having trouble thinking in a linear fashion and couldn't remember leaving the park. "What should I wear?"

Franklin shrugged. "Whatever's comfortable."

Nodding, James gestured for Franklin to have a seat as he retreated into the bedroom once again and rummaged in the closet for proper clothes. He settled on jeans and a pullover.

"Jamie?" Carol called from inside a wavering, translucent

membrane that had somehow come to encase the bed in the last few minutes. "It's almost one o'clock. Are you going to be late?"

James frowned as he slipped into his pants, his shirt. Carol was sitting up, stretching obliviously as the membrane completely shrink-wrapped her bare body. So precise was the membrane that it fit perfectly, conforming to her every curve and crevice. In a moment she was indiscernible from before, though he knew if he touched her, he would be touching that second skin and not actually *her*.

A dream, he thought. I must still be at the park—or maybe I'm home, dreaming I'm home. Maybe none of the above.

He said, "I'm on time. Go back to sleep."

Carol blew him a kiss, yawned, and rolled onto her side. In no time flat she was out cold.

Like turning a switch off, James thought. Bless her.

Franklin was waiting patiently in the living room—three-hundred pounds of goon stuffed into a double-breasted suit. James grabbed his jacket and nodded wordlessly; Franklin led him from the apartment and down to the driveway, where his car waited. Feeling more and more like the victim of an abduction, James climbed into the passenger seat and waited motionless as Franklin closed the door for him, went around to the driver side and took up post behind the wheel. In a moment they were off, out of the city and into the Graphite Glen wilderness.

Franklin turned on the radio, fiddling with the dial until he found a jazz station. Then he reached somewhere beside his seat and produced a candy bar. "Hungry?" he asked.

James was nauseous, actually, but he nodded and took the

candy anyway. His hands shook as he tore open the wrapper and bit off a sizable chunk. He chewed slowly, letting the chocolate-caramel slough off his tongue.

“So,” said Franklin. “What do you do, ah, during the day?”

“I’m a graphic artist,” James replied sullenly.

“Artist, huh? I figured. Your apartment had that certain look to it. We don’t get many artists at the Node.”

James imagined that was quite true. “How did you become a circuit?”

“Oh, I’m no circuit,” Franklin said. “I’m an outside contractor. Sort of an extended secretary, if you can believe it.” He laughed. “I wouldn’t last ten seconds in the think tank.”

“You must think I’m a freak, then . . . I mean, to actually *want* this.”

Franklin shook his head. “No, no. We all have to do what we have to do, right? I was sort of a special case, like you. I got into some sticky situations as a kid. Didn’t know my loyalties from my ass. I shit out of the wrong end. As such, my employment options became quite limited. The Node allows me to serve my community *and* pay my bills.”

Silence ensued for a few minutes—and then James, stuffing the last of the candy bar into his mouth, heard himself asking, “What sort of cologne are you wearing?”

“Node issue,” Franklin responded. “Keeps me protected. You’ll probably get something similar, only for the inverse—don’t let it throw you, though. Most people around you won’t notice. Only the really sensitive ones.”

James thought himself a “sensitive one,” as his head was spinning, tingling, and had been ever since Franklin’s arrival

on his doorstep. It had been the same with Lon, who'd decimated the day with his mere presence. Now Franklin, bearing that exotic scent on his clothing, had similarly bridged two adjacent dimensions, whisking James into a second layer of reality hidden deftly beneath the one he'd been born into. He was slipping and sliding in his skin, so much so that he hardly noticed the car ride was over until he was standing at the foot of the White Hall Node steps and trying to get his heartbeat to slow.

Franklin had the car idling. "You going to be okay?" he asked, leaning over the passenger seat.

James turned his back to the Node building (though he could still see the crisp, white façade in his mind's eye). The air was crisp and cool, the sky starless. "Yeah."

Franklin nodded, and was off. James watched him go. There was no gate, no security—it wasn't necessary. To anyone who passed close enough, the Node was simply too intense a concentration of dread. It was more than enough merely *attempting* to visualize the place; if anyone actually tried to *infiltrate*, they probably ended up dead or terminally insane.

For a moment James merely stood there, motionless, and felt the incomprehensible surge through him. Up close, the Node was an enormous, towering structure—the very tip of an ultra-sensitive nerve embedded deep in the Earth's crust. He climbed the steps—forty-two of them—and entered through the revolving door, which opened to a long, narrow lobby flanked on both sides by a dozen or so evenly-spaced chairs. The walls, the floor, the overall veneer was pallid, and quite sterile.

At the head of the lobby was the reception desk, behind which sat a young woman dressed in white.

“Good morning,” she said upon his timid approach. “How may I help you?”

James cleared his throat. “I have a one-thirty appointment.”

“Name, please?” asked the receptionist, hands suddenly poised over her computer terminal keyboard.

“James DeHaven.”

The receptionist checked whatever database needed to be checked, then nodded and rose from her seat.

“This way, please,” she said, gesturing to a door that James only now realized had been set into the otherwise seamless wall beyond the desk.

He followed the receptionist into a narrow, high-ceilinged corridor that, as far as James could tell, stretched on into infinity. There were unmarked doors on either side. He passed intersecting corridors at regular intervals; each one seemed just as endless as the last, making it difficult for him to gage the Node’s true size (though surely the outside view had been misleading). One thing was for sure: It was *big*.

After a time, the receptionist stopped in front of a door and, with a quick, efficient flourish, waved it open. “An attendant will be with you shortly,” she said, ushering James inside. “Please remove your clothes and lay on the table. There’s a clothing rack in the corner.”

James nodded. Immediately the door swished shut and he was alone in a sparsely-furnished examination room. As with the rest of the Node, everything was smooth and seamless, white and sterile. There was no medical equipment.

James stripped, hung his clothes on the rack, and lay flat on his back on the table. Above, the ceiling was a faraway point lost in the featureless geometry of the Node's alien architecture. Light seemed to emanate from all around, walls, floor, and ceiling; the table was chill against James' skin, its antiseptic essence overpowering the natural scent of his body. He tried to count the minutes before he realized there was someone else in the room with him—an attendant. She was drawing blood from one of his arms; he couldn't tell which one. He turned his head slightly to look at her, vaguely recalled having heard the door open and close a moment ago. Or maybe it had been several minutes, an hour; his mind was eluding him as it had on a distant Service Day in the park . . . which one had it been? And who'd been the perpetrator, who'd cast his thoughts out into the deepest depths of space by allowing the merest hint of that enchanting musk to escape from the fold of a billowy robe?

"You smell nice," James said, thinking of old flowers, dried leaves, fermented fruit.

The nurse smiled politely as she worked. "Is your medical chart up to date, Mr. DeHaven?"

"Yes," James answered.

"Excellent. I'm just running a few standard tests. I've also given you a booster shot, mostly pheromone inhibitors. The disorientation you're experiencing is completely normal, and will wear off in a few short minutes—at which time I will return to deliver you for your interview. Okay?"

James nodded and watched the attendant as she left. Only after she'd gone did he notice his erection, which throbbed to the touch. He wondered if other men ever became similarly

aroused during their examinations.

Intending to get dressed, he slipped from the table, took a step towards the clothing rack—and then did a complete turnabout, propping one arm against the examination table as he masturbated himself with fervor. He closed his eyes and imagined the attendant was still in the room with him, only now, in his mind, she was nude and just as desperate for release as he was. Together they kissed and caressed and grunted and ground themselves against each other, though actual genital contact was cursory to James' oral exploration of his partner's various physical imperfections (some real, some fabricated): He split a fresh cut on her elbow, inhaled the pungent aroma of her unwashed armpit, and when he came, he imagined his ejaculate being delivered into the midst of the most vicious venereal diseases—

—something large and ominous shifted. James heard, *felt*, an almost audible groan as he suddenly came to his senses, found himself standing naked and speckled with his own shame. Someone was watching him—*cameras*, he thought, whirling around in a circle, hands cupped protectively over his crotch. *A test. I'm in here five minutes and I let myself succumb to the frenzy—and now they have footage.*

Into his clothes, James—now frighteningly, embarrassingly coherent—was hastily fastening his belt and looking for something wipe up the mess he'd left when the door swished open and a third attendant stepped slightly inside.

"Mr. DeHaven?" she asked.

James snapped into a more placid posture. "Yes?"

The attendant smiled; James couldn't decide if she was being polite or if she *knew*. "This way, please."

He followed her out into the corridor, wiping his hands on the inside of his jacket as he went. He was sure he was being watched. It felt like presentation day in the *Chroma Key* conference room. He was sweating profusely, itching all over, hearing muffled accusations from the *swish-swish* of the attendant's clothing as she led him deeper into the labyrinth—and when she halted abruptly, put her hand to her ear (she was wearing a subtle headset, he realized), he knew for sure he was doggered.

“Mr. DeHaven?” she said, turning to face James as she conversed with whomever was on the other end of the line. “Why, yes. I’m just now bringing him to screening room 316 . . . yes. Yes, of course. Right way.” She lowered her hand, addressed James: “There’s been a change of plan.”

Of course, thought James, miserable.

“If you’ll please follow me *this* way”

James hung his head and followed the attendant along a new route, which gradually widened into a portal with a fortified vault door guarded by two absolutely hulking men in matching security uniforms.

The attendant nodded at the guards and tapped her headset again. “James DeHaven, here to see Raiden.”

A loud click sounded, followed by the vibration of heavy machinery as the vault opened, revealing a descending corridor beyond.

James glanced at the attendant, who’d retreated several steps; it was obvious she wouldn’t be accompanying him past this point.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the corridor, followed it down into an extremely wide and low-celienged

chamber that was plain and much like all the other Node rooms James had seen, with one major difference: the walls. They sloped inward and were riddled with an intricate network of niches and channels through which water steadily flowed, collecting in a gutter that ran along the room's perimeter. Node circuits (dressed much like Lon had been) were dispersed throughout and were meticulously tending to the various channels or niches with fine pen-like instruments. There was a heavy smell of camphor in the air—the Node scent, though now when James inhaled it, his thoughts cleared instead of scattering. The many Node chambers, he realized, were layers, hulls wrapped around a central entity. That entity was in the next room; James could feel it. The walls could barely contain it—it oozed and weeped. Were it not for the circuits' tireless ministrations, it would have burst forth and corroded all of White Hall (and, quite possibly, the entire Western Quarter) long ago.

James wanted to touch it, to bury himself within its essence and sleep for a thousand years dreaming its nightmares. Seeking an avenue into the adjacent chamber, he spotted an arched doorway that shimmered opaque. No one paid him any mind as he crossed the water-chamber and stepped through the doorway—and when he was through, when the frigid ambrosia of melancholy and pain washed over him like a colossal tidal wave consuming an entire coastline in one fell swoop—

—he knew he'd found heaven.

"Welcome. I am Raiden, Alpha Circuit of White Hall."

Not realizing his eyes were shut until he opened them, James found himself standing in a room that had somehow

acquired the unique property of being simultaneously empty *and* full. Reality here wavered, seemed to be paper-thin, as if James might be able to peel away a layer of the wall to reveal any number of chaotic possibilities. Raiden, the centerpiece, was a presence that James was only able to perceive a piece at a time: ash-blond hair, long and straight; smooth, pale skin assembled in a puzzle-piece pattern over long, sinewy arms and legs; black eyes, brown eyes, crystal, red; a whisper right beside James' ear, the rustle of rotten leaves and dead insect carcasses.

"Forgive my rather elusive appearance," said Raiden, switching to the impression of a hand on James' shoulder, "but it is probably easier for you to experience my essence in measured doses."

James cleared his throat. "Is this my interview? Or . . ." He trailed off, remembering what he'd done in the examination room.

"Do not be concerned with that." A needle prick, blood staining skin, the echo of someone long ago and far away moaning in agony. "There are no decency laws or procreative guidelines to be observed here. In fact, there is little here that would ever be considered acceptable in any civilized community—which, I suspect, is why you came in the first place. Normally there is an interview process, questions and answers, sensitivity tests, but you have caught my attention."

An operating table materialized nearby; James walked over to it and saw himself, emaciated and covered with bedsores. He stuck his finger into one rather nasty abscess and said, "All my life I've felt like I was the only one who was truly awake, while everyone around me was in a daze. Think-

ing the things I did, *wanting* them . . . I knew there was this whole underworld filled with all the gross, disgusting ideas no one else had the heart to explore. I was so cut off, all the time, because I couldn't share my interests with other people. They all wanted shiny little toy ideals packaged in neat little boxes. Until now I thought I'd have to spend my entire life suppressing it, pretending it wasn't there."

"I understand," said Raiden. "I have felt you these last . . . three decades, has it been?"

"Almost."

"Such agony withheld, wasted. I would have liked to meet you years ago, but Lon spoke the truth when he approached you in the park. We recruit when the time is right. You merely needed the right place and the right time to make the affirmative decision. You *have* decided, yes?"

James felt a fluttering gaze hitting him from behind. He turned just as the vague shape of something supremely grotesque darted into the safety of his peripheral vision. "I'm yours."

"Your enthusiasm is admirable, but you must know that I am uninterested in loyalty for the sake of loyalty. Much of what you are feeling is a psychotropic response to an external stimulus. The pheromone inhibitors allow you a window of clarity, but the majority of your work here will require you to endure long periods of delta-state psychosis, much like what you experienced during your examination."

"I know," James said, and closed his eyes, remembering—savoring.

Raiden, now the afterthought of a wounded soldier limping through a field of mutilated corpses, seemed pleased.

“There are not many like you. The work we do here is often misunderstood. Necessary, but ridiculed, shunned entirely by some quarters. The world is dying, its resources a few short decades away from depletion—and yet, for the most part, if you walked down any of White Hall’s fine streets, you would not have a clue.”

“Unless,” James said, “you’re one of us.”

“Yes. We have a boon, a responsibility. You see, civilization is allowed to exist because the collective consciousness has no notion of its own impending demise. You may or may not have read the various alternate histories on the subject, but the Four Quarters were founded not by industry and real estate players but by a group of clandestine wartime consultants. Psychics, remote viewers, metaphysicists—I was part of the new military innovation and was commissioned to head one of many new community districts. I and others like me had seen the world’s final curtain being pulled, yet there was still time to fill, lives to protect. We cannot escape our fate, but we can make the wait bearable by absorbing the dread and replacing it with hope, vision—the regenerative spirit that once flourished on this world.

“It is an incredible burden. Not all communities wish to share it in the same way—hence the war. But White Hall nevertheless retains its innocence thanks to a dedicated few who are in the know. Soldiers are told the truth before they are sent to die. Certain holy men know, so that they may direct their members’ prayers to whatever god is listening—my circuits know, and they willingly accept the mental waste of every last man, woman, and child of White Hall. Together we provide the means for social prosperity.”

James frowned. This was grim news indeed—it filled him with a sense of purpose. Life as he knew it was a festering wound, and he was being allowed to assess the damage.

Raiden sensed his eagerness; his smile was a puff of acrid breath ejected from a gaping mouth full of rotten teeth. “It has been a pleasure to meet you. The paperwork will be taken care of. In the meantime I will have someone direct you to your interview. Welcome to the Node, Mr. DeHaven.”

* * *

James only found the first few days as a Node employee to be disconcerting. Schedule-wise, he was able to adjust without trouble, as the work was done almost exclusively in the delta brain state. His body was unable to differentiate between regular sleep and Node sleep, and so he got the rest he needed while simultaneously performing his duties as a White Hall circuit. He was good at it too; he caught on to the process with very few hiccups. On several occasions, Lon joked that he had a voracious appetite, and it was true: All the years of suppressing his natural tendencies had left him eager to make up for lost time, and sometimes it took a concentrated effort not to overcompensate.

At *Chroma Key*, his coworkers were none the wiser to his new secret life. In fact, they warmed to him with an affinity unheard of in times past. His associates gravitated toward him, asked to share assignments with him; his editor worked *with* him, not *around* him. He could walk into a room and instantly all the unsavory flecks and motes of emotion would cling to him, leaving their former owners clean and pure.

People would compliment his new cologne (though no one was able to place the brand or fragrance). Women loved him, wanted to be around him—some just *wanted* him.

His shiny new social status was an unexpected side effect which, Lon explained during a think tank session one night, was quite common, and perfectly normal, as entry-level circuits were primarily sponges, collectors of community waste to be sent off to the Node. It was only later in one's career that the deeper, more physically demanding task of processing memories (which, unlike intentions, had already been embedded in the brain pattern) became accessible—at which point the body reacted by becoming pale, ashen . . . almost ghostlike.

The outside at last revealing the inside.

James' initial exercises were simple: a young boy plotting to steal one of his brother's favorite toys; an office employee calculating how many of her orders she could half-ass before her group's quota suffered; a family man considering the various consequences of dipping into his savings account for a stereo system he didn't really need. In each case, James merely had to absorb the foul intention as it percolated in the respective person's subconscious. This was done in the dreamstate, in a think tank environment much like the examination room James had initially visited, except here the tables were padded, and the circuits got to wear their street clothes. A handful of nurses kept tabs on everyone.

At first, Carol responded to James in sync with everyone else. She exhibited a cheerfulness and sense of well-being whenever she was around him; all her fears and frustrations were absorbed by his essence, and so she was never upset,

never angry, never too unbalanced that she wasn't in the mood to talk over dinner or, much to James' delight, make love.

Then came the morning of Carol's episode.

James woke up to find that she wasn't in bed with him—which was okay, as she often got up early to shower or to start breakfast. However, there was no mistaking the unsightly smudge of something dark and ugly emanating from close by—something that shouldn't have been.

James got up, put on a pair of sweatpants. He had no memory of returning from the Node—some mornings he did, some he didn't—and so wasn't sure if Carol had even been home upon his arrival. He felt her now, though, and he knew something was terribly, terribly wrong.

A trail of festering misery led into the kitchen. Carol was there, tucked haphazardly into the corner. Her nightgown was stained, spattered.

Hoping the stains were just coffee, James rushed to her side. "Carol? What's the matter? Baby—"

Carol shrieked at his touch, pushed him away. "Get away, *get away!*"

James flinched at the intensity of her outburst. She rippled with bad vibes—it gave him an instant (albeit unwanted) erection that pulsed with every heartbeat.

"Carol," he said, and backed off slightly. "What's the matter? What's happened?"

She bit her lip and fixed her gaze on the floor. There were dark circles around her eyes—she looked as if she hadn't slept a wink all night. "I kept having nightmares, one after the other, over and over. When I woke up, you were gone—I

looked for a note . . .” She trailed off, her voice caught in her throat.

“I was at work,” James said. “Overtime—”

Carol reached behind her back, produced a piece of paper

—

—his Node contract.

“I read it all,” she sobbed, a fresh stream of tears moistening the crust on her cheek. “Is it true? Are you one of them?”

James took the contract and pretended to skim over the text as he scrambled to think of how to handle the situation. Carol shouldn’t have known. The cologne should have masked any suspicious pheromones, kept her from sensing his bad side—but there had also been instructions to physically conceal any references to the Node. (Why *badn’t* he done a better job of it?) The simple act of discovering a mislaid document had devastated Carol, and now she wouldn’t touch him, wouldn’t even *look* at him.

She doesn’t know, he reminded himself. *Not really. She’s distraught, frantic emotions and citizen stereotypes of what the Node is, what it’s for. She just needs to calm down.*

He told her just that, tried to embrace her again as he reassured her it was all in her head—she would have none of it.

“It doesn’t matter what you say,” she said, holding herself. “I can feel it . . . it’s all over you. Your look, your smell, the sound of your voice . . . I don’t know why I didn’t notice before—the membrane. My God, James. I can feel it. It’s supposed to be completely breathable, nano-thin, but I can *feel* it, like I’m shrink-wrapped. You let them fuck with me. It’s been almost a *week*. How long were you going to let this go on without telling me? How . . . how could you do such a thing?”

Willingly?”

James sighed. “It’s not me you’re feeling. It’s everyone else. All their sins and nightmares. I’m still the same man I was last week.” He reached out to touch Carol’s cheek when suddenly she scrunched her eyes shut and started shrieking.

“Don’t touch, don’t touch!”

“Carol! Please, calm down! The neighbors—”

“Fuck the neighbors!” Carol pushed James away, started kicking at him. “What do you care anyway? You’re not even human anymore!”

James stumbled to his feet, backed into the table hard enough that a small flurry of papers were sent fluttering to the floor—his Node files. Carol had obviously found his not-so-well-hidden portfolio, and now everything was all over and getting trampled as she continued to scream and flail her arms and legs—

—it was too much. Her emotions were raw and electric; in an instinctive lunge, James freed his erection and availed himself of the excess. With every kiss, every touch, every thrust, Carol gave up an affliction, one after the other, yelping, moaning, gasping, and, finally, merely trembling all over with the power of an extended climax that didn’t subside until after she’d lost consciousness.

James withdrew, held her for a moment, made sure she still had a pulse and was still breathing—then he broke down and cried. He’d gleaned entirely too much pleasure from the experience. He couldn’t be certain if he’d done it to alleviate Carol’s suffering or to satisfy his own insatiable lust for all that was displeasing.

After a while, he wrangled his emotions and, hefting

Carol in his arms, stood up. The place was a mess—Carol and himself were a mess. He carried her to the bedroom, carefully laid her down and drew the sheets around her. Without a clue as to how long it would be before she woke up, or what her mental condition would be, he returned to the kitchen and called the Node. After explaining the situation, he was informed that a circuit would be dispatched immediately.

A short while later, Lon showed up. Wordlessly, James let him in and directed him to where Carol lay laughing in her sleep.

“What can we do?” James asked.

Lon placed his hand against Carol’s forehead, and instantly she settled. “You’ve abated the worst. Let her sleep it off. She should be fine when she wakes up. You should probably take the afternoon off from work, though, so you can keep an eye on her.”

“That’s it?”

“This isn’t an exact science,” said Lon, standing again and smiling sympathetically. “Sometimes this sort of thing happens, usually to a loved one with a close emotional connection. We do what we can with the precautions, but sometimes reactive episodes are unavoidable. The important thing is to make sure there is nothing that could trigger a relapse.” He glanced around the room. “I suggest you make arrangements to store all Node-related paperwork externally—perhaps in a safe-deposit box. Any digital copies should be inconspicuously named and kept in an encrypted folder.”

James nodded and watched Carol sleep. “What about the membrane? She says it’s uncomfortable.”

“A psychological effect. The membrane is necessary, else

there is the risk you would overwhelm her at the slightest touch. As long as there's nothing to trigger her suspicions, she shouldn't notice—but what about you? Are you going to be all right?"

"I suppose." James let out a long, slow breath. Things had been going so well; he'd finally been able to become the man he'd always dreamed of becoming, and Carol hadn't displayed the slightest negative symptom—and now suddenly, from one day to the next . . .

James showed Lon out, then sat by Carol's side for the rest of the hour. Last night her essence had been fresh and ripe, the day's amassed mental blemishes delightfully varied as he'd plucked them from her mind. Now, however, she was barren. He'd drained her completely. It would be days before her stores replenished themselves.

After a while, he went into the kitchen and phoned work, set himself to tidying up the apartment. He collected his Node files and stored his portfolio in his briefcase; later, he told himself, when Carol was up and about, he would get himself a safe-deposit box. For the time being, he paced and pattered.

At lunchtime, he went out onto the balcony, where he was presented with a splendid view of White Hall's urban mosaic. Everything seemed polished, glistening, perfect; he felt as if he might leave trails of soot wherever his feet came into contact with the floor, wherever he rested his arms or hands—yet he knew it was the other way around. It was the *city* that was dirty, and *he* was the pristine filter through which all the excess flowed.

He remained at Carol's side for the rest of the day. It was

early evening when she at last she came awake, yawning and stretching and looking at James as if *he* were the one who'd been sleeping all day.

"You look out of it," she said, matter-of-factly.

James had been sitting on the floor, but now he moved onto the bed and put his arm around her. "I was worried about you," he said. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Of course I am," she replied, looking at him with a placid expression.

He wanted to ask her if she remembered anything, but, fearing a relapse, he merely made small talk instead. For the most part, she was responsive.

For the most part.

* * *

The *Chroma Key* party was on a Wednesday.

James brought Carol along, introduced her to the staff, and a good time was had by all—well, all but Carol. She mingled, talked, and laughed in a manner befitting the magazine's tenth anniversary, but James knew her display was superficial. She played the part of the supportive wife, but it was only a part, a role—it had been that way all week. He watched her throughout the evening, kept his mind oriented on her thoughtpool; it was like pressing against a latex mold, skin stretched over nothing.

Empty space.

He got her alone at one point and asked (for the umpteenth time since her episode) if she was all right.

"I'm having a wonderful time," she said, and kissed him

dutifully on the cheek.

“You seem distant,” he said.

“Do I?” Carol slipped into his arms, deftly tapped his butt when no one was looking. “How about now?”

James laughed. “My mistake. Trick of the light, I guess.” He kissed her again and let her go, watched as she blended effortlessly into the crowd.

That night, when they made love, Carol lay flat on her back and stared off into the distance, her face perfectly serene throughout. Were it not for the physical manifestations of her climax, James would not have known if she’d felt even the slightest bit of pleasure at all. Most alarming, however, was the fact that not once did she cast off any mental indications of her passion, a thought, an emotion—*something* to let him know there was a spirit dwelling within his wife’s flesh.

* * *

Weeks became months, and Carol’s condition continued to atrophy. Some days James would come home and find her sitting at the kitchen table or upright in bed and staring dreamily at the wall. She was empty, James knew it—he’d overcompensated, scrubbed her mind raw when she’d been at her most vulnerable, and now he was living with a shadowy reflection of what had once been a complete soul. It was unbearable to watch her go through her daily routine disconnected, completely out of touch with everyone and everything.

Then one evening, over dinner, she asked:

“How have things been at the Node?”

James nearly fell out of his chair. He’d stored his files

away in the safe-deposit box, made sure the apartment was completely devoid of Node references—and he sure as heck hadn't said anything to tip Carol off.

"I beg your pardon?" he gasped, wiping his mouth.

"The Node," Carol said. "Your night job. How has it been for you?"

James was lost for words, his delayed reply earning an impatient look from Carol. *How did you find out?* he wanted to ask her. And more importantly: *Why aren't you crawling out of your skin?* "Oh, you know . . . a couple bad dreams here and there."

Carol nodded, took a sip of wine. "I have to admit I was a bit upset at first. Christ, that morning you found me in the kitchen . . . I must've looked like shit."

James swallowed. *So she remembers—she's known all this time and yet she's not said anything.*

Carol went on:

"But, you know, there are good days as well as bad. You did what you felt was right."

"I'm sorry," said James.

"Don't be."

"No—I'm your husband. You're my wife. We should've discussed it together."

Carol held up her hand; she looked lethargic, utterly bored. "Oh, stop it. I'm not holding anything against you. Anyway, I've always had an interest in minimalism."

"Minimalism," James echoed.

"Sure. All the emotional baggage, all the junk you have to sift through every time you want to talk to someone, make a choice, solve a problem—everything's really clear now. Plain.

Simple.” Carol took a sip of wine and stared off into the distance. “I guess my only regret is that we’ll never be able to have children.”

James vaguely recalled something about a conception clause in the Node information packet, something about an unborn fetus being vulnerable to the emotional gravity created by a Node circuit. He studied Carol for a moment and wasn’t sure if she was toying with him, getting back at him in her own way, or if she was really so devoid of feeling that she could renounce her own chance at motherhood and not bat an eyelash while doing it.

Still gazing at that imperceptible point of hers, Carol said, “I can see it, you know. The membrane. If I look in the light the right way. It’s just the slightest bit shiny—like a super-thin layer of plastic or something.”

“Does it bother you?” James asked.

“No. It makes me feel . . . objective.” Carol lifted her fork, took a delicate bite of her food.

They continued eating in silence.

* * *

As the season shifted, and summer became autumn, so did James shift from entry-level circuit to mid-level circuit. Passing the necessary tests, he was removed from the segmented think tank (one circuit per room in a channeled cluster of minds) and brought to another chamber where Node employees functioned together as a single unit. Here, the thoughtpool was larger, more expansive. James and his associates were able to seed thoughts in citizen minds rather

than simply remove them—which was quite useful considering the nature of mid-level work. Instead of merely diffusing the city’s countless mental time bombs, James was now helping to reroute the circumstances leading up to various crisis (after all, crime was nonexistent when no one had the motive to break the law).

James’ insight came naturally. Instead of mere hints or notions pertaining to the layout of a person’s mind, he could actually *see* the memories and intentions. It was both a blessing and a curse, because with insight came the need to differentiate between dreams of what had been, what would be, and what the dreamer *wanted* to happen—but it was a far more effective method of communicating, as James was able to directly manipulate the mental objects and symbols that represented a person’s thought patterns.

Inevitably, he couldn’t resist using his new skills on Carol, and did so one evening before his delivery to the Node. There hadn’t been much talk over dinner; even the food had seemed flavorless. And afterward, when they’d made love, it hadn’t been an expression of Oneness so much as a biological process designed to cycle James’ semen in a timely fashion. Carol’s newfound baseline was driving him nuts.

Laying beside her, he put himself into a light sleep. In the dreamstate, Carol’s thoughtpool was a gaping depression in an otherwise level plane of consciousness. James dipped inside—and what he found disturbed him, for most people’s thoughts radiated outward in multiple layers and levels threaded together by an intricate network of vivid pathways, bridges, boulevards, roadways, tracks, and trails. Carol’s mind, by contrast, was contained entirely within a single

room, a decrepit gallery completely devoid of furnishings. In the center of the room, Carol, naked, lay curled up on her side on the wooden floor. Her porcelain-smooth skin was pale and goose bumped from the oppressive chill.

Taking care not to disturb her, James browsed the gallery, which was piled high with framed pictures stacked, strewn about, balanced precariously upon one another. Each picture contained a certain specific scene, a static representation of a memory, a hope, a wish, a dream—but Carol herself wasn't dreaming. She was merely *collecting*, ordering her dreams in a haphazard fashion, and so, with nowhere to go, they accumulated, taking up more and more space until—

James receded, his essence distilling itself back into his body. He lay motionless beside Carol and stared at the ceiling, tears turning his vision to liquid. *That's no way to live*, he thought. *No way to live . . .*

He cried for several minutes, until Carol stirred—at which point he spooned her from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder. She was warm, soft, and he could feel her pulse. The night light cast a subdued sheen over her skin; James could see a hint of something shiny, and he knew it wasn't perspiration from their lovemaking.

Holding her close, he whispered, "Oh, Carol. The world is going to end very soon . . . you won't have to hold out much longer."

* * *

The memory of Carol's mental gallery haunted James for weeks.

It was quite infuriating: He was a circuit—he made a living absorbing other people’s fallacies, and yet he couldn’t help Carol because she wasn’t living any of her own. Oh, she had a surplus, but it was all objective; whenever he tried working on her, he was only able to glean the *portraits* of her thoughts and not the thoughts themselves.

And so James suffered.

Thinking of how to rectify the situation often resulted in long periods of counterproductivity at *Cbroma Key*, where everyone but himself seemed blissfully unaware of the intricate workings of existence. James’ thoughtpool sessions were a temporary reprieve during which he could gorge himself on the trials and tribulations of others while staving off his own, but eventually he knew he was going to run out of ways to dodge the inevitable.

His situation was not unique. Looking over his Node files one evening, he discovered that while many circuits who worked at the Node were husband and wife teams, there were also a number of people whose spouses had nothing to do with the Node. In such cases, physical separation was the solution of choice, as there was a lesser likelihood of a reactive episode if the instigator—the Node employee—wasn’t always in close proximity to the citizen. Supposedly, many a couple had healthy, beneficial relationships in such a manner.

James read on, found a section covering the membrane. In any modern city, the alpha circuit had a metaphysical influence over a specific radius—a medium for the sending and receiving of citizen thoughts—and could place “filters” on individuals who warranted special attention. This led James to believe that perhaps Carol’s condition was merely the result

of how Raiden's system worked inside the radius. But *outside*, and without Raiden's influence, the membrane would dissolve or, at the very least, weaken to a sufficient point where Carol could once again connect properly with the world around her.

James leaned back in his chair and took a slow, deep breath. The thought of leaving White Hall was simultaneously terrifying and inspiring. Outside, there was no civilization; there were no rules, no carefully-constructed domiciles. Everything was tribal, growing one's own food, making one's own clothes, scavenging for resources, no electricity, no medicine—and there was the emotional factor too. A large part of James' well-being was dependent upon society's abundant mental wastes. Leaving White Hall would be like cutting solid foods from his diet. Of course, there was bound to be anguish in a No-Zone as well, but there was little chance it could match the intensity of fifty million citizens' entangled dreams.

The only benefit would be Carol's chance at improvement.

James sighed, leaned forward and rested his arms against the tabletop. He could feel Carol asleep in the bedroom, and he imagined her mind puttering around the lifeless gallery—he knew he was putting himself first by hesitating.

I should have done something that first week.

Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was nearing midnight; he had an hour before he had to leave for the Node. He left the kitchen and went into the living room, where he lay down on the sofa and closed his eyes. Dreamstate came readily, and in a moment he was adrift—but instead of gravitating

towards the White Hall epicenter, he drifted outward, away from the city's light and warmth—

—into the darkness.

Beyond the city limits, human minds came and went in flickers, pockets of hope and despair in an otherwise barren landscape. The emotions were all uneven, varied—no uniformity at all. There was passion, anger, love, hate, fear, jealousy; no emotion was too raw or improper, no matter what the age, sex, or race of the individual, and though the quarry was spread out, the payoff held promise, as it had never before been tapped by circuit minds.

Jumping from mind to mind, filching a memory here, a memory there, James spied rolling plains speckled with pine, spruce, cypress, windswept deserts pockmarking the Earth like gaping wounds, and jagged peaks piercing the sky in prime examples of tectonic agony. Where White Hall was uniform in design, the No-Zones were cacophonous. Nothing polished, nothing predictable. There was a different kind of suffering here in the sprawling isolation—it wasn't the suffocating effect of too many citizens crammed into too small a space and trying to relieve the pressure at any given chance, it was too *few* people trying to fill the void with something, anything. It was endless silence broken occasionally by muffled laughter, snarled insults, unheard calls for help, stifled moans of passion—

—a man, his wife and two children lived in a small house surrounded by vegetable fields. James entered the man's mind and traveled the day's experiences, working, sweating, ignoring the chronic back pain as, his son at his side, he harvested carrots, radishes, potatoes. At sundown, his wife and

daughter waited on the porch with dinner; the day's labor went unspoken as together the family watched night fall over the valley.

And tomorrow it will begin all over again.

James shifted viewpoints, settling into the son's mind. He found himself and his sister squatting beside a river and working to fill a pair of buckets with water. They were almost done when he heard his sister cry out, a water spider crawling up her arm. *Such a girlie*, he thought as she froze and screamed for him to get it off. He laughed, calling her "baby" as he moved to flick the offending insect back into the water—but the spider dodged his hand and jumped onto his sister's shoulder. Before he could react, the spider started spewing out an impossible abundance of silk as it netted James' head, his *mind*—

"Getting an early start, I see."

James blinked, found he was standing in Raiden's Node chamber. Looking down at himself, he saw he was still wearing the boy's body; there were muddy prints beneath his bare feet. "I . . . I was just . . . browsing," he said, and tried unsuccessfully to shake his costume. "I was in the mood for a little variety."

Raiden shifted beside him, a small fleet of spider legs probing the back of James' neck. "Interesting choice. Was the city not enough for you?"

"It was. I just . . . had some time to kill. It seemed like an interesting place to go."

"I imagine," said Raiden, "a No-Zone *would* be an interesting place to go . . . but alas, we work for the city. Those who dwell without . . . must do without."

“I know.”

“Yet you long for something. You are . . . unsatisfied.”

James swallowed. “I . . . my wife—she’s been ill. She hasn’t adjusted very well at all to my new position here at the Node.”

“I see—and you feel that perhaps by searching without, you can glean insight within.”

James said nothing. He knew Raiden could sense his thoughts regardless, and for the first time since becoming a Node employee, James didn’t want the insight. At least, not when *he* was the subject of speculation.

A twitch of the eye, a burp of slow-moving water, and James found himself back at the riverside, except now everything was inverted, the landscape crusted with disease and decay. James looked down and saw the mud oozing bright yellow pus beneath the weight of his feet.

“You recognize yourself, do you not?” Raiden asked.

James looked up and saw himself—or, rather, he saw a pseudo James DeHaven, a zombie James DeHaven, a half-rotten corpse Raiden had unearthed from one of James’ worst nightmares—standing at the river’s edge. He wore James’ skin like a suit of clothes, and even did a full turn to showcase mottled calves and legs, dimpled buttocks splitting at the seams, back and shoulders riddled with lesions.

Something stirred in James, an unexpected revulsion. “In a nightmare,” he said.

Raiden nodded. “This is how Carol sees you. Her emotional recession, rare as it may be, is a defense mechanism. She can function normally, day to day, but this is how she will *always* see you, now that she knows the truth. Inside or

out, you are the same man. That will never change.”

“Not unless I want it to,” James said, softly.

“Oh, but you forget your responsibilities. If you leave White Hall, will it be for the good of the city? Will it in any way, shape, or form add to the quality of life of your fellow citizen?”

James bit his lip. “Carol is my wife. I love her.”

“She is one woman,” said Raiden, stepping close, assaulting James’ senses with an amalgam of death and decay. “Your wife, your love, yes, but . . . when you took this job you were willing to sacrifice the self for the whole.”

“Of course—but *I* made that decision, not Carol. She got stuck with it.”

“There are ways of coping. The membrane will hold. There is medication available to deal with the social lag—and there are other solutions. Carol and yourself have not had children . . . there would be few ill consequences in the case of a separation.”

“A divorce?” James shook his head. “That’s not an option. For other circuits, maybe, but not for me.”

A severe look came over Raiden’s pseudo-face. “You want to leave White Hall.”

“Maybe.” James hadn’t yet decided.

“Running away will solve nothing,” Raiden said. “You will once again be making a decision on Carol’s behalf, without her consent—and, of course, you must know that once a citizen leaves White Hall, his ID chip is flagged. He cannot come back.”

James shrugged, trying hard to mask his emotions, to think in roundabout ways. “Maybe that’s how it’s got to be.”

Raiden chuckled. “For some, perhaps, but for you it is not that simple. You see, there is the matter of your contract. Node work is extremely difficult, open only to a select few who meet the steep requirements. Losing a single circuit places a huge burden on the rest of the team. And, knowing what you know, there is always the chance you might spread unsavory rumors concerning our work here. I cannot allow you to leave. Not at this time.”

Of course, thought James. The city. The Node. My “colleagues.” Loyalty, perseverance, dedication, and all that. It would be selfish to up and leave simply because of a few rough edges. He studied Raiden for a moment, felt him through and through. There were rooms with the windows sealed up, boxes and crates wrapped in sturdy chains, locked doors behind which something infinitely unpleasant lurked—the frothy cesspool that had drawn James to the Node in the first place. It was a unique feeling: He wanted to throw himself over the brink and avail himself of Raiden’s malevolent stores, but he also wanted to run screaming from what he knew Raiden could do to him if he went astray.

“Trapped,” said Raiden, now embracing James as a father might his son. “We are all trapped within our circumstances. However, some of us have the good fortune of being able to see the truth. You are privileged, James. I don’t turn on my circuits—but, then, I don’t allow them to turn on me either. Remember that.”

Raiden kissed James on the forehead—and he came awake, gasping, choking, caught in a sticky, fetid warmth that blotted out air, light, sound. He thrashed with his arms and legs, and, in a painfully inefficient manner, extricated himself

from what he realized to be a life-sized cocoon encasing him from head to toe. Once his hands were freed, he desperately peeled away the muck from his face, coughed up green mucous; when at last he was able to breathe normally again, he rolled off the sofa and onto his hands and knees, taking great swallows of air and doing his best not to vomit. The living room floor was covered with bits of torn flesh—the zombie-James, transferred from dreamstate to reality. Raiden had encased him inside the nightmare body and sent him home to reevaluate his priorities.

Damn, James caught himself thinking. That was pretty impressive.

* * *

James arrived at the Node without a plan—which was just as well, considering that Raiden might have caught on prematurely had James himself even known what he wanted to do about his situation before actually doing it.

His first instinct was to play it safe and perform his circuit duties in the normal fashion, and so he joined the others in think tank and went to work—but his mind inevitably wandered, his focus fragmented, and soon he found himself in the wrong thoughtpool entirely.

Momentarily, Lon was at his side and was asking if he was okay.

“Bad morning,” James replied. “There’s . . . I’m having some trouble with my wife.”

Lon nodded. “The membrane.”

“Yes and no,” James said. Extending himself ever so

slightly, he felt for Raiden's presence; it was present, but it wasn't concentrated in the vicinity. "Raiden and myself seem to be in disagreement over how to handle the situation."

Lon rippled. "Wow. We all know Raiden is the main fixture around here, but he rarely makes appearances. You must have pissed him off royally."

"He acted more like a spoiled child than an alpha circuit—unless that's how *all* alphas are."

"I know you've heard the story," Lon said. "Grand visions and politics aside, this is Raiden's city, and it's by his grace that you're here."

"Then I'll leave," James said.

"Leave? White Hall?" Lon sighed. "You are a citizen, James. This is your life, for better or for worse. Raiden is what he is, for better or for worse. He holds White Hall together."

"But I've seen the No-Zones. It's not so bad."

"You've seen it through someone else's eyes. They grew up outside; you've grown up here in the city. Imagine the adjustment."

"So I lose my job at *Chroma*. Big deal. I never had any friends there anyway. Not real ones—everyone who calls now only does so because of the pheromones."

Lon's essence became consolatory. "Most people live their lives in the typical superficial manner, never *really* seeing. Ignorance is bliss, but you have a rare opportunity. My advice is not to rock the boat. You've seen what Raiden can do."

Yes, thought James. *I've seen Raiden's dark side*. Crossing him again would likely mean the ultimate consequence—but

even then, for someone of James' make, death was more a delicacy than a punishment.

* * *

The workload for the rest of the morning was fairly light—mostly petty executive matters. At the usual time, just before dawn, James was delivered home, this time, coincidentally, by Franklin.

“Long time no see,” James said as they were off.

“Long time no see, Mr. DeHaven,” Franklin replied, smiling.

They rode together in silence, James unwilling to talk, Franklin unwilling to prod his passenger.

When they arrived at James' apartment, he got out of the car and said, “Thanks for the ride.”

“No problem, Mr. DeHaven.”

“Say, Frank?”

“Yeah?”

“Just out of curiosity, what if you came to pick me up one morning and I refused to go with you?”

“Then, I'd have to knock you out and take you in unconscious.”

James laughed (Franklin too); it was a nervous sort of sound, polite and yet affrontive. “Just asking,” he said, and stepped away from the car. “Have a good day, Frank.”

“You too, Mr. DeHaven.”

Franklin drove away, and for a good long while James remained standing in the driveway. Part of him wanted to go inside and check on Carol, but he already knew what he would

find.

Instead, he went for a walk, and was hit by a pang of déjà vu as he recalled a Service Day long ago and far away when he'd gone on a similar excursion. He thought he should somehow feel different, *better*, now that he'd had the time to acknowledge the truths he'd known for years and years.

Passing smiling faces, receiving cheerful salutations, James knew it all to be nothing more than the subtle presentation of civilized illusions. The subdued sheen of the membrane had never been more obvious than it was now, hiding beneath a jogger's sweat, a woman's mascara, a child's rosy glow. James knew his fellow citizens were medicated, unaware of their condition; they were rattling around inside the White Hall façade and inadvertently feeding the dreams of a ravenous alpha circuit.

Property of Raiden.

James had rented a car, packed his bags, and was gently lifting Carol out of bed when he realized he'd come to a decision—or perhaps he'd known all along and had merely been keen enough to keep his thoughts closed, lest Raiden catch on prematurely.

He made it to the car, and was strapping Carol into her seat when a familiar voice sounded inside his head:

This is rather unprofessional.

Carol stirred, glancing matter-of-factly at James. "Are we late for the breakfast menu or something?"

"It's a surprise," James replied, and shut the door—

You realize this is a breach of protocol.

—went around to the driver's side and got behind the wheel.

This will almost certainly ruin your career.

James gritted his teeth and started the car, pulled onto the street. As he drove, he imagined he was a red blood cell racing along one of Raiden's arteries, to be expelled through a gushing wound.

Nice imagery. I always did have an affinity for your mind, James. You genuinely enjoyed your work here. You would have done it for free, were it not for the basic necessities—or should I say nuisances?—of city life.

James recalled a city map he'd studied covertly during his walk and worked out the quickest route to White Hall's eastern border.

It truly is a shame. I invited you into my inner sanctum—you were the first in a long while. I thought you understood what it meant to be a citizen of White Hall. I see I was greatly mistaken . . . still, you haven't crossed the border yet. You can turn around.

James didn't respond.

Turn around, James, before it's too late.

James pushed every extraneous thought from his mind and concentrated on the road, and, whether through perseverance or just plain old luck, was able to tune Raiden out completely for the next several minutes. He glanced over at Carol at regular intervals; she looked so peaceful, curled up in her blanket and resting her head against her pillow. He imagined her waking up outside the city, imagined himself grinning foolishly and dancing around in circles as he proclaimed their newfound freedom—he wondered if she would praise him or punch him in the nose.

The suburbs gradually thinned, giving way to White

Hall's outlying farmlands. Here, the human presence was sporadic. James caught a thought here, an idea there; it was the first time he'd physically traveled close to the city border, and he found the experience to be mellow, almost relaxing—so much so that he didn't see the man standing in the middle of the road until it was almost too late. Letting out a stifled exclamation, James slammed his foot on the break and swerved the car onto a soft shoulder.

Carol jolted awake as they came to a shuddering stop. "Christ, James. You think you could offer up a little warning the next time you decide to switch to off-road-mode?"

James ignored her; he was far more concerned about having possibly plowed right over some poor citizen. "Wait here," he said, unbuckling his seatbelt.

"James—"

"I'll be right back."

He left the engine running and exited the car, stepped out onto the road, which appeared deserted, sans evidence of a hit-and-run. He walked a short distance from the car, scanning the foliage for an arm, a leg, a torso, and finding nothing. No one.

Strange, he thought, neck-hairs suddenly bristling. He turned around—

—and found himself face to face with a tall, husky man wearing overalls and a bandanna.

A farmer. He was carrying a garden hoe.

James let out a sigh. "Geez, for a moment there I thought I'd—are you all right?"

In answer, the farmer lifted his hoe and swung it at James. The metal blade made a sickening noise as it struck the top of

James' head, sending shards of pain, bolts of lightning through him. He fell to the ground, his senses reeling in agony, everything fusing together the wrong way as somewhere nearby a familiar odor infiltrated his burning sinuses.

"Do you know what happens when a circuit burns out?" he heard the farmer ask.

James tried to open his eyes, but everything seemed so bright, so sharp that his eyelids sealed themselves shut out of desperation. "N-no."

"Let me show you, then."

Raiden smiled—James didn't have to look to see the wicked grin swallowing him whole as the marionette-farmer grabbed him by the neck and hauled him to his feet. Rough fingers pulled at James' eyelids, forcing them open. His vision was blurred, blotted, save for two focal points: the farmer's eyes. They sizzled and crackled with static electricity. Tiny tendrils lashed out at James, tearing through his clothes and binding him, spread-eagle, by ankles and wrists. In an instant he was suspended in mid-air, the road, the backcountry dissolving like smoke and revealing an entirely new scene in which he was shackled naked to a specially-fitted frame that had been placed at the head of a courtroom. The jury box (twice the size it should have been) was occupied by a variety of men, women, and children, all of whom wore grim, frightened expressions on their faces.

A pair of robed men (James recognized them from the Node) appeared on James' right side. They'd brought with them a small cart carrying a collection of wicked-looking scalpels and knives.

"These citizens will know you," came Raiden's voice, soft

and gentle, on James' left. He'd taken on the form of a young man with ash-blond hair and slender, almost androgynous features—the afterimage of the body he'd once had, or perhaps a composite of all his nightmare bodies, for though he was whole, complete, his skin was heavily seamed—as if he were a puppet sewn together from various other individuals' flesh.

“They will despise you,” Raiden continued, pacing slowly back and forth before James. “They will watch you suffer, and they will see the joy you receive from it . . . and they will shun the very memory of you for having to watch your death.” He stopped, stepped in close and brushed the back of his hand against James' cheek. “Your soul will be integrated into the mass consciousness. You will become an affection that cannot be shaken or cured—but all is not lost. You understand how the system works. Their hatred becomes my joy. The cycle repeats itself.”

James felt a sharp sting as one of Raiden's assistants made an effective incision in his upper arm. One of the children screamed at the first sign of blood.

“An abomination,” Raiden said slowly, closing his eyes. “Give me your agony—let me drink 'till the last drop.”

Another incision was made, and James gasped. The pain was exquisite; he knew he was going to be carved to pieces an inch at a time and he both loathed and lauded the prospect.

“Look—*look!*” Raiden said, waving his arm at the jury, whose eyes unwillingly became glued on the podium. “They want to look away, but they are compelled to watch. The loving husband, the proper wife, the innocent child . . .” He trailed off, summoning one of his assistants and telling him to

strip. Then Raiden set him before the podium and instructed him to perform fellatio on James. The room filled with gasps and howls of disapproval, and yet the ritual continued, James' flesh carved, his blood spilled, his shame exploited. Nevertheless, despite such a horrific scenario, James felt himself sighing inwardly, felt his member swelling dutifully in the assistant's mouth. Even in the midst of all the pain there were slivers of pleasure, his true nature summoning itself from the depths—

No, he thought, scrunching his eyes shut, but still unable to hold back the tears. Not my shame but Raiden's. He wants me to feel this way. He's twisting my mind to make it happen according to his design. This isn't a memory yet—I'm not a memory yet. I would never subject my fellow citizens to something like this . . . never . . . his shame, not mine . . . not mine . . .

James dove deep, brushing the source of his thoughtpool. In the think tank, it was important to meter the flow of energy; you were supposed to control yourself, as many of the affirmative thought factors were linked to the body's adrenal glands, and too much energy channeled through the battery of the flesh could result in spontaneous combustion—but here and now, James had no need for safeguards. There was a very good chance he was going to die anyway, and so he grasped the root of himself, opened his eyes again and looked down at the assistant attending his genital. Their eyes met, and he smiled as he squeezed the man's head between his legs and started bucking his hips. The assistant gagged and tried to pull away, but James was too strong, his lust for pain already snowballing, edging him on until he convulsed, his impossibly abundant ejaculate filling the man's mouth, cut-

ting off air, stifling the ability to swallow. The pressure quickly reached a crisis—at which point the man’s head exploded.

James loosened his grip; the assistant’s decapitated torso slipped from between his legs and fell to the ground. The other circuit, the one who’d been carving James’ arm like a Thanksgiving turkey, now recoiled several steps.

Several people in the jury box were choking on their own vomit.

“Impressive!” said Raiden, who’d watched the entire display with a straight face. “I suspected you had as much in you—but alas, our audience appears to be ailing, so we’ll have to finish this up rather quickly.”

He spread his arms wide, great orbs of electricity forming in each of his hands. With lightning-quick speed, he attacked James, hurling one orb, then the other.

The first charge took James’ breath away; the second caused his flesh to sizzle—but even as the pain threatened to overwhelm him, James felt his strength exploding, charging him to the max—he snapped free of his bonds, springing forward and tackling Raiden. Together, they crashed into the jury box, their bodies splintering wood and eliciting an inverted rhapsody from the jury, all of whom had seen enough. People fled in every direction, shouting, screaming; James ignored it all as he wrestled with his opponent, bore down on him with everything he had, fingers piercing skin, crushing bone—

If this is what you want, came Raiden’s voice from out of thin air, *then so be it*.

White Hall’s alpha circuit opened the floodgates, and

James took the full force of an emotional blast so powerful it dissolved him in an instant. Bodiless, senseless, there was nothing left but raw emotion, pure thought . . . unencumbered hatred. James knew Raiden was in his element now, that there were no rules or limits to hold him back as he began snuffing out the bits that made up James' soul. Memories floated like bubbles on a breeze, and Raiden popped each one in succession, as if he were playing a game—but therein lay his mistake, for though James had been born of the flesh and had lived his life according to the laws of physics, *his* soul was now free as well—

—free to utilize that special spot he'd discovered so long ago, for as Raiden, inebriated by his own unsavory lust, unmade him from the outside in, James recalled a very specific memory (one of his earliest) in which he was six, maybe seven years old, and his parents had just brought him home from his first visit to a head doctor. There had been talk of James' manic depression, possible methods of treatment; James had lay in his room for a good hour listening to his parents argue over *what to do*, and the whole time he was smiling, thinking they had it all wrong.

I have a special spot, he'd thought. *A miniature sun tucked inside me, and at any moment I can start a chain reaction to make it go supernova.* One day, he'd always told himself . . . one day, if he ever needed to, he'd put it to use.

Today.

The reaction had already started. Imagined protons danced together and formed deuterium, positrons, and neutrinos—a potent solar wind that bleached clean everything and everyone within James' reach. Somewhere Raiden's aware-

ness flared, but there wasn't anything he could do about what was happening—how could he? How could *anyone* single-handedly contain such an incredible force of nature? It was so much more than even Raiden could absorb, and so *he* was absorbed.

James let himself go, waiting for death, or perhaps an eternity of random, incomprehensible thought, dreams, hopes, and despairs. It wasn't so bad—it was like dreaming.

Everything was like a dream.

He drifted through empty space; there was nothing but total silence, complete stillness as he felt himself settling lower and lower in a depthless well of time and motion as the soul-stuff sifted to the bottommost layer, the heavy elements of the Self, flesh, bone, blood, cotton fabric against his cheek . . . and the smell of Carol's perfume.

He opened his eyes; he was lying on a road in the middle of White Hall's backcountry. Carol had knelt beside him and was cradling his head in her arms.

"How . . . how am I doing?" he asked. There was blood, wretched physical pain, but it was manageable.

"I don't know what happened," Carol said, a concerned look on her face. She dabbed at his head with a handkerchief. "I watched you get out of the car and . . . and then that asshole attacked you. I got out to help, but the two of you just collapsed."

James reached up, wiped a tear from Carol's cheek. He was glad to see her emotions manifesting themselves as such, and it had nothing to do with self-gratification.

After a minute or two, he sat up and glanced over to where the farmer lay flat on his back, motionless. "Is he . . . ?"

"I don't know," Carol replied, suddenly bursting into tears. "James . . . I don't know."

He cradled her in his arms and wondered if it was the same for everyone else in White Hall, waking up from a lifelong daydream and wondering what to do next. Raiden was almost surely dead, and without his influence, there would be greed, crime, suffering—there would be *life*.

It was terrifying.

After a while, Carol lifted her head and wiped her nose. "Wow. I haven't cried like that in . . . ages." She sniffed, glanced over James' shoulder. "I feel like something's happened, like . . . like we'll go back home and find the entire city's been deserted."

"Or refilled," James said. With Carol's help, he got to his feet and looked down at the farmer's body.

"We should call someone," she said.

"Yes," agreed James. "We should."

"Did you know him?"

"Not really."

"The fucker . . . he was probably drunk or stoned or something." Carol bit her lip and gazed up the road. "Where were we going, anyway?"

"Nowhere," replied James.

"*Nowhere*. That's a funny name for a place."

"Yes," said James. "It is."

Arrival

At the onset of an unexpected journey, Matthew MacBride sat hunched behind the wheel of his Ford Escort and prayed for the world to burn in hell.

Instead, he got rain.

Figures, he thought as he drove northwest along Cabrillo Highway. *I ask for one thing, get something else altogether. Lucky me.*

Not that he cared—not really, for he'd pretty much decided that this little drive up into the Cambria hills was going to be a one way trip. *In fact*, he thought, *I might very well be driving through the gates of heaven pretty soon—this fucking stairway to heaven looks like it's going to keep winding up and up until it breaks through the clouds and pokes God in the butt.*

Which might have served the Big Guy right for allowing so much pain, disease, corruption, and other mortal follies to run rampant in His world, for allowing Matthew to sample a heaping plate of death when he was ten and his father had died—for allowing Yvonne to break up with him after seven *years* of going steady.

In church too, during Reverend Lanks' sermon . . .

"Matthew . . . I have to talk to you."

"Right now?"

"Yes. This can't wait."

"Um, okay."

"Matthew . . . I've been sleeping with Tyler."

"Oh."

"Now, I know you're mad at me, I know you're hurt, but I couldn't keep it inside any longer. I know that it's not something you want to hear, but I had to bring myself to tell you the truth. No more secrets between us."

"Uh-huh."

"We're good friends, you and I, and I want it to stay like that, but sometimes I need *more* than just a friend. I have . . . physical needs as well."

"Mm-hm."

"And this has nothing to do with your weight. It has nothing to do with you. It's just . . . there are things you can do with certain friends, and things you can't do with others. I don't want our relationship spoiled because of something like sex."

"Oh."

"God, I feel so much better finally getting this off my chest. Are you going to be okay?"

"Um . . . sure."

Yvonne may have sugar-coated it, but Matthew knew perfectly well what the score was: he was overweight, balding, and his penis was more modestly-sized than was fashionable

for his generation. While Yvonne was into working out at the gym, going rollerblading, and playing volleyball at the beach, he was a couch potato who preferred renting DVDs, eating pizza, and sleeping in on weekends. How he'd ever managed to snag a girl like Yvonne—and hold onto her for a good, solid run—he hadn't a clue, except that at one time she'd sworn it wasn't looks that mattered, but what was on the inside. She'd said she liked his sense of humor, how he always seemed to have the right advice whenever she needed it, how he wasn't obsessed with football and army movies like a lot of other guys.

Still, Matthew *was* fat, bald, and needle-dicked. Oh, he was an eager participant whenever it came down to some good old fashioned, genital-to-genital contact, but that didn't necessarily mean he was *good* at it. Or, as *good* as a woman like Yvonne needed him to be. Once she'd hit her mid-twenties, she'd become obsessed with her biological clock; suddenly she needed a fellow hard-body, a prime example of southern California vanity (and one who was hung like a horse, as Tyler allegedly was) to prove, in the gym and in bed, that she was impervious to the passage of time.

Matthew had gone for a nighttime drive. An hour along the highway and he realized he'd left San Luis Obispo in a fight or flight reaction that would have put his viking ancestors to shame. No route in particular, just somewhere relatively isolated where he could die in peace.

In retrospect, dying young was probably something no one in their right mind would want to do unless burdened with some sort of horrific, incurable disease—or, perhaps, if someone was stuck on the receiving end of a breakup with the

only girlfriend he'd ever had (and would probably *ever* have). Many had chosen suicide as a solution to such circumstances, though its effectiveness was questionable since one was usually never heard from again upon exiting the flesh.

Matthew had considered asphyxiation, pills, getting drunk and hanging himself—but what if, in his stupor, he made a gross miscalculation and ended up doing only enough damage to prolong his suffering until the medics arrived? No, better to drive off a cliff at ninety miles per hour, fast and furious.

Such was Matthew's ironclad intention for about the first five minutes prowling around the sleepy Cambria hillsides, with the numerous saloons, shops, and restaurants perched at the edge of the deep, dark Pacific. The town was elvish, a leftover relic from the old world that was kept around primarily as a tourist attraction.

Good, Matthew thought. *Small and quiet. No one to get in my way.*

However, the longer he drove, the more he thought, and the more he thought, the more he began having doubts about what exactly he was intending to do. Kill himself over a woman? Perfectly logical in one sense, utterly insane in another—especially considering the storm. Cambria's epicenter behind him, the evening had turned pitch black, as if all that existed was the fogged-up window, the sheets of rain, the flashes of Matthew's headlights against a brief muddy field of view that most certainly wasn't part of Cambria anymore, wasn't part of *anywhere*—

—he didn't spot the pothole until it was too late, at which point the two front wheels of his Escort suddenly hiccuped.

The car came to a shuddering halt, Matthew almost hitting his nose on the steering wheel.

“Shit!” he exclaimed. He shut off the engine and got out to examine the damage. It wasn’t a very big pothole, but the surrounding rainwater was turning the whole area into one gigantic mud hole. Even now, the abundant flow soaked the ankles of his pants. It was obvious his car wasn’t going to budge without a tow truck.

Matthew slouched his shoulders as he surveyed the darkness. Really paying attention this time, he saw nothing but trees and undergrowth wilting under the torrential down-pour.

He was quite lost.

Well, this must be it, then, he thought. This is where I die. I wonder how long it’ll take to drown if I just lay down on the road and open my mouth? Or will some animal start pecking at me first? What if I’m half-eaten, but before I die, some dude happens by and takes me to the hospital, and the doctors keep me alive so that I have to live the rest of my life without arms or legs—damn it. Suicide was a complicated business.

Pulling out his last bit of determination, Matthew lay down in the mud and stared up into the darkened sky. Cold rain pelted him, matting the wispy hairs on his head and soaking his clothes. In a moment, he actually felt like the water was washing him away, dissolving him into the ground. He felt calm, he felt relaxed, he felt ready for death. Everything seemed ready, except . . .

. . . he had to piss.

With a sigh he got up again and spit water from his mouth, wiped his eyes—and just like that, his moment of

bravado was gone, replaced with embarrassed amusement. *What was I thinking? This is ridiculous. I'm not going to die just by lying down on the ground like some tribesman.*

He started walking, searching for a suitable place to urinate—as if it mattered where in all the excess water he deposited his piss. Already he knew that he didn't have the courage to go through with the whole self-service-suicide thing, knew that he should start making his way home before he missed *Frasier*.

As if on cue, the storm worsened. Matthew considered waiting it out inside his car, but then he started worrying about mudslides and so decided he'd do better trying to get out of the situation affirmatively rather than passively. After rummaging in the trunk, he came up with a small flashlight; the batteries were half dead.

By now, the rain was sweeping the countryside in huge, multi-layered torrents. Loud cracks of thunder roared overhead. Matthew tried to walk where the puddles weren't too deep, but more often than not he ended up wading through hidden dips and miniature sinkholes. The road had become a treacherous ravine, every step of the way a disaster in calculation as Matthew slipped and fell, got to his feet, and slipped and fell again.

Well, this isn't good, he thought as he hauled himself over a boulder that had slid into the middle of the road. *What if I really do die up here? No one would know. In a thousand years, they'll find the petrified remains of my car and put it on display in a dinosaur exhibit, but good ol' Matthew MacBride . . . they'll never even miss me.* The concept became more and more foreboding with every step he took, and as flashes of lightning

split the sky, as the worst of the storm seemed to hover in an area precisely over his head, he actually heard himself whispering a prayer—

—a prayer he didn't finish, for suddenly the sky opened up and a bolt of lightning ignited a nearby oak. The force of the bolt sent Matthew's heart racing (faster than it was already) as he tried to leap out of the way. His meager athletic skills eluded him, however, and he missed his footing, fell onto his back. To his horror, the flaming tree came crashing down on him. He let loose a stifled scream before the impact sent him spinning into unconsciousness.

As he crossed into the indigo darkness, a single thought broadcast itself in his mind:

Now I'll definitely miss Frasier.

* * *

Moments later:

The cloaked shadow of a four-foot-tall man separated itself from a nearby clump of foliage and approached Matthew's comatose form. Waving his hand in the air, this man shaped from darkness snuffed out the last lingering embers of the fallen tree. Then, with a quick swoop of his arms (and, again, without making physical contact), he lifted the entire oak above his head and hurled it several feet out of the way.

The man crouched beside Matthew, examined his ears, and then muttered under his breath, "My Goddess. Human."

Several possible courses of action presented themselves to the cloaked man—immediacy won out in the end. He reached down and with a strength that belied his small

stature, hoisted Matthew over his shoulder.

In this manner, Matthew was carried off into the shadows, from rain world to dark world, the only witness to the whole ordeal being the rain and the wind and the flashes of lightning scalding God's Earth in a time-lapse maelstrom.

* * *

Matthew was floating in darkness.

At first, there wasn't much to it. He knew he was being carried somewhere, knew he was still alive, though his soul seemed hesitant to reanimate his body just yet. Too much discomfort, too much pain.

He let himself float.

Gradually, at a distance, his senses awakened, one by one, to the rain, the wind, the sound of thunder rumbling overhead—but he himself decided it was best to curl up inside, where it was warm and dry.

His soul shifted. Not far from where a scorched oak lay bruised and battered, the saturated ground swelled into a gently rolling hillside carefully camouflaged by an armada of sycamore, cypress, oak. Hidden behind this arboreal barrier was a large mansion. Elven in design, it was the sort of place remembered in history books. In its day, the mansion had been the site of magnificent parties, the home of a grand lineage; today, it was cold, drafty, and quite lonely for any inhabitants hardy (or destitute) enough to dwell within.

On the second floor, and at the southernmost end of a long, dark hallway (the mansion faced west), there was a bedroom that swam with shadows—imagined spirits under the

assault of the storm. Though dry and, for all outward purposes, safe, the young man who lay curled up in the large banistered bed had wrapped himself tightly in the blankets and was trembling like a leaf. His anxiety, however, was only half-inspired by the whispers of the wind, the rhythm of the rain—

—*boly shit*, thought Matthew, suddenly finding himself pressed into the scene. Here, he was himself, but he was also someone else, wearing someone else's body and occupying someone else's bed.

In another person's head!

It was early evening; he felt as if he'd been bedridden for ages, though. He was still young, his adolescence only recently having peaked and delivered him into adulthood, and yet he felt too old to move a finger, a toe, even, lest he risk breaking something. He was shackled, the bearer of a burden he'd carried since birth. A life as unspent as his should have been warm to the touch, eager for youthful memories, summertime excursions by the beach, first kisses from girls, weekend cruises along the California coast—like the people on TV. Instead, he was here, always here, his thoughts cluttered with broken images of distant dark places, heavy, pungent odors, and rough, malignant sounds.

Dark dreams.

The storm outside is no match for the storm within, he thought, clutching the bedclothes tightly. The phrase tumbled about in his head, begging for release.

It took a little while, but Matthew—*Arrow?*—eventually worked up the courage to leave the bed. As he padded quickly to his desk he noted that his body was uncommonly fit and

flexible. With a deft movement of his hand, he lit a candle—no matches required. He sat himself in the old, worn chair. His journal rested atop the desk pad; the candlelight cast a flickering glow across an elaborate bow and arrow engraved in the journal's cover.

That's my name, Matthew thought. *Arrow.*

He flipped to an empty page, tried to write something insightful. It was hard—all he knew were the walls that encapsulated him, the splintered wood of the chair against his backside, lightning, thunder, rain, the necessary solitude of a gatekeeper—

—he thought of Her, and tried ineffectually to recall his most recent dream. The details were elusive; the only memory his brain allowed him to keep was of Her, the young woman who'd routinely haunted his nocturnal ramblings for weeks, months . . . perhaps years, even.

So very familiar, Matthew heard himself think, *and yet I cannot even recall her name.*

He had no idea who the woman was beyond the fact that she was elven, half human, half elf—like himself (himself?)—very pretty, and very insistent about something, though what, Matthew couldn't say, for every time he realized he was having a dark dream, he awoke in a sweat before he could properly investigate.

This night, the cycle had repeated itself three times.

Lightning flashed, thunder rolled. Leaving the desk, Matthew returned to his bed, sat next to the headboard, where his dreamcatcher hung.

Share with me, he thought intensely, but the catcher was dormant, dreamless. *She comes to me in my dreams, demands*

something of me which I cannot understand, then leaves without a trace. What am I to make of that?

It was impossible to answer his dream-self's question—but the need to know, the *curiosity* set Matthew into motion as he stepped across the room and pulled open the heavy wooden door that led out into the hallway. Poking his head out first, he saw that all the night lamps had been extinguished, which meant it was somewhat safe to go wandering about without having to worry about Darius catching him.

Darius . . . my master's name

Matthew stepped into the hallway. Holding out his right hand and calling light, his palm began to glow as he made his way towards the stairwell. In his head he tried to piece together any fragments of the night's dreams, tried to make sense of his incessant restlessness.

Yana. The name had been whispered a thousand times in his head. The girl of his dreams was named Yana. She'd come to him, taken his hand, led him somewhere deep inside the house. Somewhere . . . down. Somewhere he'd never been—a place that couldn't possibly exist because it was so big, so complex there was no way it could fit anywhere on the Greensbough grounds.

Maybe, he thought, his dreams had taken him somewhere *beneath* the mansion—a secret cavern accessible via the keep. It was, after all, the only place Darius had never permitted him to go.

Matthew knew the secrets Darius stored within the keep were for his eyes only, and Matthew had never much questioned them—but his dreams, as of late, had been persistent in arousing his curiosity. His whole life, in fact, was one big

curiosity. He knew not who his parents were, though he was fairly certain one of them—most likely his mother—had to have been human, for he had a human's height, a human's proportions, and his skin was darker. He was an orphan, he knew, of the old world, and a gatekeeper in the new. Darius was his mentor and coworker; together they lived in isolation. It was often lonely, but it was home, and, until now, Matthew had mostly succeeded in filling his waking hours with as many distractions as possible: conversing, studying with Darius, exercising on the promenade, tending a journal between household and groundskeeping chores . . . and keeping watch.

It was different now. His assigned position wasn't enough. He'd always accepted. Now, as if a hidden switch had burned turned on, he suddenly found himself filled with the desire to *know*.

"When the student is ready," Darius would always say, "the teacher will present himself." Such epiphanies were almost always followed by some sort of menial job—dusting shelves, scrubbing floors, clearing out gutters or drains, fetching Darius' bathwater.

Matthew's dream-self had spent his entire life in wait.

Master's obsession with being ready is so terribly important, Matthew thought, making his way down the hall, still amazed by the qualities of his elven body, the features of his surreal environment, but so caught up in his dream-self's conundrum that he didn't stop to analyze. *He's taught me language, history, magic, the defensive arts, but for what? The new world has forsaken the ways of magic. "Someday," he always says. "Someday it will be different." But for four-hundred seasons, every day has been*

alike. Surely we are not here merely to keep house.

Matthew kept his lighted palm cupped close to his thigh and descended the winding stairwell that led deep into the bowels of the mansion. Though he knew he was unobserved, he moved quickly and kept himself acutely aware of any shadow not his own. It wasn't that he was frightened of the darkness, for he'd lived in the mansion all his life, and darkness was an integral quality. Rather, he didn't want to get caught by Darius, whose mana wasn't currently detectable, but whose presence could manifest itself at a moment's notice. (It had happened before, and during less strenuous circumstances.)

Down, Matthew told himself, spiraling deeper into darkness, so deep that the sounds of the storm could hardly be heard at all. At the foot of the stairwell was the entrance to the keep—

—glowing within by some unnatural light.

He started forward, then stopped just before he reached the threshold. His skin prickled, almost electric. He extinguished his light, felt along the floor with his foot. When he found a small pebble, he picked it up and hurled it at the entrance. The pebble bounced off an invisible barricade.

A security spell, thought Matthew. *Probably placed here by Darius.*

He squinted. It was obvious there was something going on at the far end of the keep, but he needed a better vantage point. Tightening his abdomen, eliciting a tempered warmth from within as he called another spell, this one vastly more intricate than his light spell, Matthew worked to undo the barrier. Since he'd studied under Darius, reverse-engineering

the man's magic wasn't overtly difficult. It *was* strenuous work, though, and took more than a few minutes. When at last he was through, and the doorway was unblocked, he sighed deeply, leaning against the wall and wiping the sweat from his forehead. He was very nearly winded; his heart was thumping madly in his chest. Were it not for the lure of the unknown, he might have turned around and gone right back to bed for an extended nap.

Stepping past the threshold, Matthew gazed about the keep. The chamber was long and narrow, with a low, arched ceiling. Neither he nor his dream-self had been here before, but from the look of things it was mostly emergency supplies: food, tools, and nameless crates stacked to the ceiling. All about the pillars and walls hung a countless number of feathered dream catchers, which swayed in an ethereal breeze. Some were big, some were small, some were ancient-looking, and some looked as if they'd been freshly hung—but most fascinating was the sound of the place, a wide-open sort of quietness filled with the subtle swish of water against stone. This was augmented by a thousand distant voices whispering and sighing in a delicate choral orchestration.

The after-echoes of life, Matthew thought, walking slowly through the chamber and experiencing a myriad of emotions as instant recognition burned in his brain. Yana had taken him here, in his dreams—only then the keep had been three times as large, and a hundred times as ominous—and yet now, during wakefulness, the collective presence was unmistakably real, unmistakably familiar.

Matthew realized that he was standing amidst the catchers of his dream-self's elven brothers and sisters.

Gwendolyn Pendragon, Baisy North, Katalla—Katalla the fire Seer? Perias, Davyd, Mikail—Mikail Watershed? The flutist? Marcus, Debussy, Stephanie—Princess Stephanie of the Marcus Order? Yes, he recognized many of the mana impressions from Darius' history books—it had to be so! He could hear their voices, their songs, he could feel their presence.

Is this our charge, then? he wondered. *To tend to the memories of the dead?*

As Matthew's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw that the dream catchers had been arranged in families—all but a few lone ones that hung on the same pillars with certain groups, but which had been placed at a noticeable distance from the others.

Yana's was one of the loners. When Matthew recognized her mana impression, his heart started pounding in his chest. Her catcher had been constructed out of crude materials, and its feathers were matted and dirty, indicating that she had probably been poor and had subsequently utilized whatever materials were handy. Nevertheless, the design was marvelous. It may have been built from scraps, but the artistry surpassed that of even the wealthiest lord's. Indeed, Matthew knew his dream-self had been proud of his own catcher until seeing this one.

All this time, living a mere layer above a keep full of sleeping spirits—the well. There was a well.

Matthew looked towards the far end of the keep. Sure enough, a large well rested atop a shallow step. A wavering glow emanated from inside.

The breeze picked up, and the choral symphony became more excited as Matthew approached the well. Whether or

not this was just his own perception becoming more sensitive, he wasn't sure, but he felt compelled to peer inside, to discover what was sure to be the source of something unfathomable.

What he saw took him quite by surprise: faces, bodies—hundreds of elven men, women, and children floating beside one other with eyes closed and arms crossed over pale, semi-translucent torsos. The longer Matthew gazed, the more he saw as the rim of the well expanded beyond his peripheral vision, giving the sea of sleeping bodies endless boundaries.

He trembled. He bit his lip and curled his toes, hearing the ringing of a thousand voices as they whipped through his essence with an almost-but-not-quite tangible force. All the elves' experiences and all their dreams were hitting him at the same time, coming at him from every direction. He wanted to pull away, to run from the chamber for a moment's silence, but he couldn't, not just yet, for there she was—

—Yana.

Matthew followed her voice, listened to her spirit's call and ignored all the others as best he could. He found himself focusing on her sleeping form. She was young, not very far into adulthood. Mid-twenties, maybe, like him. She had blond hair that had been chopped short; her face was delicately chiseled and caught in an expression of weary pain. Of course, he'd seen all this before, in his dreams, but never with such detail, and never so up close.

Yana . . . The name rang out clearly in his mind as he reached for her. *Why have you come to me?*

With a sudden, violent jerking of her body, Yana's eyes flew open. She gasped—and so did Matthew, who blinked

and found himself submerged in the well water. He cried out in alarm, bubbles blocking his view as he started swimming upwards through an impossibly wide expanse of water. All about him the elves' arms, legs, and unbridled hair brushed against him—not of their own accord, but at the whim of the current. The effect was most unpleasant, especially considering that the proportions had been thrown off; three feet had become thirty, cold and murky.

When he reached the surface, Matthew grabbed onto the stone rim and hauled himself out, his breath coming in great gasps and mingling with the cacophony of the keep. It was chaos, and he could stand it no longer. He ran from the well, from the keep, up the stairs two, sometimes three at a time. Once on the ground floor of the mansion, once the voices from below were replaced with the more bearable patter of the thunderstorm, he stopped and dropped to his knees. He slicked back his wet hair and found that he was crying, a recollection of great sadness and fear overcoming him.

They sleep because they are safe, he thought, *but it is ultimately better to be alive.*

Confusion jumbling his thoughts, he sat shivering on the cold stone floor and wondered what to do next—and then he remembered: this was just a dream, he wasn't really here . . . was he?

His mind receded, and just as he'd once left his flesh body behind for the solace in sleep, so did he leave his dream body, naked, wet—sobbing softly in the darkness—for the solace in utter slumber.

From somewhere nearby:

“Arrow?”

“Master . . .” The almost inaudible sound of bare limbs and unbridled hair shifting in the darkness. “. . . you were outside?”

“There has been an accident. Run and get a pot of hot water, astringent too—bring it to the guest room. Please hurry.”

Motion, in and out of semiconsciousness, then:

“Where did you find him?”

“A ways down the road. He seemed disoriented, lost in the storm—I do not think he knew about this place, but he has crossed over nonetheless.”

“That is impossible, Master. The barrier—”

“Barriers can be broken.”

“But a *human*—”

“Please, I must concentrate.”

Water, a warm washcloth, gentle hands lifting his head, turning—stopping suddenly.

“What is it, Master?”

“He has the Jacaranda.”

“But . . . that cannot be. He is human.”

“Indeed. Human and marked. An unlikely occurrence, but the evidence presents itself nevertheless.”

Pinpricks of pain, the desire to continue eavesdropping overpowered by the instinct to flee a scene of certain misery.

Raindrops hitting glass in fast-forward.

Then:

“Arrow. Moss from the garden, and more water—and clothes for yourself!”

“Yes, Master.”

Bare feet making light noise against the floor; a door opening and closing nearby; a sharp twist somewhere deep down inside, eyelids unable to keep themselves closed for a moment—a man standing overhead, hair and beard disheveled, glistening with water, sweat.

A wave of the hand, eyelids drooping closed once again.

“Sleep.”

* * *

Waking up wasn't something that Matthew had planned on when the oak tree had been barreling down on him—so, naturally, when he opened his eyes, saw that he was laying in a strange bed with an elf sitting asleep in a nearby armchair, he was sure that he'd died and that his soul had been misdelivered into a fairytale purgatory.

“What the hell?” he mumbled, sitting up and blinking around at the room. It was like something from a elvish movie or history book: walls and floors made of stone and decorated with intricate carvings, tapestries, rugs, large candleholders fastened to the walls for light, the window made of stained-glass so that the morning light cast a multi-colored rainbow inside—he'd been here before, in his dream body. Not this exact room, but the decor was such that he was suddenly sweating, wondering how it could be that he'd cheated death and rented a room at an old world inn.

But getting back to the key element: the elf sitting in the chair beside the bed. Four feet tall, straight out of the history books, with the beard and proportions of a human man (only

scaled down—more like a human child than a full-grown human midget), and the pointed ears of, well, an elf.

Wallowing in his own disbelief, Matthew watched as the elf stirred, cracked his eyes open. When he realized that Matthew was awake, he sobered, any traces of morning fatigue banished instantaneously.

“How do you feel?” asked the elf.

Matthew didn’t answer at first. The elf’s voice was believable, only slightly higher and smaller-sounding than a typical man’s, and not like something from *The Wizard of Oz*. But it was still kind of crazy, to actually be seeing a historical creature sitting two feet from where you were beginning to go into a cold sweat because you thought your first moments in heaven were being orchestrated by Tolkien.

The elf continued: “My name is Darius. Do not be alarmed. I found you during the storm. You were injured, but I have healed the more serious wounds . . .”

Unbelievable. Matthew blinked and rubbed his eyes in the cliché fashion. *This can’t be happening. I must be hallucinating—or dead.*

“... you may feel sore for several days, until your body completely absorbs the moss, but there should be no further complications.”

Or dreaming . . . yes, still asleep—still dreaming. “And . . . and who are you again?”

“My name is Darius.”

Matthew cocked his head to one side. “What’s with the ears?”

“Ah, of course.” Darius reached up to touch the pointed tip of one of his ears. “You have no doubt noticed that you

and I are not of the same make.”

“You’re elven.”

“Yes.”

“But the elves disappeared at the end of the 1800s. Fled east, to the Orient—wait, did you say *moss*?”

“Yes, of a kind. A makeshift foundation to help knit your damaged flesh and broken bones.”

Matthew looked down at himself, feeling his chest and thighs, lifting the bedclothes to make sure both legs were still attached. His torso was riddled with bruises. “Jesus, I really took a beating—you say you healed me?”

Darius stood. “Let us start simple. What is your name?”

Fair enough. “Matthew. Matthew MacBride.”

“Do you know how you came to be here?”

Matthew shrugged and thought back. “I was out driving. A storm came up. I got lost, my car was stuck in the mud—shit, my car.” He lifted the blanket again and examined a particularly angry-looking bruise. “How’d you get the tree off me?”

Darius said, “It was difficult, but under the circumstances, I thought it prudent to expend as much mana as was necessary to bring you here.”

“So . . . you’re an elven doctor or something?”

Darius looked at him curiously. “You are a mage, yes?”

“A mage?” Matthew asked.

“Magic—you *have* been trained in the art of spellcasting, have you not?”

Matthew laughed. “Are you kidding me? I don’t know the first thing about magic. I work at an electronics store in San Luis Obispo.”

Darius seemed on the verge of asking another question, but instead shook his head and said, “You are a long way from home, then.”

“You’re probably right. Where are we? Cambria still?”

“Greensbough.”

“The theme park?”

“Ah . . . no.”

Matthew blinked at Darius; Darius blinked at Matthew.

“Greensbough,” said Matthew, various grade school history lessons flashing through his mind. “You mean *the* Castle Greensbough?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

Matthew reexamined the room, felt his heart flutter in his chest. For a moment he’d been almost willing to entertain the likelihood of his situation, but now he was sure he was in an altered state.

“I guess,” he said, “that would explain the décor—but the history books all say Tameran’s castle was spirited away during the final throes of the Last Battle. This *can’t* be Greensbough!”

“It is not that simple,” Darius said. “Greensbough does indeed still exist, but, well, quite simply: this is a null world.”

Matthew didn’t recognize the reference; he told Darius so by way of a most perplexed expression.

“You have studied history, yes?” asked Darius.

“Yeah.”

“Then you know of the old world, the new world?”

Matthew nodded. “Yeah. Anything prior to the twentieth century was old world, anything after the Last Battle is new world. Magic then, science now.”

Darius took a step towards the bed, hands clasped, brow furrowed. "Then you understand our predicament."

"Predicament?"

"Yes. Now that western civilization has banished the practice of magic, it has become unusual indeed for a human to possess any practical knowledge of spellcasting."

"Well, yeah, but . . . I'm afraid I don't exactly follow you," Matthew said.

"Ah, of course." Darius took another step towards the bed. "Please forgive my inquisitiveness, but in tending your wounds, I could not help but notice you have the Jacaranda."

Again, Matthew was lost.

"The symbol on your neck."

Matthew felt the back of his neck with his hand. "Oh, this old thing? I've had it forever. A birth mark."

"And you have no idea what it is? What it stands for?"

"I'm beginning to think," said Matthew, "that you do."

A sigh from Darius. "It is the elven graduate symbol, a mark of power, and the only possible explanation as to your presence here."

"Dude, trust me—I'm no mage. I'm no elf either." Lifting the blanket to make sure he was still wearing pants, Matthew glanced around the room, located his shoes beside the bureau. He wondered if his wallet had been lifted—though he couldn't remember if he'd brought it with him when he'd left his car. "I should be going."

"You cannot."

Matthew blinked. "What, is this a *Misery* kind of thing?"

The slightest hint of annoyance crossed Darius' face. "You cannot leave because, unless you are able to reproduce

whatever magic brought you here last night, there is an unbreakable barrier between this world and yours.”

“Right,” said Matthew, getting out of bed, wavering on his feet for a moment as the blood rushed to his head. *A null world*, he thought. *Castles floating between dimensions, walking, talking elves offering bedside assistance. Not impossible, but not very likely either.* Normally, in his dreams, all Matthew had to do was question a given situation’s validity, and that would be that—his brain would yield, and he would wake up. This was different. Things were too coherent, too gritty; he had to investigate for himself before he acquiesced to either fantasy or insanity.

It didn’t help that Darius was persistent.

He said, “We are presently occupying the same space as Castle Greensbough, and yet we also exist in what you call Cambria. You might say we are poised at the gateway between both realities.”

“Come on,” Matthew said, putting on his shoes. “I’ve been through grade school. I know all about the elves, Oremwatt, Arkensaw, the Last Battle—I never heard of any null worlds.”

“Naturally not,” said Darius. “Such information is often exclusive to elven spellmakers. I assumed you were a mage, but alas, it appears you are not. Still, you *have* crossed over.”

Matthew bit his lip, tried to think of something definitive to say. When nothing came to mind, he merely shrugged and started towards the door. He had to get out, away—somewhere he could assess the situation from an objective view.

Darius followed, a bearded child tugging insistently at Matthew’s shirtsleeve. “Where are you going?”

"For a walk," Matthew replied. "I mean, thanks and all for saving my life, but . . . I should find a phone, call a tow truck. Christ, my car is probably totaled . . ."

"Such things do not matter," said Darius. "Not now."

Matthew stopped at the threshold, peered out into the hallway, which seemed to stretch forever in both directions. "Geez, look at this place. You guys do bed and breakfast?"

"You are finding it hard to suspend your disbelief," Darius said. "That is understandable. However, believe me when I tell you there is no leaving the premises."

Matthew started walking. Thanks to his recent dream, he was somewhat familiar with the layout, and soon reached the foyer. With Darius still at his side, he stepped out into the early afternoon. The sky was heavily overcast; all around, the trees swayed in an uneasy breeze. The only sounds were those of the elements—Cambria (or any form of civilization) might have been a hundred miles away, or it might have been just around the corner.

Matthew looked down at Darius. "Okay, let's say Cambria's somewhere around here. Would it be too terribly inconvenient to point me in the right direction?"

"I cannot," Darius replied in an offhand manner. His attention seemed to be caught elsewhere as he entertained something dark and distant.

Of course, Matthew thought. *Can't give directions to somewhere that supposedly doesn't exist.* He descended the steps, started along the promenade with its two dozen stone sentries keeping post on either side. Darius didn't follow—which was okay by Matthew, seeing as how the elf's attitude was lukewarm at best.

There was no defined route leading from the mansion. Rather, it was as if the surrounding foliage had merely agreed to recede just far enough to make room for a single domicile—but no further. As Matthew stepped along, the stonework became cracked, overgrown with weeds and vines; quite abruptly there was no stone at all. Everything was bushes and trees and the obvious fact that Matthew wasn't the outdoors type. He tripped and fell, tore his pant legs to shreds—and that was just in the first five minutes. Fifteen minutes out and he was wishing he'd stayed put in Darius' guest room. The forest was dense indeed, and while Matthew didn't encounter any voracious creatures intent on incorporating him into their lunch menu, neither did he have any idea whatsoever which direction he was heading.

He wandered for half an hour in such fashion—at which point the muscles of his arms and legs decided they'd had enough. He fell onto his hands and knees, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

Goddamn, he thought as he wiped the sweat from his brow. *I am one out-of-shape motherfucker.*

He looked up, dreading the sight of more layers of undergrowth to have to fight through. Amazingly, he saw a thinning of leaves, a finger of pale daylight filtering in from what appeared to be a clearing.

With renewed vigor, he hauled himself to his feet and started forward again. Dodging branches, twisting himself around tree trunks, he burst out into the clearing—

—and found himself right back where he'd started. There was the cobbled walkway, the statues, the mossy façade of the Greensbough mansion.

Darius was waiting on the steps.

Fuck, no, Matthew thought, scratching his head and turning back to face the forest. *No way!*

Without much thought on the matter, he plunged back into the wilderness, this time, *this time*, he told himself, making sure he kept an extra special handle on his sense of direction. Whatever strange circumstances had brought him to Greensbough instead of the afterlife, he knew there had to be a rational explanation—a bang on the head, hallucinations . . . possibly a diminutive mental fart named Darius who was dressed like an elf, but who *wasn't* actually an elf.

Find a road, get back into town, call a tow truck, call work—nuts to this metaphysical shit.

He wandered without reprieve for a good forty-five minutes. When at last the undergrowth thinned, and daylight once again prevailed, he breathed a sigh of relief, stumbled forward, out into the open.

See? All you need to do is stick with it and—

Darius' mansion loomed before him.

He collapsed to his knees, letting out a sigh of frustration as he closed his eyes and massaged his temples with his fingers. *You're awake, aren't you?* He felt the ground beneath him, heard the rustle of the trees—yet it couldn't be real. Something was wrong, somehow. *Okay. Not awake. Dreaming. Dead. Maybe . . . a kind of afterlife? Heaven's waiting room?*

"Mr. MacBride?"

Matthew opened his eyes and looked up. Darius was moving down the walkway, a concerned look on his face. Behind him, on the steps, a dark-skinned young man (whom Matthew had not seen before, but whose appearance was oddly

familiar) waited quietly.

“Mr. MacBride?” Darius asked again once he’d reached Matthew’s side.

“What?” Matthew asked, sighing.

“Are you well?”

Matthew chuckled, craned his neck slightly. Even in the cold light of day Darius’ appearance was irrefutable. *Elves, gateways—maybe a cosmic joke played by the Big Guy? Humans fucked with elves in the old world, so now we have to make amends before we can cross over to heaven?* “I’m fine. Just . . . thinking that I’m starting to get the joke.”

“Joke?”

“The inescapable forest thing.” *The fact that I should have been killed when that tree fell on me.* Matthew gave Darius another good, hard look. In books, angels were always depicted as having pointed ears, and while Matthew had never before made the connection between fleshed elves and transcendental angels, the idea was pretty tempting now.

“You see, then,” said Darius, “why it is so unusual for you to be here. The barrier was put in place by Tameran himself. I maintain the grounds, but that is all. It would take a powerful sorcerer to find a way through.”

Matthew snorted. “And yet I’ve waltzed right in.”

“Yes.”

The breeze picked up; Matthew smelled rain.

Darius asked, “You will stay, eat with us?”

The mention of food caused Matthew’s stomach to grumble. “I don’t have a choice, now do I? And even if I did, another trip through the Amazon would probably kill my fat ass.”

Darius frowned for a moment, as if he'd missed the sarcasm completely. Then he turned and started towards the mansion.

Matthew followed. When they reached the steps, he paid the dark-skinned elven fellow a cursory glance. Up close, he looked to be Matthew's age, perhaps a few years younger. College age. He was dressed in what could only be described as an aerodynamic kimono, with forearms and shins bare, feet sandaled. It was obvious he was in excellent physical shape, for his posture was straight, his abdomen flat, his limbs well-muscled.

"This is Arrow," Darius said. "He is also a groundskeeper here at Greensbough."

Something clicked in Matthew's head—*Arrow, the man of my dreams, as it were.*

He swallowed hard, nodded. "How many more of you guys are stashed away in there?"

(Arrow looked curiously at Darius.)

"We are the only ones," Darius answered. There was a moment of silence before, in some foreign tongue—presumably elvish—he gave Arrow instruction.

In response, Arrow bowed, took one more look at Matthew, and then went inside the mansion.

Darius gathered his cloak about his shoulders. "He will prepare our meal."

Matthew pursed his lips. "So, you guys are really elves, huh?"

"Yes, Mr. MacBride."

"I hope you won't mind if I give your ears a tug?"

Darius shot him a severe look.

“Just asking,” Matthew said.

* * *

Arrow had sliced and arranged a spread of fruit and vegetables, and was filling a trio of cups with water from a pitcher when Darius showed Matthew into the dining room. Low-ceilinged and augmented by a variety of daedal tapestries, Matthew was once again reminded of his dream, how he'd roamed the mansion on a dark and stormy night—

“Thank you, Arrow,” Darius said, and gestured for everyone to sit.

Matthew set himself in one of the chairs and surveyed the tabletop. It was all fruits and vegetables. There was no meat, no cheese—no bread, even.

“Er, is this it?” he asked, the words tumbling from his mouth before he could consider his manners.

Darius looked concerned. “Is the food unacceptable, Mr. MacBride?”

“No, no, it's fine . . .” Matthew sighed, took an apple in his hands, started picking at the skin with his fingernails. His stomach grumbled.

“Sorry there is no human food,” Arrow said. “The animals died out long ago. The insects too—not that I suspect your kind has an affinity for eating insects.”

“Grade-schoolers, maybe,” said Matthew, continuing to decorticate his apple a piece at a time. “The rest of us prefer a good ham and cheese, a nice cold beer afterward. Christ, I forgot all you elf-types are strict vegetarians.”

“I have seen many humans,” Arrow said, “on the tele-

vision who practice the elven diet—or is that merely part of an actor’s ability to portray his character?”

Matthew gave him a look, unsure if he was being a jerk or if he was merely curious. “Some of us prefer our old-fashioned diets, thank you very much. You watch a lot of TV around here?”

Arrow nodded. “When my chores are done, yes.”

“So, you’ve got electricity, then? A phone?”

“Well, no. Not exactly.”

“Let me guess,” said Matthew. “Magic?”

“I create the necessary electrical current using my own mana stores, yes.”

Darius sipped from his cup, said to Matthew, “The boy seems to have an affinity for human theater. I tell him not to waste his mana on such things, but he is young. I suppose there are worse ways he could be expelling all that excess energy.”

“*Master*,” Arrow hissed, looking noticeably perturbed.

Darius raised his hand. “My apologies. It is not often that we get visitors here. No doubt my hosting skills are in need of a good dusting.”

“Hey, shit happens, right?” Matthew gave up trying to prepare his apple and instead went for a handful of grapes. “And if broken table manners are the worst of our worries . . .”

“I agree,” said Darius. “Let us shift our attention to the matter at hand. Mr. MacBride, perhaps you could recount the details behind last night’s excursion?”

Matthew shrugged. “It was a botched suicide. There’s not much else to it.”

“If I might ask, how is it you came to seek such a . . . final outcome?”

“It’s a long story,” Matthew said, wincing as he bit into a grape seed. Thinking about his breakup with Yvonne, his decision that there was nothing left for him in this life, was like thinking about a bad dream after the fact; talking about death now, over lunch, didn’t seem as ominous as he would have thought. It was almost silly (though not as silly as being entertained by elves). “I met this girl in high school. A real fox, perfect tits, perfect legs, soft spot for a fat-ass like me. She always said she was sick of dating guys who were hung like bulls and just as intelligent. Shit, she stuck with me for seven years, and up until yesterday I thought that I was set for life . . . I thought that she was like The One.

“But then she does a complete turnaround. She tells me she’s been sleeping with some guy from work, getting what she couldn’t get from me. It turns out I’ve been her big brother all this time. She’d rather do the emotional stuff with me, fuck her brains out with *him*.” He trailed off, reminiscing, digging his fingernail into the skin of his discarded apple. When he realized he still hadn’t answered Darius’ question, he looked up and laughed. “Ha. That’s what you get for holding onto those teenage crushes too long, I guess. Lost time. Regrets. I came up here thinking I might as well throw in the towel. I really didn’t want to live anymore, so I figured I’d kill myself, get it all over quickly instead of letting things get drawn out until I’m sixty-five and all old and I still can’t find a woman who’s not too good for me. But when I actually tried to, er, let myself go . . . I couldn’t do it. I bailed, headed back towards town—but then it was like the Big Guy said,

‘Oh, no, you started this, you’d better go through with it!’ and he knocks down this tree right on top of me.”

Arrow looked disturbed. “Your god would do that?”

“I believe,” said Darius, looking at Matthew for confirmation, “Mr. MacBride is merely speaking figuratively.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Matthew. “I mean, I *am* sharing a meal with two elves for Christ’s sake. Who’s to say what’s figurative and what’s literal?” He laid his hands on the tabletop, patted it twice as he forced his brain to come to a reasonable conclusion. “The way I see it, my being here—wherever this is—is the penalty, a stopover in elf-heaven—”

Darius cut Arrow off with a wave of his hand and said, “I assure you, Mr. MacBride, that all of us—you, me, Arrow—are very much alive. I can also assure you that this is *not* heaven.”

“Whatever it *is*, it’s the penalty for . . . for . . .” Matthew shook his head, scrunched his eyes shut. “Is this how suicides work? Re-route the offender into some null world, as you call it, until one of God’s caseworkers can find the time to sit down with you and ask why you so gleefully decided to trample on the life you’ve been given?”

Neither Darius nor Arrow made any sound.

“Or else,” continued Matthew, opening his eyes after a moment and looking at Arrow, “I’ve been dumped into a bad elvish fanfic. I mean, come on—a grown man who lives alone with his ‘master’ in a giant mansion? Tell me: which one of you is the uke, and which one the seme?”

Vacant looks.

Matthew sighed. “Aw, hell. Don’t mind my ramblings. I’m just trying to figure this out.”

Darius rose from the table. "As are we—but come, it has been a long night, especially for you. Perhaps a bit of rest will improve your outlook."

"No, no . . . I'm fine. I just need to . . . something's going on here. I need to figure out which part of my brain has decided to go on vacation."

"You still believe you are dreaming? Or dead?"

Matthew looked from Darius to Arrow, to Darius again. "At the very least, this is some kind of purgatory, a holding cell for my sins. I tried to check out before paying the tab, and so God's locked me up for a while. That would make at least *some* sense, right?"

"Mr. MacBride . . ." Darius began.

"Please—*I have to figure this out.*" His thoughts reaching a fever pitch, Matthew rested his head in his hands—

—and at that moment the most deafening thunderclap rumbled overhead, rattling the table and shattering the windows. Matthew flinched, his instincts spurring him to duck for cover; in actuality, he merely fell backwards in his chair. The wind was knocked out of him.

Arrow was at his side in no time, helping him to his feet. "Are you all right, Mr. MacBride?"

Matthew nodded, shook some debris from his shirt collar. There was wind whistling through the room, a distant cacophony of voices— "What the hell is going on?" he asked.

Arrow glanced over his shoulder at Darius. Neither of them said anything until, eventually, the turmoil subsided. Even then, the silence was suspect; no one wanted to move or speak, lest another auditory avalanche be inadvertently set off.

Darius had an infinitely troubled expression on his face. After taking a good, hard look at Matthew, he said to Arrow, "I shall check the barrier. If you would, please keep Mr. MacBride occupied until I am finished."

"Master—"

"Go."

Arrow looked like he wanted to say something else, but he held his tongue as he bowed and then gestured for Matthew to follow him from the dining room.

Outside, the clouds were swollen with rain, and the trees shifted restlessly. Arrow led Matthew onto a landing decorated with more of the eerie statues and statuettes that Matthew had seen earlier. From here the sprawling Cambria hillside should have been at least *somewhat* visible, but instead there was only a brief cropping of treetops before the thick cloud cover descended abruptly.

The barrier, Matthew thought, awestruck. Totally concealed

Arrow sat on the ground and fidgeted. "I fear I have performed a grave transgression."

Matthew sat too, nodded once he'd wrangled his legs into a sloppy Indian-style. "The keep, right?"

An embarrassed look came over Arrow's face. "Mr. MacBride . . . how did you . . . ?"

"How'd I know?" Matthew snorted. "Beats me. When I was down for the count last night—and please realize this isn't a bizarre pickup line—I dreamed I was you."

"But . . . how can that be? Master says you are not a mage—yet you have defied the barrier, and you have the ability to occupy another's thoughts."

“You’re telling me.”

Arrow shook his head. “I do not know very much about human metaphysics.”

“Neither do I,” said Matthew. “Before last night, magic was just something I’d read about as a teenager in history class. Now, shit, maybe that’s it. Magic isn’t supposed to exist in the new world, right? So there’s a storm, you’re sneaking around in the basement when you break Darius’ barrier—maybe, with the storm and all, you created a short-circuit?”

“No,” said Arrow, shaking his head. “I am not nearly powerful enough to do something like that.”

“But we—*you*—left the keep door open afterward. I remember that. Maybe something, er, leaked out or whatever.”

Arrow looked at Matthew, his lip quivering. “If that is true, then I have failed Master. I allowed my restlessness to get the better of me and I forgot to seal the keep. I have betrayed Master . . . I have betrayed Tameran.”

Crap, Matthew thought. *Just my luck that’s he’s the emotional type*. “Aw, hell, shit happens, right? So Darius gets a little upset when he finds out what happened—what is he to you anyway? Your boss? A relative? A friend?”

“He is,” said Arrow, pausing to think a moment, “my master. I was abandoned as a newborn, left behind during the final throes of the Last Battle. Perhaps I was unwanted, or perhaps my parents were killed and there was no one to take me in. Master has not spoken of the details, but he has raised me all these years.”

“Must be lonely, then,” Matthew said, attempting to replace one type of angst with another. “Being trapped here, not being able to see the world and all.”

“There is, I imagine, little work for us elvenfolk in the new world, save for a few small places where we are openly accepted. There would be nothing for me outside the premises, nor for Master. Here, we serve Tameran. We are his gatekeepers, tending to the mansion until his return. Such is the greatest honor of all. I do not regret that. I do regret that I have not developed my mental skills to a point where self-interest is no longer troublesome.”

Matthew nodded, trying to think of what to say or do next when a lagging thought occurred to him. “Wait—you said Darius found you at the end of the Last Battle?”

“Yes.”

“That means . . . that means you’re, like, just over a century old!”

Arrow scowled. “I am painfully aware of my youth, Mr. MacBride.”

“No,” said Matthew. “I mean that’s incredible! Hundred-year-old humans are either decrepit or dead—but look at you!”

“Did they not teach you about elven longevity in school?”

“Yeah,” Matthew laughed, “but that’s all book-stuff. Like reading about all those biblical dudes who lived hundreds of years. It’s old world, a fable, not new world at all. Christ, I’m only twenty-five and I look like Grandpa Munster next to you.”

Arrow frowned and bit his lip. He started to respond when, quite abruptly, something seemed to catch his attention.

He jumped to his feet. “Master . . .”

“What, what’s wrong?” Matthew asked, standing as well.

“Something has happened—Master is in trouble, perhaps.” Motioning for Matthew to follow, Arrow started back inside the mansion.

“How do you know?” asked Matthew.

“His mana impression has suddenly disappeared.”

“Er, dumb human here—can you give me the mainstream media explanation?”

Arrow hauled open the oaken door. “If I close my eyes, and you start walking away from me while talking out loud, I can assume that that is what you are doing because I can hear the gradual fading of your voice the farther you go. But if after only a moment the sound of your voice suddenly disappeared altogether, before it logically should have . . .”

Matthew knew that Arrow wasn’t speaking figuratively, for immediately upon reentering the mansion, he was thrust into a scene of madness: floors lurched at wrong angles, ceilings stretched too high, walls shifting and hiccuping, raining dust and debris down onto his head. The entire place was quite literally rearranging itself!

Calling Darius’ name, Arrow moved forward. Matthew followed close behind, and was, for the most part, able to keep up, though at times he became so disoriented that he tripped and fell. Arrow helped him up when necessary, and in such fashion they gradually inspected the ground floor, poking their heads into rooms and peering down hallways that, Matthew could tell from Arrow’s uniformly-flabbergasted facial expressions, shouldn’t have been.

Eventually, they arrived at the entrance to the main stairwell, which, presumably, still led up to the bedrooms . . . and down—

—to the keep.

Feeling the breeze from below, hearing the faint jangle of voices, Matthew experienced a familiar pang of fear.

“You can wait here,” Arrow said, unconvincingly, his hair billowing in the wind.

Matthew considered—but then the wall behind him suddenly burped and sprouted a tree branch. “I’ll take my chances in the dungeon,” he said, and stepped close to Arrow. “Let’s go.”

Arrow nodded and set his palm ablaze, led the way down the stairwell. As they went deeper, the breeze intensified, and by the time they reached the entrance to the keep, the wind was so fierce and the voices so loud that the ground itself was vibrating.

The keep was in utter chaos. Crates were overturned, shelves knocked over, dreamcatchers strewn about; Matthew squinted towards the far end and saw that the well had begun overflowing. Frigid water rushed across the floor and sloshed against his ankles. He hopped in a lopsided fashion while trying to find something to stand on.

“Arrow!” he cried. “Arrow, do something!”

Arrow stood very still and watched wide-eyed as the well water continued to spill into the keep, flooding it with impossible rapidity.

“Arrow!” Matthew cried again.

“Master is here,” Arrow replied, “and yet somehow . . . not.”

Matthew found a rickety crate nearby. He was hauling himself up onto it, about to solicit Arrow for clarification, when he heard a terrible noise from the direction of the stair-

well—an angry, snorting growl, like that of a bull. In no time flat he was at Arrow’s side and unconsciously attaching himself to the man’s arm. “What was that?”

Arrow turned with him to face the keep entrance. Another growl pierced the air, and Matthew felt his heart start to thud—especially when *it* suddenly appeared in the threshold.

At first, Matthew thought it was a man wearing a bull mask. Tall, and massively-built, his body was bare, save for a pair of threadbare leggings stretched taught over bulging thigh and quad muscles. Matthew squinted, trying to find a seam connecting animal to man, but the illusion was just too perfect, and it dawned on him that the intruder wasn’t just a man wearing a bull mask, it was a man whose head was actually that of a bull.

And the bull’s eyes were now glowing bright red.

The bull-man looked around the keep, searching for something; when its gaze fell upon Arrow and Matthew, it snorted and began to charge at them, on legs, first, and then, as it gained momentum, on all fours.

Arrow yelled something in a language Matthew didn’t understand, pulled him back a few steps. “The well! Come, Mr. MacBride!”

Matthew stumbled, his feet leaden, his senses smoldering. He was past the disbelieving stage now, and quite scared out of his mind. Were it not for Arrow’s insistent guidance, he would have frozen up completely. He certainly wouldn’t have made it to the well in time, blinking, gasping when his brain finally processed the visual input that told him the well wasn’t a well anymore, it was a gaping whirlpool that had instantaneously formed in the waist-deep water.

“W-what the fuck?” he sputtered, teetering.

“It is a portal!” Arrow replied, bracing himself, ready to hurl Matthew in.

“How can you be sure?”

Arrow’s answer was a quick, firm shove. Matthew, legs buckling, arms flailing, plummeted into the whirlpool, and before he had time even to take a breath, he was submerged, swallowed whole. His first instinct was to hold in any remaining air he had, but after a moment’s harried frolicking, he found this was unnecessary; somehow he was able to breathe. He opened his eyes—and flinched as he saw the thousand elven bodies floating around him. In his dream, they’d been unnerving, benign enough despite the current, but now everything was a mess, arms and legs tumbling and twitching every which way, the voluminous voices cutting through the murk with force-ten strength.

A pair of shoulders parted before him, and Arrow came into view. He mouthed something unintelligible and then took the lead, swimming downward. Matthew did his best to keep up, though it wasn’t easy considering the circumstances (and his generally non-athletic abilities). When they reached the bottom of the well, he saw a rounded portal, like the top of another well, wavering and flickering as if it wasn’t quite sure whether it existed or not. Without hesitation, Arrow swam through the portal and disappeared from sight. Matthew swam close, hesitated, afraid of what might lie ahead, but even more afraid of remaining in limbo. Muttering a silent prayer, he dove inside—

—out of one nightmare and into another.

* * *

Wake up, Yana, Matthew heard himself think as he came to hover over the familiar bed—

—she bolted upright, the first sounds of strife shattering the early morning silence outside her family's cottage.

A raid.

Fear was prevalent, of that Matthew was certain, as Yana slipped from her bed and ran to the window. She crouched just below the frame to peer outside, though once she was able to see the village thoroughfare, she immediately wished she'd stayed in bed. Humans and elves clashed violently, the former clad in irons and chain mail and riding horseback as they wielded axes, swords, blazing torches; the latter were mostly weaponless, naked women and children—the families of Arkensaw's soldiers, who were off battling King Beston's men—who'd been sleeping peacefully a moment ago, before they'd been herded outside like cattle. As Yana watched, fire was set first to one, then another of the cottages across the way, and she knew that by morning, Arkensaw Village would be nothing more than a blackened mound along the Buffalo River.

Goddamn. Matthew wanted to hold Yana, to console her, but he was, for all intensive purposes, a passenger in this waking nightmare, a ghost—

—Yana flinched as a pair of arms grabbed her and hauled her from the window. She started to scream, then realized it was only Dal, her younger brother, who was still a boy, his voice not yet changed, his full height not yet realized—but now, in a time of crisis, his obvious artisan upbringing paid

off: he was one giant muscle, able to half-carry, half-drag his sobbing five-and-a-half-foot tall, halfblood sister across the room and to the ladder.

Starting through the trap door, he whispered, "We must flee before the humans find and eat us!"

"What about mother?" Yana asked as she followed Dal down. "And Chee? Where are they?"

"Outside," Dal replied, alighting on the floor of the den. "Gone to fight the humans. Mother would not let me go until I saw you to safety—come now, we must leave!"

Matthew watched, his perspective changing appropriately, as Yana followed her brother through the den, which glowed orange and red from the firelight outside. Somewhere along the way, Dal acquired a wooden flat sword, a flimsy plaything that would hardly be a match for anyone properly armed—but it was the closest thing he had to a real weapon, and so he wielded it high above his head, firmly clasping Yana's hand as he charged out of the cottage and into the heart of the skirmish.

The street was clogged with people, the air smoky and carrying the screams of the berserkers, the frightened, the wounded. Dal dodged a flaming projectile and pulled Yana along (Matthew too, for he'd become attached to Yana much like he'd been attached to Arrow), from shadow to shadow, shrub to shrub. At the village's periphery, the darkened woods promised protection; they plunged inside, ignoring the thistles and brambles that tore at their bare bodies.

The river ran cold and quiet when, a quarter of an hour away from the village, Dal and Yana stumbled onto the Buffalo shore. Not wanting to attract unwanted attention, they

refrained from calling any form of light as they fell to their knees to catch their breath.

"I dropped my sword," Dal gasped. Matthew could feel the heat of his shame radiating like fire.

Yana reached for him, took him in her arms. "Oh, Dal . . . we are merely wives and daughters and sons. The humans know that—are they so desperate for dominance that they must rape and kill women and children?"

"They are *human*," Dal murmured. "Their lust for mana drives them. We are merely containers for the spiritual wealth they believe is attainable through material hoarding."

A harried battle cry rang out in the night; Matthew wanted, more than anything, to be as far away from Arkensaw as possible, but he was nevertheless forced to bear witness to Yana's scene—able to watch, to experience, but not to interfere—much like he'd been forced to witness Arrow's.

"The far side of the river," Dal hissed, stumbling to his feet.

Yana stood as well and squinted across the way, where the limestone bluffs jutted into the starlit sky. She knew the finger holds and toeholds were unforgiving—but surrendering to the raiders would be far worse.

Dal said, "The humans will not like forcing their horses to cross the water—if you keep to the other side, go south . . ."

"You mean *we*," Yana corrected.

"I must return home to fight!"

Yana shook her head. Matthew knew she often hunted alone, and so was accustomed to romping through the wilderness in solitude—but under the circumstances, splitting up didn't seem the right thing to do. And besides, Dal was still a

child, not yet far enough into puberty to have acquired the mana stores of an adult. If he returned to the village to fight, he would have to rely on muscle alone.

“I will not leave you,” Yana said.

“You must!”

“Dal—”

“You *know* the human king is looking for those like you, those who are young and whose mana impressions are strong—now go, hurry!”

“*No!*”

Dal fought with Yana a moment, pushing her towards the river’s edge, but she refused to relent. “You are being unreasonable!”

“As are you!”

“I will not cross without you, I will *not!*”

Dal bit his lip, eased up. “Very well. I will go with you.”

“You *promise?*”

“Yes—but let us hurry. I can smell human sweat on the breeze. You go first. I will follow.”

Yana nodded, sloshing into the water, wading until it got deep enough to swim. She emerged on the other side of the river, shivering, teeth chattering; she looked for Dal, but he was nowhere to be found.

(Indeed, Matthew couldn’t recall if the boy had followed or not, if the current had carried him away—)

Yana choked back a fit of tears and silently cursed Dal’s name for being so stubborn. Dread overwhelmed her, and she almost froze up on the spot—

Yana, Matthew heard himself think. You’ve got to keep going!

The sound of a horse whinnying set her legs into motion, sparked her instinct to flee. The horsemen had come from the north, so, as Dal had suggested, Yana headed south, towards Ozarka—perhaps she could warn the townspeople there.

Unless, of course, the humans beat her to the mark.

Traversing the riverbank was a slow and arduous task. Branches, thorns, and sharp pebbles tore at Yana's limbs and feet, but she didn't allow herself to succumb to the pain, for to shrivel up and die would be pointless; she was alive and well, and unfettered—as long as there was a will, there was a way.

Yana charted her course as best as she could, but after a while, the ground beneath her turned slippery and, misstepping, she went down hard, falling face-first into a shallow mud pit.

Ouch, Matthew thought, wishing he could lend a helping hand.

For a moment Yana simply lay there, panting and listening for the sound of the human barbarians, but there was nothing. Not even the chirping of crickets. The forest was dead, holding its breath as yet another elven village was destroyed in the name of the human king.

Don't cry, Yana, thought Matthew. *You're strong. You'll pull through.*

Yana dragged herself out of the mud and sat cross-legged on the ground, a single tear trickling down her cheek as she worked a healing spell over one of her smaller wounds.

Arkensaw was fated, she thought. *My family allowed to perish . . . the humans allowed to run rampant.* Matthew winced, seeing the various remembered scenes being played out in Yana's head. The nights, for her, had been windows into the

future. She'd heard the stories from traders, wandering travelers who'd seen first-hand the legions of horsemen, each bearing King Beston's mark, riding first eastward, out from Greensbough, then southeast, flooding the land without mercy. It had only been a matter of time before her village fell into the humans' sights.

Despite the unlikelihood that Yana could hear him, Matthew nevertheless whispered words of comfort. After a brief period of time, she was able to calm herself. She mourned her family's capture by softly singing the Song of the Dead as she finished mending the last of her scrapes and bruises. She thought about Dal and hoped he was still alive.

With dawn still a few hours away, Yana decided against further haphazard hiking, and instead found a suitable spot to rest in a tree that had branches low enough to climb. She scaled it easily enough, tucked herself into a crook, and closed her eyes, waiting for daybreak.

Matthew waited, tethered, able to make out Yana's form, hear the sound of her breathing, smell her scent, even—but he himself remained immaterial. Moreover, he was unable to retreat more than a handful of steps before his essence automatically returned to her side. He assumed that what was supposed to happen—what he was supposed to *see*—hadn't yet happened, and he was right: No sooner had he considered the importance of his presence than he saw a gathering of leaves, a twisting of roots, azure light gathering around a central point at the foot of Yana's tree—

“Yana.”

Yana stirred. She'd been dozing lightly; the distinct whisper made her ears tingle—but not, surprisingly, in alarm.

Blinking, she looked around in the darkness, down towards the forest floor where an elven boy stood basking in an otherworldly halo. Upon seeing him, Yana gasped in recognition. Matthew, too (to the extent a disembodied spirit can physically express its surprise).

“Tameran . . . my lord,” Yana breathed.

The boy chuckled in an embarrassed way. “Please, ‘Tameran’ only.”

Yana nodded, breathless.

“Can you come down a moment?”

A nod, a swallow, teeth chattering in the presence of an unlikely visitor. Yana scampered down the tree; as she did so, Matthew got a closer look at Tameran, confirming his suspicion that the elf king was indeed the spitting image of his history book renderings. Sandy-haired, clad in furs, vigorously muscled (though otherwise very prepubescent-looking), Tameran was one of the last purebloods, born just prior to the human invasion of the West. As such, he retained the spritely looks of his ancestors.

(For humans, puberty was an evolutionary improvement necessary to defend the species against predatory and elemental dangers—but where the elves came from, it was the world that had adjusted itself to the inhabitants, and not the other way around—which wasn’t to say all elves were perfect little angels, as innocent on the inside as they were on the outside. Nor had they refused to adapt in their time on Earth; many have philosophized that the elvenfolk achieved their own sort of evolution in the human realm by refining their magical abilities as a means of survival. Thus, their bodies remained deceptively childlike while their mana swelled to

such grandiose proportions that, when properly trained, a single elven man could wield the strength of a thousand human men.)

On the ground, Yana faced Tameran and shyly covered her loin with her hands. “My lord—Tameran . . . how is it possible that you are here? Are you not leading our forces against King Beston?”

“I am indeed,” Tameran replied. “But at the moment, I am having a nap. What you see before you is a projection.” He giggled in a distinctively boyish manner.

Yana laughed, too. It was a nervous, uncertain sound.

Sobering, Tameran said, “I am sorry I am only here in spirit—are you lost?”

Matthew caught the tensing of Yana’s muscles, heard the quickening of her breath. He knew she was struggling with all her might to keep from crying. “My village . . . a clan of humans attacked.”

“Oh, my.” Tameran faced northward, tilted his head slightly to one side as if trying to discern the distant sounds of battle.

“Some of us saw this night, a foresight. We always believed our men could keep the humans away.” Yana started to cry. Her shame forgotten, she brought both hands to her face and wept.

Tameran stepped forward, reached up and gently stroked Yana’s cheek (in actuality, his translucent hand passed through her flesh, but he performed the motion so well that he might have been standing right there). “The humans would have come, regardless, and if not your village, then another, and another. They will seek out every last one of us, I

fear. However, whether we fight or hide, a climax is soon to pass. A new age is dawning.”

“The human age,” Yana hissed bitterly.

“No—not if we take the initiative. That is why I am here. Yana, I would make a request of you.”

Yana lowered her hands, nodded, swallowed. “Of course—what would you have me do?”

“You must go north, to Greensbough.”

“But Greensbough is many cycles’ travel to the *west*.”

Tameran nodded. “Yes, but you must go north to reach ShadowKeep. The human mages have installed a portal there. You must forgive me, because this is the hardest part of all.” He retreated a step, all traces of self-assuredness vanishing from his face. “You must allow yourself to be captured.”

“Captured? Why?”

“They will not harm one with your mana,” Tameran said. “The human king collects those with potent stores for his lot, and uses those with diminished abilities as magic containers for his warriors. I need you to go to Greensbough as Beston’s retainer. I’m afraid I cannot divulge the details at the moment, but . . . you must trust me.”

Yana swallowed hard. Outwardly, she was a young woman, and Tameran a boy; she could have been his older sister, his mother, even—and yet there was no doubt in Matthew’s mind who answered to whom.

“I . . . I do not know if I can bear such a burden,” Yana said.

“I will not force you.”

Yana waved her hand. “No . . . no. I accept your proposal . . . I am merely unsure of my ability to carry out your

plan.”

“I understand,” Tameran said. “Please, come. I want to show you something before you commit entirely.”

Yana nodded, and Matthew saw Tameran’s form waver. He gestured at something and began walking into the darkness. Yana stumbled after, pushing aside stray branches and vines that grabbed at her while leaving the elf king untouched. Beneath her feet, the ground started to change. Instead of damp soil spreading between her toes, she felt hard stone—warm stone. She looked up and suddenly found herself plunged into a glowing *mêlée*; she was in a long, narrow, low-ceilinged chamber with a multitude of crates and boxes stacked between wide pillars, each of which was decorated with dozens of intricate dreamcatchers—

The keep—again, thought Matthew.

Yana followed Tameran to the far end of the chamber, covering her ears in an attempt to muffle the sound of countless voices, talking, whispering, moaning, crying.

At the well, Tameran gestured for her to peer inside. “This is where our people sleep,” he said. “Everyone we managed to spare, comrades, survivors, the women and children of those who have died defending Greensbough.”

Yana gasped, seeing the horde of elven bodies, floating corpse-like; all sense of proportion went awry as the rim of the well expanded, giving her an unabashed view of the Sleep, and suddenly she found herself submerged in the water, kicking and flailing her limbs and inadvertently intertwining herself with a thousand others. She gasped and found that her lungs sucked in water like air—but Matthew knew it didn’t make her feel any better about being where she was.

With all her strength, she propelled herself upward, parting the sea of bodies and, finally, surfacing.

She pulled herself out of the well—and found that her surroundings had changed. She was still inside a keep of sorts, only now the place was bigger, more expansive. The spaces between the pillars had widened and had been stuffed with locked cages containing prisoners, both human and elven. Torchlight made the shadows dance, made the air smoky.

“Greensbough,” whispered Tameran, having appeared at Yana’s side. He crouched low, motioned for her to do the same. “As it will be in the near future.”

“Then . . . the humans will win after all?” Yana asked.

Tameran put his finger to his lips. “Look.”

Yana fell silent and squinted across the way. There were three guards total, one pacing the length between the rows of cages, the other two posted near the keep entrance. All were well-muscled and armed with powerful-looking axes.

For several minutes, nothing interesting happened. Chains rustled, every now and then someone muttered something unintelligible, and the lone guard stepped slowly along, seemingly unaware of Yana and Tameran’s presence. Then:

“Dinner,” called out one of the men beside the entrance.

Yana fixed her gaze on the entrance—and nearly gasped out loud when she saw herself—dressed in rags, her hair chopped short—stepping into the keep. To-be memories flooded her thoughts: herself on hands and knees, scrubbing floors, walls, tabletops; standing sleeveless and barefoot in a tub of soap suds as she washed the pots and pans while a maniacal chef barked orders at his cooking staff; sitting curled up

in the corner of a darkened corridor as she crafted a ratty dreamcatcher from filched materials.

And here, carrying a stew pot, an array of wooden bowls strung along a cord that was slung over her shoulder. Without a word, she went to the nearest prison cage, set her pot down, and began serving the prisoners their din.

“What is this?” Yana whispered, turning to face Tameran.

He held his finger to her lips. “Watch carefully.”

Yana’s future-self made her way from cell to cell. Behind her, the guards made cat-calls, offered derogatory comments about various parts of her anatomy, but they didn’t touch her; she was able to complete her duties unmolested, eventually setting her pot down before a cage occupied by three men of varying ages and builds. The largest of the men lay on the ground, unconscious; the bearded one looked to be a full-blood, and handled the food as his younger, dark-skinned companion sat somewhat apart, leaning against the bars and brooding, eyes scanning the interior of the keep, alighting on Yana—

—a shaft of morning sunlight poked through the leaves above and shone on Yana’s face as she blinked awake to find she was back in the forest where she had, apparently, fallen asleep. Taking a quick survey, she saw no sign of Tameran—but although the authenticity of the elf king’s appearance was questionable, there was no mistaking the potency of her vision, the vivid afterimage of the young elven man’s eyes as he’d caught sight of her from the prison cage—the fact, Matthew realized, that the young man had been Arrow.

And me, he thought, laying there like that. Dead, maybe. Starved for ages in a dank cell. Dead, alive, or among elves, life

away from life didn't seem all that promising.

Yana shimmied down the tree, began making her way northward, and Matthew at last found himself released, drifting away, faster and faster, higher and higher until Yana was nothing more than a speck of bare flesh moving through the leafy weave below.

Take heart, Mr. MacBride—your time is now.

* * *

With a sudden, nauseating jolt, Matthew was yanked from his fanciful vantage point above the treetops and slammed head-first into a cold, dark space where pain and adrenaline rattled his bones. It took a moment's frantic gasping before he could catch his breath, struggle onto hands and knees on the hard stone floor. The excess water came soon afterward, splashing down upon him—a miniature tidal wave. He coughed, spit, and stumbled into a crouching position.

“Arrow?” he rasped, trying to find form in the hazy semi-darkness. There was noise, but nothing so terrible as the sleeping elves' chorus. No, this was men's voices, boots scuffing, chains clinking—Matthew was back in the keep, only it looked very different from the place he and Arrow had left behind.

It was Yana's dream.

Yana's *nightmare*.

Come to life.

One of the guards grabbed Matthew by the shirt collar, hauled him out of the shadows and into the firelight (where the other two guards were restraining Arrow and Darius).

"Well, well," grunted the guard holding Arrow. "If I'd known we'd be getting this many visitors, I'd have worn my good vestments."

"And what's this?" asked the man holding Matthew. He reached out and took hold of one of Matthew's ears. "A human in cahoots with the elfish sorcerers?"

"Probably spellbound by these two, Gerri," said the guard holding Darius. "Tell us, fats, who's king of Greensbough?"

"Har-har," Matthew coughed, trying ineffectually to clear his left lung of residual well water. "Push the fat guy around, make yourself feel like a big man."

Gerri scowled and leaned forward so that his nose pressed against Matthew's. "Clive asked you a question, fats. Answer it."

Matthew started to struggle, but when Gerri gripped him around the neck, lifted him off the floor, he immediately gave up and sputtered, "K-king Beston."

"*Lord Kelvin.*" Gerri cackled, set Matthew down on his feet again (though he didn't let him go). Then, with an exaggerated accent: "Know ye not yer history?"

"I *do*," Matthew retorted—*it's just that my school lessons aren't at the forefront of my priorities right now*. "I take it the Last Battle is over, Beston is six feet under, and his right-hand man has taken over operations here in the null world?"

"Humor," Gerri spat, shaking Matthew like so much flotsam. "They say the new world is full of people just like you, people who point their fingers at the past and laugh 'till their bellies are sore."

"Ah, but there are few here who find humor of any use,"

said Arrow's captor.

Gerri nodded. "Right you are, Heath. And those of us who *do*, well, perhaps our sanity has left us after all these years being encapsulated here, isolated, exiled—but Lady Maire always said there'd be guests sooner or later."

"You think the fat one needs special treatment?" asked Clive.

"He'll probably need a looking at by Maire. For now, toss him in a cage with the others. And slash his palms, just in case he's learned a few tricks from the point-ears."

Matthew panted a plea for mercy as his wrists were bound behind his back—then came the sharp pinch of metal cutting into flesh as, with a quick movement, Gerri slashed the palms of both his hands. He cried out in pain and stumbled forward into one of the prison cages, where he fell onto his knees, his eyes watering. Behind him, he could hear the raucous as Arrow and Darius were similarly badgered inside.

"Mr. MacBride, are you all right?" Darius asked after Gerri and his cohorts had receded.

Matthew straightened slightly and turned to see Darius and Arrow kneeling nearby; both men's hands were blood-stained. "I can still feel pain, if that's what you mean."

"I am sorry," said Darius. "Without the ability to do proper finger formations, my medical assistance is quite limited."

"No matter, anyhow," said Arrow. "With our palms slashed, our mana is almost useless."

Matthew sighed. "Darius, what happened? How did we get here?"

"The barrier between worlds has been compromised once again," Darius replied. "As you crossed over into our null world, so have we been transferred into *another* null world."

"Let me make a wild guess: Greensbough, the sequel?"

Darius looked around. "There is no way of knowing for certain—not from in here. But I would guess you are correct."

"So, what *do* we know?"

"It is obvious that you did not intentionally transcend worlds on the night of the storm. However, the incident has caused a sort of bleed between realms. Greensbough is on the crux; there is a great presence here—it can barely be contained."

"Our sleeping brothers and sisters," Arrow said, accusingly. "The secret you have kept from me these years past."

There was a moment's uncomfortable silence before Darius quietly said, "Arrow, you must understand—"

"I *understand*," Arrow interrupted. "My background, my youth—my inexperience has prompted you to keep me as your pet."

"Arrow—"

"You trained me for busywork, when, with my help, we might have been able to repair the damage and avoid our current troubles altogether." Arrow sighed. "Ah, well, no matter. I too was drawn to the keep. I saw the water tomb the night of Mr. MacBride's arrival. Finally, I know the truth."

Darius scowled. "The keep is forbidden. You know that."

"Regardless, there was a woman," Arrow said.

"Yes," Matthew added, scooting closer to his companions. "Yana, from Arkensaw. I saw her, too."

In unison, Darius and Arrow both regarded Matthew with shocked expressions on their faces.

Arrow asked, "You . . . the dark dreams came to you as well?"

"Well, not exactly," said Matthew. "It felt more like I was piggybacking off your dreams, Yana's too."

"Correct me if I am wrong," said Arrow, "but humans are not ordinarily aware of their psychic abilities."

"That's just it: Before Darius rescued me, I'd never had the slightest inkling of anything remotely psychic."

"But you *do* have the Jacaranda," Darius pointed out.

"Maybe," said Arrow, "there is a reason for your being here after all."

Matthew sighed. "It's a birthmark, I've already told you."

"Yes, but an indicator of power nonetheless—and if not your own, then that of someone who has decided to imprint their mana force upon you."

Darius nodded, and Matthew felt an unexpected pang of responsibility. The null world had him, there was a reason *why*, and, now, his elven friends expected him to cough up results. Failing that, they at least expected him to acknowledge the importance of his skin marking in light of the fact that he was now occupying a reality not his own.

"Let's talk about Yana," he said, addressing Arrow. "You think she's here? You think maybe she, er, summoned us somehow?"

Shaking his head, Darius said, "It is unlikely a single person could bypass Tameran's magic."

"And yet," said Matthew, "she was calling to Arrow. I saw it. She showed him exactly where to go to find the well—the

portal. She might not have created it, but she sure *knew* about it. Lord Tameran appeared to her on the night her village was destroyed—he told her to come to Greensbough for some specific purpose. When I last saw her, she was a servant. Right here. I was asleep, or dead, God forbid, and you two were in this very cage. Now, isn't that worth a little something?"

"I do not know," replied Arrow. "Regardless of the reasons behind our being here, here is where we are, and here we will stay until our benefactors decide otherwise."

Matthew shifted, winced at the pain in his hands. "You're elves!" he hissed. "Mages—you must know *something* about this shit. History? A prophecy?"

There wasn't time for an answer, as a disturbance at the keep entrance caught everyone's attention. Accompanied by a pair of guardsmen, a human woman of advanced years entered the keep. She was cloaked in black, her brilliant white hair unkempt, her face streaked with wrinkles—yet her stride was quick, her movements well-coordinated.

Matthew watched as Gerri approached the woman.

"Lady Maire," he said, and bowed.

"Where are my arrivals?" Maire asked, surveying the keep. "Two elves and a man, yes?"

"Right this way, m'lady," Gerri said, and led her to the cell where Matthew, Darius, and Arrow were huddled together.

"Ah, two pairs of sharpened ears," Maire said, stooping to peer inside. With a knobby hand, she reached out and beckoned to Darius (who promptly scooted out of reach). "I didn't think there were any fullbloods allowed in the new

world. And you—” She looked at Arrow. “—a handsome hybrid. The fullblood’s son, perhaps?” Lastly, she looked at Matthew. “But who would you be? A human mage? These elves’ master? Their slave?”

Matthew, frozen in total bewilderment, kept his mouth firmly shut.

“Speak up, now.”

No one in the cage uttered a sound (though someone several cells over grunted somewhat miserably).

“Your resistance is counterproductive,” Maire said, straightening. “I don’t have to look to know you possess the elven graduate symbol—all of you. I have seen. I know where you come from, and I know how. But why you three in *particular* . . . that is no doubt a matter of great debate.” She turned and nodded at the guards. “I’m finished for now. Bring them up to Kelvin’s chamber. He’ll want to see them for himself, of course.”

“Yes, m’lady,” said Gerri. Then, grinning at Matthew: “You’ll be seeing the boss now.”

* * *

The Greensbough interior was only vaguely familiar to Matthew as he and the others were led along. The metamorphosis he’d witnessed prior to his entering the portal with Arrow had stretched the ceilings high, made the hallways long, and created corridors where there had been none before.

The throne room was large, and shouldn’t have been able to fit *anywhere* inside the mansion—that is, if the mansion were still resting atop a Cambrian hillside. (This was a null

world, Matthew reminded himself, and he realized, historically-speaking, that Greensbough hadn't been spirited away at the turn of the twentieth century, it had merely been hidden cleverly inside a popular California tourist attraction.) Large, colorful tapestries hung in multiple layers on the walls. The throne was ornately-decorated, almost monolithic—and Lord Kelvin himself was the jewel, the centerpiece. Matthew recognized him immediately from his portraits.

The man hadn't aged a day.

Kelvin stroked his meticulously-trimmed goatee and waited quietly as one of his men strode forward.

"Show respect for your king," the guard ordered as he shoved Matthew onto his knees (Darius and Arrow, too).

His guests properly humbled, Kelvin said, "Lady Maire tells me you three are the summoners she rounded up. Followers of Tameran, the elf king, come to wake your leader."

Matthew glanced at Darius, who appeared to be in deep thought.

"We are merely groundskeepers," offered Arrow.

"Come, now," prompted Kelvin. "Your mere presence here would indicate otherwise."

A blank look from Arrow.

Kelvin frowned, leaned forward slightly. "Would you have me believe a lowly groundskeeper, his halfblood catamite, and this pale, puffy slob—" He waved a hand at Matthew. "—have *accidentally* bypassed a spell that has gone unbroken for more than a century?"

When no one offered up an explanation, one of the guards hit Matthew in the back with the hilt of his sword.

"Easy there, He-Man!" Matthew exclaimed—earning

himself an encore blow.

“Such behavior,” Kelvin said, relaxing in his seat, “is to be expected from the elvenfolk, but you, you’re a man, are you not? Or would you have me believe you’re human in appearance only?”

“I’m just along for the ride,” Matthew said, panting from the pain. “I don’t know how any of this was done.”

“But it *was* done.”

Darius started to his feet, was immediately knocked back down again. “He knows nothing, sir.”

Kelvin sighed, leaving the throne and pacing before his guests. “You are reluctant to speak. Understandable. The humans and elves have been enemies for centuries. The Last Battle brought an end to the war—but the suffering goes on. The wound refuses to heal.” He stopped in front of Darius. “How can you know what it’s like for me? For my people? When Tameran trapped us here, it was to be a life sentence. But life here has been skewed. We were never allowed the privilege of growing old, eventually dying, and at last finding ourselves free from this infernal null world.” Moving on to Matthew, Kelvin asked, “Don’t believe me?”

Matthew shook his head. “Frankly, I don’t know what to believe.”

“How old do you think I am?”

Matthew licked his lips, considering. “Um . . . thirty?”

Kelvin flashed a toothy grin. “My boy, I have not seen thirty in more than a century.”

“That’s some feat.”

Kelvin’s expression wavered for a moment before he resumed his slow, methodical pacing. “Tameran’s elves are

rumored to be sleeping within these very walls. They, too, are ageless, very nearly immortal—although for them it is easy as going to sleep in one world and waking up a moment later in another. For us, it is day after day, month after month, year after year of incessant *waiting*. Never aging, never dying, unable to fall ill. Frozen in time, we are living portraits of the people we once were . . . prisoners of a war that ended when the old world ended. Yet we are still alive . . . alive, but not allowed to *live*.”

Kelvin waited a moment, then took the throne again when Matthew’s party failed to respond.

“There’ll be time yet to become acquainted,” he said. “Oh, there is always time. You’ll soon realize that I have nothing *but* time on my hands.” He nodded at the guards. “Take them back to their cell. Let Lady Maire entertain them for a while.”

* * *

“He’s not what I expected, that’s for sure,” Matthew grunted as he and the others were thrust unceremoniously into their prison cage.

“His mind has no doubt been affected by his prolonged stay in this null world,” Darius said.

Gerri laughed, locking the cage and then tapping on the wooden bars with the blunt end of his axe. “Give yourself some time in here, and you’ll find it a bit difficult to hold on to *your* wits as well.” He walked away, whistling a nameless tune as he went.

“Wits, huh?” Matthew mumbled, and jerked his chin in

the direction of his cellmates. “You two have been cooped up at the Cambria portal for as long as these twits, and you’re not insane—at least, not that I can tell.”

Darius and Arrow looked at each other; Darius spoke: “We are elven. Time passes differently for us.”

Matthew slouched his shoulders. “God, my hands hurt. Probably a nice bit of gangrene setting in.”

“This realm is sterile,” Darius said. “There is no sickness, no decay.”

“There may not be sickness, but there *is* decay.”

It was a prisoner who had spoken. Matthew gazed into the adjoining cage and saw an elven man, a halfblood, leaning against the bars. He was dark-haired, shackled, dressed in rags (though he appeared to be moderately clean). There wasn’t a spare ounce of fat on him.

“My name is Arlo,” the man said.

“Matthew,” replied Matthew. Gesturing at his companions, he said, “This is Darius, that’s Arrow.”

Arlo nodded at them both.

“Looks like we’re here for the royal treatment,” said Matthew.

“They don’t hurt us as badly as they could,” Arlo said (Matthew noted his distinctly human accent). “They need us for our mana, so they take decent care of us. When I say decent, I mean enough to keep our stores up, to keep us alive—enough to power that bitch Maire’s spells.”

“And this has been going on, with you guys stuck here as prisoners, for the last century?”

Arlo chuckled. “A hundred years is nothing to an elf. Still, I would rather have spent the time someplace where the sun

shines, and the grass grows.”

“There’s no way out, then?” asked Arrow. “In all this time, has no one escaped?”

“A few have braved the dark abyss, though to no avail. Their ghosts haunt our hallways, spoil our dreams.”

That didn’t sound promising.

Matthew thanked Arlo for his insight and settled down, scooting himself up against the rear wall where Darius and Arrow were. For a while, everyone sat in silence, the only sound in the keep-turned-dungeon being the occasional grunt or snuffle from the guards, the crackling of the fires, the muffled moans of destitution from the various prisoners—ample reminders that as much as his wounds hurt, there were people all around him in far worse condition.

The passage of time was immeasurable. Matthew dozed on and off, still a bit weakened from his near-death experience. His dreams were mostly empty, save for the occasional instance where he would find himself jogging through a conglomerate of imaginary corridors that led nowhere in particular. Every time he turned a corner, he stumbled upon a different faceless, voiceless form, roughly human in shape, but otherwise incomplete. Each of these specters lurched along in a disjointed fashion, stopping routinely to feel along the walls, the floors. Matthew would sense an agonizing sorrow every time he stepped up to one—at which point he would wake up, back in his cage, hands aching, stomach grumbling.

Whether or not Darius and Arrow experienced something similar, he couldn’t say. However, they seemed to handle themselves well enough—most likely because they weren’t hauling around two-hundred pounds of cumulative sausage-

pepperoni pizzas and BLT sandwiches.

At some point, Matthew awoke to the sound of one of the guards calling out, “Dinner!”

Rolling onto his side so that he was facing Darius and Arrow, he said, “Somehow I don’t think the cuisine is going to be any good.”

Darius sighed; Arrow simply ignored him and gripped the cage bars, his attention caught elsewhere.

Their silence was hardly comforting.

“So,” Matthew said, “are we going to try to escape, or merely allow the passage of time to wither away our enemies for us—oh, wait, that’s right. That won’t work because time doesn’t exist here.”

“I have checked the structural integrity of our prison,” Darius said. “Without the use of our hands, escape will be difficult.”

“Well, how about I learn some magic, then? I’m guessing it works differently for humans because I see magicians on TV doing all kinds of tricks without the use of any fancy finger formations.”

Darius furrowed his brow. “It is possible for humans to work viable spells, but the result is only as good as the effort. A well-trained mage will use up only a minute or two of a day’s potency, while a novice will find himself ready to call it a night after a single poorly-executed spell. Training is an intensive process, and such skills are not easily acquired.”

“You’re saying it would take time—time in a place where there’s nothing *but*.”

Darius started rattling off a smart-allecky response, but was cut short when Gerri strode past the cage, rapping on the

bars with axe handle.

“Chow time, boys,” he said. “Blink and you’ll miss it.”

Pushing himself into a sitting position, Matthew peered through the cage bars—and was hit by a wave of *déjà vu* as he spotted an elven servant boy moving from cage to cage. *No, not a boy*, he thought. *Short hair, wiry build, yes, but definitely female—*

“Yana,” he breathed. He grabbed Arrow by the shirtsleeve. “From my vision—from your dreams—she’s here, she’s *here!*”

Arrow replied, “Yes, I know.”

He watched her, the girl of his dreams, make the rounds. He watched for a hint, a sign; he’d often imagined this moment, he the hero, she the damsel in distress, rescued after all her time locked in his dreams. When she reached his cell, he half expected her to slip him a note, a key—her arms around him and her lips pressed to his ear, “You’ve come at last, Arrow!” Some sort of signal that she knew he was here, and that she was willing to support his mission of rescue.

There was nothing.

Yana kept her eyes on her work, not once looking up as she handed him a bowl of what looked like vegetable soup. In a moment, she was gone, leaving him and his cellmates to ration their meal.

“You think she recognized us?” Matthew asked.

“It does not seem likely.” Spirits plummeting, Arrow looked at Darius, who had remained near the center of the cage. “Master, what are we to do?”

Darius nodded at the soup bowl. “Eat.”

Arrow blanched, offered the bowl to Matthew, who looked famished, for sure, but seemed to have an aversion to slurping his food out of an unfamiliar bowl—sterile world or not. He waved Arrow away and returned his attention to Yana, who had just served the last of the prisoners, and who was now making her way toward the keep entrance.

The guards stopped her halfway to the mark.

“You got something for us today?” Gerri asked, cooing as Clive and Heath deftly stepped in to cut her off.

Yana lowered her head, not answering.

The men took turns verbalizing their desire to utilize her in a variety of sexual positions. Gerri was the boldest, actually reaching out and squeezing her backside.

“Mm-hm,” he said. “They got you tending the garden again? All that work’s made you nice and firm.”

From his cage, Arlo uttered a disgusted sigh. “Not a day goes by those brutes can’t control their animal tendencies. It’s a wonder they don’t scurry around on all fours.”

Arrow felt the blood rushing to his face. He struggled against his bonds, trying to come up with a plan of action, his elven half genuinely wishing to rescue a woman in need, his human half humiliated beyond belief at the notion of being unable to fulfill his role as her savior.

His fantasy wasn’t playing out as he’d imagined—not in the slightest.

Watching alongside Arrow, Matthew felt an infusion of rage causing his insides to broil. Whether or not it was a wise thing to do, he couldn’t stand to be passive any longer, and so stumbled to his feet, rattled the cage bars with his feet.

“Leave her alone, you overgrown pricks!” he shouted.

The guards only partially complied, as Matthew’s outburst had the dubious effect of drawing Gerri’s attention to himself *and* spurring the other guards’ scornful remarks toward Yana (Clive and Heath started physically molesting Yana now, poking, prodding, and pulling at her clothes).

Matthew took several steps backward as Gerri approached the cage. “That’s right, just let your anger get the best of you—beat up some poor slob locked in a cage with his hands tied so you can feel better about yourself!”

“Mr. MacBride,” Darius said, backing away as well. “Perhaps it is unwise to further enrage our warden at this point.”

“Too late,” said Matthew, swallowing hard as Gerri unlocked the cage.

With a wicked gleam in his eye, Gerri said, “Lord Kelvin doesn’t like it when I rough up the prisoners. Says it drains the retainers, injures the workers—but you’ve got neither magic nor muscle. I wager it doesn’t matter much what happens to you.”

Matthew backed up even further, hoping no one was looking in his direction, because he was about to wet his pants. Gerri was quick: He ducked into the cage, towering over Arrow and Matthew (and dwarfing Darius). He grabbed Matthew around the neck and hauled him from the cage, held him up in the firelight as if he were a rag doll. Matthew kicked his legs, jiggled his shoulders, flapped his wrists behind his back—to no avail. His only hope was that if he were to serve as a distraction by letting Gerri pop his head off like a bottle cap, Arrow and Darius would at least have a chance to make a run for it through the open cage door. As soon as he

got a chance to glance over his shoulder, however, he discovered they were simply standing motionless, frozen in place . . . waiting patiently.

Fucking elves, Matthew thought, and faced Gerri again, felt himself go limp against the onslaught of the man's sweaty, foaming mug.

Fortunately, it was at that moment that Lady Maire decided to make an appearance.

She entered the keep, and, upon seeing the men with their hands inside Yana's shirt, Gerri with his fingers digging into Matthew's neck, put her hands on her hips. "And just what is going on here?" she demanded loudly.

Clive and Heath immediately stepped away from Yana.

"Nothing, m'lady," Clive said, dropping his hands over the obvious bulge in his crotch.

"Feeding the prisoners, is all," Heath added.

Maire made a distasteful face. "Looks to me like you're feeding *yourselves*."

"We're men, are we not?" Gerri said, setting Matthew down and mock-adjusting his shirt collar before shoving him back inside the cage. "We have needs too."

"You're not men, you're swine. And as for *needs* . . ." Maire snorted again. "If it's such a distraction, I can happily have your *needs* stored in little glass jars and added to my collection." She gestured for Yana to leave, then motioned at Matthew's cage. "I'll start with the young one. The halfblood. Bring him to my laboratory, please—and do try to keep your grubby paws out of his pants."

Gerri nodded, and though he looked to be stifling a bit of embarrassment, he nevertheless complied, reaching into the

cage for Arrow. Matthew made it as difficult as possible, shouting and getting in Gerri's way at every opportunity—until Gerri hit him over the head, causing him to black out for a moment. When he came to, he was laying on the ground, and Arrow was gone.

Kneeling over him, Darius shook his head and said, "You should not have provoked him."

"Shut up," Matthew replied, panting, coughing in the smoky darkness.

He lay down, closing his eyes and studying the darkness behind his eyelids. This went on for what must have been several hours, because when he opened his eyes, the keep was quiet. Beside him, Darius was sleeping sitting up.

"Sir."

Matthew wriggled himself into a sitting position and saw Yana crouching beside the cage. Glancing towards the keep entrance, he spotted the guards—all three of them—asleep at their post.

"They sleep hard," Yana whispered.

Matthew shuffled over to where she was. "You're Yana, right?"

"Yes."

"I'm Matthew."

Yana nodded. "You're friends with Arrow and his master?"

"Something like that."

"And you're a mage?"

"No. Just a guy who was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Yana's expression shifted curiously. She tilted her head

slightly, trying to get a look at Matthew's hands. "Let me see."

Matthew twisted around slightly; he could feel Yana's hands cradling his own. Her skin was ice-cold.

"You're freezing," he said.

"Yes," replied Yana. "I too was mutilated upon first arriving here. My mana has not flown freely for a hundred years. But I have found other ways."

She closed her eyes and concentrated, and Matthew felt the skin of his palms crawl, felt invisible bugs scurrying about his wounds. Though the sensation was initially repugnant, the discomfort only lasted a moment before receding.

Yana opened her eyes, let him go.

"What did you do?" Matthew asked, his pain vanquished.

"A simple healing spell," Yana said. She held up her hands, palms outward, to reveal a pair of nasty scars. "I could never fix more than the most superficial wounds, and my hands will never be warm again, but I've nevertheless had time to practice casting spells in different ways. That was how I was able to send my messages to Arrow."

Matthew felt a slight breeze and turned to find Darius was standing beside him.

"You are the woman he spoke of," Darius whispered.

Yana nodded. "I've been sending my messages to him, yes."

"And where's Arrow now?" Matthew asked.

"Maire has him, most likely" replied Yana. "She will not kill him, but she will certainly put him through her various tests. She has an obsession with elven physiology."

Matthew looked at Darius. "We have to help him, then.

We have to get out of here and find him.”

Darius nodded. To Yana he said, “We will need to know how to reactivate the portal.”

Yana frowned. “Portal?”

“Yes. A way between worlds.”

“But . . . but there are no portals here. None, at least, besides the one you created when you came here.”

Darius’ face blanked.

“You’ve found a way to defeat the barrier, at least?” asked Yana.

Again, Darius was a portrait of uncertainty.

“Okay,” said Matthew. “One thing at a time. We’ll get nowhere stuck in this cage. We have to get out.”

Yana nodded, started to say something, but froze up as one of the guards stirred, snorted in his sleep, then settled again. “Goddess, if they catch me here—”

“Quick, then,” Matthew said. “Help us out of here. The key, maybe—”

Yana shook her head. “No time—I’ll be back. I promise.”

She scurried away, her footfalls quiet as a mouse’s against the stone.

“Shit.” Matthew slumped, wrenched his hands, searching for pain and finding none. His wounds had been healed with the same certainty Darius had shown upon Matthew’s first arriving in the Greensbough null world—but otherwise, Yana seemed absolutely clueless as to what was supposed to happen next. She was merely a slave, frightened, uncertain. He’d seen it in her eyes. It sent a chill down his spine—he’d expected more than a simple S.O.S.

She doesn’t have a plan, he thought. And neither do we. No

plan at all.

* * *

With her fist in her mouth and her heart hammering in her chest, Kelvin found Yana wandering the hallways.

"There you are, Yana, my sweet," he said (she knew he was merely feigning sympathy for her obviously agitated state). "Wherever have you gotten yourself to?"

"I couldn't sleep," Yana said.

"I too have borne the weight of an unshakable insomnia this night."

Kelvin brushed her cheek with the back of his hand; she could see in his eyes, though, that he wanted more than a mere touch—he *always* wanted more. It was a game they played, he the persistent instigator, she the unwilling prize, meant to be Beston's retainer, but stuck instead as Kelvin's object of infatuation. He'd never done more to her than what his unique sexual affliction would allow, but this night of nights . . .

She needed his mind off the here and now. She allowed him to caress her, to become distracted by his manly desires so that he no longer cared about her previous whereabouts so long as she retired to his bedchamber with him.

The scene was familiar to Yana. Kelvin undressed and waited on the bed, calling to her, telling her she was free to leave, but that his heart would break if she did (a beefy guard was posted outside his room to protect against this). Yana removed her clothes, stepped before him, displaying her femininity for him, looking indecisive, fighting back the urge to

cover herself, to run, but knowing that if she could keep his mind off the prisoners, even for this brief moment, it might give them . . . time.

She lay with him; he kissed her here and there, pressed himself against her, whispered in her ear that he needed her, that now would be a time unlike any other, an ending, a beginning. Yana ignored the remembered instances of Kelvin and herself sharing this very bed and listened distantly to his ode to the desires of men. Beston had been old, tired, interested in mana only—but Kelvin was young, his passions left to simmer for the last four-hundred seasons. He'd resisted at first, perhaps out of some small honor for his former king, but gradually his hunger had gotten the better of him. There were very few women in the null world; most of them had been frozen in middle age. Yana was young and lithe, and the men all gave her looks, even when she'd cut her hair short and filched extra fabric from the cloth room to knit makeshift garments that effectively downplayed the unmistakable qualities of her elven beauty.

Kelvin knew what she was trying to hide and, so, had at last taken her to his bed—but he'd never made love to her. On every occasion she would lay there, eyes fixed on some distant point as she waited for the last of her purity to be obliterated with a definitive thrust between her legs. As always, though, when it came time to perform the manly act, Kelvin wilted.

It was no different tonight. He hovered over her, halfway to the point, arms and legs shaking, unwilling to support him any further. The sweat rolled off him in large droplets; Yana waited, knowing it was over, knowing she was safe for one

more night.

Kelvin rolled off her, immediately drawing the coverings over his lax member and staring up at the ceiling with a ponderous expression on his face. His breath came in ragged gasps. It was almost enough to rouse her pity for him—but no, Yana reminded herself. Kelvin was no village boy bungling his first time with a girl, he was a cold-hearted human warrior, a killer of elves and men. The null world had coaxed his violent tendencies to the fringes, but he always found them again whenever he beat his chefs for a lack of culinary improvisation, or when he tortured his servants for crossing him during a depressive spell.

“Would you join them?”

Yana closed her eyes, pretended she was recovering from a fit of passion. “Who?”

“Our guests down below, of course.” Kelvin spoke slowly and softly, as if commenting on any old thing, but Yana knew he was acutely interested in discussing exactly what she’d hoped he’d forget: Tameran’s summoners.

“I’d rather spend the night here,” Yana said. “Where it’s warm.”

Kelvin swore under his breath. “Don’t play with me. Whatever hex was placed upon you in the old world survives to torture me even now. My potency festers inside me—I am hardly a man anymore.” He shuffled beneath the sheets. “I would have made you a princess. Your son would have inherited the throne.”

“In a null world,” Yana whispered. “A dead world.”

“Perhaps.” Kelvin turned away. “Maire said you were guided here by Tameran himself. A key to be tucked away

until the moment was right. I thought perhaps after the first fifty years it was either untrue, or that you'd forgotten your purpose—but now that the prophecy has fulfilled itself with the new arrivals . . .”

Yana opened her eyes. “Maire tells you bedtime stories, my lord.”

“Still, we know Tameran waits in the wings for his deliverance from this hell. There was a war once, or don't you remember? And isn't that why you came to Greensbough in the first place? To serve your king upon his waking?”

Yana said nothing.

“Nothing has changed, Maire has been unable to break the barrier in a century. And now this. I'm certain our time here has come to an end. We will rejoin the world we were exiled from, Yana.”

“The world has changed.”

“Yes. But we will be free.”

“What will you do, then, if you are freed?”

“I have seen the new world,” Kelvin said. “Through Maire's looking glass. Great cities teeming, overflowing with people and machinery. Aimless thought, meaningless action—a world in search of its king.”

“And you would be that king?”

“Perhaps.” Kelvin brushed a hand through Yana's hair. “You would be their queen.”

Yana shrugged away from him, sat at the edge of the bed. Her legs tensed, ready for action. “You don't know me well enough to make such an assumption.”

“I've known you for more than a hundred years.”

“And not once have you made love to me.” Yana made it

sound like she actually wanted him as much as he wanted her, that perhaps her lack of enthusiasm during previous encounters was due to the awful knowledge that his seed would never take, and if it ever did, a child would be born into a dead world for all eternity.

“The magic is strong . . . and I am only a man.”

Yana sighed, her gaze darting about the room, settling on Kelvin’s dagger, still in its hilt attached to his waist belt, which was draped over the back of a chair. “Can I go now?”

“You are not a prisoner here,” said Kelvin.

Leaving the bed, Yana picked up her pants and shirt, waded them, walked past the chair and deftly drew the dagger, hiding it in her clothing bundle. The urge to stab Kelvin now was great, but she willed herself to remain calm, to wait for him to get up from the bed, don his robe and walk over to the chamber door. He opened it slightly, relieved his guard.

She waited in the center of the room, her clothes bundled in front of her, the blade gripped tightly in her hand.

“Do you really love me, my lord?” she asked.

Kelvin came to her, leaned in close, and kissed her on the mouth—and as he speared her with his tongue, so did she spear him with his own blade, a quick, firm thrust in the abdomen that stole his breath away. He started to cry out, but Yana used her free hand to hold the back of his head, keep his mouth pressed against hers as she toppled forward, fell with him onto the floor. Her weight helped drive the blade deeper. Kelvin thrashed only momentarily before his eyes rolled back in his head and a last, gasped breath escaped his lips.

Yana separated herself from his body, stumbled shakily to her feet. There was blood on her hands, on her clothes,

smeared across her belly and thighs. Quickly, before her conscience could get the best of her, she dressed, then padded to the door, peeked out into the corridor. It was empty; she went straight for the washroom, jumbled thoughts and unbridled emotions making her tremble. She hadn't thought herself capable of killing—but, then, what *bad* she intended when she'd picked up Kelvin's dagger?

Regardless of her intentions, things had changed; the consequences were unavoidable. Before the storm, before the battle, she washed herself, calmed herself—prepared herself as best as she could for what was to come next.

* * *

Maire's laboratory was an assemblage of wooden bowls containing colorful powders, glass tubes and bottles overflowing with bubbling liquids, and rusted troughs bearing spidery swathes of plant life. In the center was a wooden frame, where Arrow was bound by his ankles and wrists, tied spread-eagle so that his unclad body was easily accessible.

Maire moved about the room, talking cheerfully—as if she were entertaining a friend over tea. “Science is the one true measuring stick,” she said. “Elves have their mana. Humans have their molecules. In both cases, it's how you measure your endeavors that produces repeatable results. What you do with a flexing of your aura, I can replicate through various combinations of chemicals and bodily fluids.”

As she spoke, she worked, doing terrible things to Arrow, poking and prodding him, cutting him with sharp instruments so that she could study his flesh. At each turn, she

would heal his wounds—only to begin again on a different body part. Sometimes she would sit for a minute or two asking questions which Arrow was unable to answer; when she didn't get what she wanted, she screamed and lashed out at him, swiping him across the face before returning to her amicable baseline.

"I suppose we can start on other aspects of my research," she said, smiling amiably after one such outburst. "Mana and magic is fine, but sometimes all you need is a little basic biology."

Maire left the laboratory. Alone, Arrow slumped instantly into a light sleep, making up for what felt like days of insomnia. However, all too soon, he was roused by Maire's return.

She'd brought Yana.

"You will assist me in my research," Maire said, folding her arms. "Remove your clothes."

Yana blushed, sneaked a quick glance at Arrow before bowing her head. "But madam—"

"No arguments. Remove your clothes at once."

Arrow swallowed hard. *Some hero I am!* He wriggled his arms, his legs; the soreness in his joints made it painfully obvious that once again he'd been caught at his most vulnerable.

Yana started to shake her head, but Maire would have none of it. Producing something from the folds of her robe—a small doll, modeled after Yana, Arrow realized—the witch raised her hand and cast a spell in the spirituous human tongue. At first, Yana merely flinched, no doubt quite dubious as to the effectiveness of a *doll*—then Maire repeated her request for Yana to disrobe.

Yana obeyed. With jerky, forced movements, she

shrugged out of her shirt, shimmied out of her pants. Then, on shaky legs, and with Maire operating her limbs in the background, she strode up to Arrow.

“Shall we begin with a kiss?” Maire asked, and made a persuasive gesture with her doll.

Yana leaned in close, pressed her lips against Arrow’s. Her hair was damp, her skin wet; there were tears in her eyes. Arrow’s guess was that Maire’s men had caught her in the bath, probably weary from a long day’s work, ready for the sweet embrace of dreamless sleep—but instead she was here, the girl of his dreams, he the boy of her dreams, forced to consummate a relationship that hadn’t even begun yet.

After a moment, Maire had Yana pull back slightly. “There, see? Not so bad after all—and look! The lad is already responding in the masculine fashion!”

At Maire’s command, Yana pressed herself against Arrow in a most provocative manner. Arrow turned his head away, but Yana grabbed him by the ears, forced him to face forward as she kissed him again, this time passionately. Worse yet, Maire was right: his arousal was manifesting itself physically, slowly, hesitantly at first, then more rapidly as his member achieved a firmness necessary for penetration.

“I am s-sorry,” Arrow whimpered, his own tears now mixing with Yana’s.

Maire watched with great fervor and continued to conduct her abomination. “The male must reach his culmination first for the crucial abscess to be rich with his potency.” She made another gesture, causing Yana to start thrusting against Arrow with quick, broad strokes, purely for his stimulation. After a few minutes of this (and against his will), he reached

climax, and Maire cackled, continued her chanting, making Yana shift slightly, altering her motions to affect her own finale. When it was done, she collapsed against Arrow, spent, shaking—utterly devastated. Over her shoulder, Arrow could see Maire nodding approvingly as she recorded her results in a clothbound journal.

“You will remain this way until the lad’s seed has taken,” said the witch, “at which point I will return to finalize the conception.”

Neither Arrow nor Yana had much say in the matter. Maire left the laboratory, left them standing locked together, Yana weeping, Arrow mumbling repeated apologies. Maire’s hold on Yana remained; however, she did seem able to move her head or wiggle her limbs in a very slight fashion.

“Yana,” Arrow breathed.

She shook her head.

“Yana, we must attempt to escape.”

“Don’t . . . please, leave me be . . .”

“Yana, before Maire comes back—”

Yana screamed, shuddered against him. “Get away, get off, oh, Goddess, I can’t take anymore!”

Arrow groaned inwardly, suppressing the urge to join Yana in tears. He knew from his dreams that she had spent the last hundred years in captivity, as a slave; he could only imagine the number of times she’d been taken advantage of. The men in the keep, Gerri—and now me.

“Yana,” he said, softly. “More terrible things await us if we do not break free. You *must* come to your senses.”

Yana cried for a moment longer. Then, merely trembling, resting her chin on his shoulder: “Tameran told me he had a

plan. He came to me on the night my village was raided. He told me to come here, told me that I would have to face great hardship, but . . . he promised I would be protected.” She scrunched up her face. “He lied.”

“Oh, Yana.” Arrow felt an overwhelming pang of sorrow. Though he had admittedly developed a crush over the years, and had often imagined making love to Yana (strictly as a fantasy), never had he envisioned the experience to manifest itself as such. He was supposed to be her savior; instead he was a hindrance.

He tightened his gut, cleared his throat. “I am sorry about what has happened, but we must get ourselves out of this, lest we allow Maire to abuse us further.”

“There is no escape,” Yana said, raising her head and locking her gaze with Arrow’s. “We might hide around the castle for a short while, but we will be found. Especially since . . .” Fresh tears welled in her eyes. “Oh, Goddess forgive me . . . I killed him, Arrow. The servants will bring him breakfast, and once they see . . . it will be terrible.”

“Who did you kill?” Arrow asked, spine prickling.

“Lord Kelvin. The bastard took me to his bed for the last time, and I killed him. I didn’t mean to, it’s just . . . perhaps the madness of being here so long has finally taken its toll. Oh, Arrow. We truly are doomed to drift along in this insane null world forever, aren’t we?”

“Not if we *try*,” Arrow persisted. “Please, Yana—can you move at all?”

Yana blinked. Arrow felt her shudder against him in a subtle fashion. “Not really.”

Arrow studied the laboratory, picking out the details in

the smoky firelight, and there, on a table cluttered with every manner of trinket imaginable, were Maire's dolls—a miniature Arrow, a miniature Yana, their eerily-realistic bodies provocatively intertwined.

"Over there," he said. "On the table. The dolls—Maire's retainers."

Yana followed his gaze. "I see . . . but how can we reach them?"

Arrow strained his neck and peered down the length of Yana's body, saw that the muscles of her legs were flexed firmly. Maire's spell, while limiting Yana in one respect, was also keeping her on her feet, keeping her balanced. "You are unbound. If you can maneuver over to the table and knock your retainer free, you might crack the spell. You would then be able to release me."

"But . . . but I can't move."

Yana's arms were still linked above Arrow's shoulders; he shrugged, started wriggling about. "Try to let go of me."

At first nothing happened. Arrow could feel the slight slithering of Yana's arm muscles as she tried to let go of him, but it wasn't enough. Becoming impatient, and not to mention the slightest bit frantic, Arrow boldly thrust his hips forward—and, amazingly, caused Yana to stumble backward a small handful of steps.

"Oh!" she cried, her torso wavering, becoming knotted as she instinctively tried to balance herself—no easy feat, as her arms seemed dead at her sides. She didn't fall, though.

"Sorry," Arrow said, noting her glare as he caught his breath. "I meant no insult in, er, pushing you away like that."

Yana looked down at herself. With a look of great determ-

ination on her face, she managed to jerk one arm, then the other. Without repeated effort, however, they remained lifeless. Dead weight.

"Perhaps if you pivot at the waist," Arrow suggested, "you will force yourself to fall forward, and your legs will react to keep you from falling down. If you do this in the direction of the table . . ."

Nodding, Yana twisted towards the table, setting her jaw and jerking her abdomen so that her upper half slouched forward. It was an odd spectacle, bending at the waist, forcing her legs to compensate, jerking forward a step or two, straightening, and repeating the process. Eventually, she reached the table, panting as she struggled to lift one of her arms high enough so that she could rest it on the tabletop. Then she worked, torso tensed, buttocks clenched, skin gleaming with the sweat of her labor, to move her hand across the table's surface, inching towards the paired dolls. Two-thirds of the way there, she stopped, her head suddenly lolling forward.

Arrow swallowed. "Yana?"

She barely had the breath to speak. "I . . . can't . . . go on. My strength . . . has left me."

"You are almost there, Yana. Look. *Look.*"

Yana remained still, her breath coming in great gasps. For a moment Arrow feared she was going to pass out, but just as he was going to call her name, she lifted her head, steeled herself, and, with what could only be described as the mother of all battle cries, extended her entire torso across the table, knocking the dolls to the floor in one fell swoop. The dolls fell apart—

—and the spell was broken (as was evidenced by the relaxing of Yana's arms and legs).

As an added bonus, Arrow's ankles and wrists were released as well (Maire's knots, apparently, had been tied using magic alone). He fell forward, onto hands and knees, every joint in his body complaining. Nevertheless, he quickly got to his feet and, wiping the sweat from his brow, turned to see Yana still laying sprawled face-down on the table. He rushed to her, helped her up; she was breathing heavily, her cheeks flushed, but there was a smile on her lips.

"You are strong," Arrow said.

Yana snorted disdainfully. "Rather, I have come to loathe this place. I want out. More than anything, *I want out.*"

Despite her exhaustion, Yana was able to stay on her feet without Arrow's help. She gathered her clothes, put them on. Arrow's own coverings were nowhere to be found, so he improvised by filching a spare, dung-colored robe that was hanging on a peg near the laboratory entrance.

After the two of them had dressed, they stood together over their likenesses.

"What should we do with these?" Arrow asked, picking up his retainer, marveling at the lifelike qualities of the skin.

"She can always make more," said Yana. "But at the very least, if we destroy ours, we can stave off her influence for a while."

Arrow nodded, threw his doll to the floor and stamped it with his foot. It bled—and suddenly he felt himself engulfed in agonizing pain. Unable to help himself, he fell against the wall and clutched his head in his hands. Then, as quickly as the pain had come, it subsided. Arrow looked up and saw

Yana holding his doll in her hands—or, rather, she was holding the doll's head in one hand, and the torso in the other.

"The connection had to be completely broken," she explained. "I've watched Maire do this before." She handed him her own doll. "Now, do mine. Make it quick."

Arrow complied, decapitating Yana's doll in a quick, efficient manner. She bore the pain well, only gasping for a moment before steadying herself and nodding.

"We should leave," she said. "Maire will be back soon."

Arrow headed for the door, but Yana stopped him. "There'll be guards out there. We should leave by the window. I know how to get back in from the outside."

Yana led him to the rear of the laboratory, to where there was a curtained window just above a tall bookshelf. Both Arrow and Yana were lithe and light; they scaled the shelf with little trouble (though they did knock off a dusty volume or two in the process) and pulled the curtain aside, revealing a gaping darkness beyond. Yana went first, Arrow following close behind, out of Maire's playroom and into the pitch-black void.

Night in the null world.

* * *

The commotion roused Matthew from a light sleep. Gerri was chattering with someone near the keep entrance—a page, evidently, who nodded in Matthew's direction. "Lady Maire will take the fullblood now."

The guards, though disturbed from their naps, smiled enthusiastically and started across the keep, towards the cage.

“Look, *look!*” Matthew hissed, backing into the cage and pressing himself against Darius. “This is what we get for sitting around waiting for the dust to settle! The bitch has finished off Arrow and is looking for fresh meat!”

“Given our circumstances,” Darius replied, “there was no other rational solution. However . . .” He held up his hands—his *unbound* hands. “I have been working to defeat my bonds the entire time.”

Matthew’s jaw dropped. “As I was saying, your perseverance is second to none. Now, untie me—quick!”

Darius did so, but there wasn’t much time to prepare an attack plan before Gerri and Clive, axes at the ready, were at the cage door.

“Uh, oh,” said Clive, snickering. “Looks like they’ve been busy.”

“No matter,” said Gerri, unlocking the cage. “The elf is as well-mannered as they come, and the fatso, why, he’d be out of breath before he got two steps along the way.”

Arlo booed.

Gerri lunged for Matthew. When he dodged out of reach, Clive stepped beside the cage and swung his axe between the bars, herding Matthew forward—right into Gerri’s arms.

“Darius!” Matthew cried. “Do something!”

The keep erupted into a thrum of protest, the prisoners rattling their cages and calling out in support of Matthew and Darius.

Determined to go down with a fight, Matthew started kicking and shouting and clawing at Gerri’s face—making such a raucous that he hardly noticed Arrow’s presence until he was upon Gerri, knife blade held at the man’s neck.

"Release him," Arrow ordered.

Whether or not Gerri had any intention of complying, Matthew took the initiative and kicked Gerri in the knee. Then, surprised by his own agility, and much to the delight of the prisoners, who screamed even louder, he wrenched free, whirled around and delivered a well-executed punch in Gerri's face.

"Clobber him!" Matthew shouted at Arrow as Gerri wavered on his feet, blood gushing from his nose.

"But—"

"Knock that pig-nosed Goliath to the ground!"

Arrow raised his sword, slammed the butt against the back of Gerri's head. There was a loud crack, followed by a meaty thud as Gerri toppled to the floor, unconscious.

"Hurrah, hurrah!" cried Arlo. "Down with the pigs!"

Matthew nodded approvingly at Arrow, glanced over his shoulder. Darius stood with his hands extended over Clive's writhing form.

"It is difficult," Darius said, "but I am able to exert my mana in a rudimentary form."

"Save your energy," Matthew said, and ducked quickly into the open cage, retrieved the rope used to bind Darius and himself. He bound Clive's wrists together and shoved him into the cage.

"Toss Gerri inside too," Matthew said to Darius. "And unlock all these cages. Free the prisoners."

A huge cheer went up. Matthew hefted Clive's axe and went over to where Yana, a nasty-looking dagger in her hand, had both Heath and the page cornered.

"Come now," Heath said, stepping towards Yana. "You're

much too pretty and delicate to be waving something like that around.”

Yana’s response was a quick step forward, a swipe of her dagger across Heath’s right arm. Blood beaded on his skin.

The page started bawling, covering his eyes with his hands.

Matthew stepped beside Yana, wielded his axe. “Go on. In the cage. Both of you.”

The page nodded, literally running across the keep and scurrying into the cage. Heath looked less willing to accede, though his attitude soon changed as, freed from their cages, Greensbough’s prisoners came to stand behind Matthew.

“Where in God’s name did you two come from?” Matthew asked Arrow once the guards had been locked away and their weapons appropriated.

Arrow gestured towards the keep’s perimeter, where the opening to a flue had been uncovered. “Yana knows how to get inside the walls.”

Yana nodded. “Maire has become careless in her old age—all the humans have, as you’ve probably already noticed. Too far outside their normal lifespan. Their minds wander.”

Arlo approached Matthew’s group. “Thank you, friends, for freeing us. It’s been far too long since last we caused a raucous.” He stretched, addressed Matthew directly: “Yana tells me you are her spirit guide—and Tameran’s summoner, to boot.”

Matthew squirmed, looking from Arlo to Yana (blushing brightly), to Arrow and Darius—all of whom were watching him expectantly—and back to Arlo again. “Well, er, right, then. Um . . . you wouldn’t happen to have any prophecies ly-

ing around that I could, er, refer to?"

Arlo laughed. "I assume you must find Tameran's resting place. If indeed you are part of his plan, he will no doubt guide you from there."

"And how do we do that?"

"Those are esoteric matters. I am merely a carpenter. But I suppose it's like anything else in this life—you won't know until the moment is right."

"Perhaps you should seek out a vision," Yana said. "You *do* have the gift."

Before Matthew could clarify his psychic ineptitude, Arlo stepped up to him and said, "We will distract Kelvin's men for as long as possible. May the Goddess give you her blessing." He turned then and rallied the prisoners, who gathered anything useful as a weapon and charged through the keep entrance.

At the far end of the chamber, where once upon a time an ornery well had delivered him into madness, Matthew got on all fours, feeling between the masonry with his fingers. "There must be something here. A crack, a clue."

"Portals are irrelevant at this point," Darius said, "and would defeat the purpose of this null world. Tameran allegedly imprisoned himself here with his people—his own flesh and blood, and not a facsimile. Therefore he must be a physical entity in this world."

"We can feel for his impression," Arrow suggested. "Along the walls, the floors."

"That could take days," Yana said.

Darius turned to Matthew. "You've had the dark dreams, yes?"

"Other people's dreams," Matthew answered. "Never my own."

"Whose?"

"Arrow's, Yana's . . . that's about it, I think."

"Mine?" Yana asked, incredulous.

"Yes—"

"Then perhaps," said Arrow, "if you concentrated, you could . . . you could—"

"I could dream Lord Tameran's dreams?" Matthew finished.

"That would be ideal."

Matthew rolled his eyes. "What, am I supposed to simply go into a trance like *that*?" He snapped his finger.

"The elven lullabies," Darius said, addressing Yana. "Do you know any?"

Yana nodded. "Yes. I could do for Matthew what I used to do for my brother, when sleep eluded him."

"What's an elven lullaby?" Matthew asked, nudging Arrow in the ribs.

"Good—but you will need privacy, quiet."

"They are lyrical spells passed along by village women," said Arrow. "They put you to sleep."

"I know a spot," Yana said, and took Matthew's hand, led him towards the flue. "It's outside, away from the castle. I hope you all can climb?"

Peering into the shaft, Matthew cringed and said, "This is going to be gym class all over again."

Yana started up. Then Arrow.

"We cannot afford to stand around any longer, Mr. MacBride," Darius said, gesturing for Matthew to follow

next.

“Yup,” said Matthew, stepping into the shaft and finding a foothold. “Just like gym class.”

* * *

Outside, it was darker than anything Matthew had ever known. Yana had led him and the others through a crack in the castle wall, and was now guiding them along a dry path leading away from Greensbough. Glancing behind him, Matthew could see the castle glowing in the distance, its light intersected by the skeletal branches of a forest long deprived of sunlight. Ahead . . . there was nothing. The only bit of light to be found came from his elven companions' cupped palms. Beneath their feet, dry grass crunched and crackled. Other than that, there were no crickets, no night birds, no sounds of any kind.

“We are close to the boundary,” Yana explained as the ground started sloping downward. “It is believed this realm sits on a piece of rock floating in limbo. No one comes out here for fear of taking the wrong path, slipping and falling into nothingness.”

Matthew swallowed, suddenly feeling unbalanced. “And so we're just going for a little jaunt on the edge, are we?”

“I know the way. I first came out here many years ago, to kill myself, but instead found a way through the barrier. Well, sort of, for you see away from the castle, the dark dreams come easier. I was able to contact Arrow.”

Matthew opened his mouth to say something else, but instead choked on his own words as the ground gave way

sharply and, misstepping, he stumbled forward.

The troop halted, everyone facing him as he hollered, "Look out!"

It took him a moment to regain his balance. When he did, Arrow grasped his shoulder.

"Are you all right, Mr. MacBride?"

"No," Matthew replied. "But I'll manage."

Yana faced forward again, took a few more careful steps before squatting and lowering herself into darkness. "Here—watch your step."

Matthew watched as one by one his companions followed. "Um, are you sure *this* isn't the boundary?"

"Don't worry!" Yana called. "There's another shelf of rock just below!"

Somewhat dubious, Matthew followed along, lowering himself over the edge. Despite his best effort, he ended up descending the dusty slope headfirst and landing haphazardly in a field of dead vines crisscrossing over cracked stone. The place was littered with bloated, calcified stone manifestations of elves standing, laying scattered, shattered, as far as the eye could see.

A graveyard for statues.

"It's just like your front yard," Matthew said as Arrow helped him up. "Except there are more here."

"And these are prone to an odd sort of decay," Darius pointed out, craning his neck to examine a goddess.

"This used to be a great promenade," Yana said, setting herself on a cracked pillar. "A stone rendering for every lord and lady to have lived on these grounds."

Darius studied the statue for a moment longer before he

approached Yana. “Mr. MacBride should begin.”

Yana nodded. “He will need to be relaxed.”

“Good,” said Matthew. “I was about to ask if I could take a nap anyway.”

“We will keep watch,” Arrow said.

He and Darius receded to the graveyard’s edge.

Matthew lay on the ground, beside Yana, and folded his hands over his belly. “Okay, let’s get your buddy Tameran out of bed so he can get us the hell out of here.”

“Close your eyes,” Yana said. “Don’t try to direct your thoughts. Let them come. Browse them at ease.”

It was difficult. The first things on Matthew’s mind were of a petty and unimportant nature: his missed TiVo schedule, his car, images of cheeseburgers, milkshakes, chocolate candy bars.

He relayed these mental burps to Yana.

“Alas,” she replied, giggling, “there is no food here.”

“How do people in the null world eat, then?”

“Sorcery. Maire enchants Kelvin’s table using mana from the prisoners. It’s a strenuous process that requires much stamina and concentration—and even then, the result is mostly illusion.”

“No wonder she looks her age,” Matthew muttered.

“Most witches are, in fact, young. They only appear aged because magic draws so heavily from personal mana. The body cannot replenish itself quickly enough, and so it begins to break down.”

“You mean she’s like one of those beach babe types who spent her teens soaking up so many rays that by the time she was twenty-five you couldn’t tell her nipples from her liver

spots?”

“She is certainly . . . strained,” Yana answered.

“How long can Maire keep Kelvin’s men alive with her magic?”

“Until she dies, presumably. There’s no way to know—hers is not a permanent solution. Even recycling our energies, we’re dying, slowly but surely. Sorcery is not a substitute for proper nutrition. No one dreams anymore because of it. We’re growing hollow.”

Matthew heard his stomach grumble. “I know exactly what you mean.”

Yana laughed again, softly, but sincerely. “You have such a tart sense of humor, don’t you?”

“I try.”

“How did you become involved with the gatekeepers?”

“I was depressed,” Matthew replied. “I wanted to end my life. Darius rescued me and nursed me back to health. The whole thing should have been a fluke, but now that I’ve seen what I’ve seen . . .” He opened his eyes, gazed up at Yana. He thought her very beautiful despite her unkempt hair and the ragtag condition of her clothes. “I still can’t believe I’m here with you guys, in this place, as horrible as it is, it’s also amazing.”

Yana took his hand, squeezed gently, smiled sadly. “This is true.”

“I can’t imagine what it was like for you. The night you ran away from Arkensaw. I . . . I was with you the whole time.”

Yana looked slightly embarrassed. “I know. I felt something, I was always sure. Someone other than Tameran.”

Matthew laughed nervously. “Apparently—and this is entirely within the past few days—I tend to latch onto other people’s souls, or auras, or whatever.”

“So, you are my spirit guardian ”

Matthew thought hard, tried to figure out if he’d worked any subtle, if incidental, magic the night of the raid. “It’s not something I understand. I mean, I’ve never done LSD. I don’t have an explanation for any of this.”

“Everything—*everyone*—has a purpose.”

“And only one in ten ever figures it out.”

Yana fixed her eyes on Matthew, blinked twice—and caught him quite by surprise as she suddenly ducked forward, kissed him on the cheek. Then, pulling back, looking away as she bit her lip, she said, “I have found my purpose: to repay my spirit guardian.”

“Oh?” Matthew’s mind was cleared of all extraneous thoughts; he could still feel Yana’s lips on his skin.

“On the night of the raid,” she continued, “you gave me the courage I needed to brave the night and the wilderness. During my stay here I’ve often thought of you. Even without your presence, the memory of that night in the woods has given me the strength to carry on. And now you’ve come at last, rescued me. I am forever grateful, Matthew.”

Though he was tired, dirty, far from debonair, Matthew couldn’t help but feel a swell of masculine pride. It was a strange feeling—he wasn’t usually the type of guy who had women swooning so readily, but here was this elven beauty, once-met and forever smitten by . . . what, exactly? His heart? His soul? His charm? Or had he merely been in the right place at the right time?

With all the poise and dignity of a ninth grader courting a first-semester crush, he said, “That’s cool.”

Yana smiled, looked like she was trying hard to suppress another blush. “I think you’re ready for the lullaby.”

“Okay.”

“What sort of story would you like to hear?”

Matthew thought for a moment. “Tell me about the elves—I mean, something besides the pre-approved stuff they teach in the human textbooks.”

Smoothing her hand over Matthew’s eyelids, Yana’s voice took on an altogether musical tone as she began:

“We came from Kyrth, the elven realm created by the god Taurus. Earth was to be an extension of our world. It was a ready-made planet, barren except for the plants and animals—we were to be the stewards and stewardesses, developing our own home away from home, but somewhere along the way we lost sight of our spiritual roots. Earth is a sensual world, a world of immense material treasures. We were overcome by the abundant pleasures, and so decided to make the world for ourselves, and not for our god. We created the race of men—servants, slaves, workers, and builders—to do for us what we didn’t want to do. We became as gods, in a sense, valuing our own satisfaction above all else. Worse, we bypassed the millions of seasons it takes to earn the knowledge and wisdom of the gods. We were adolescent in our actions.

“And the humans didn’t take lightly to their imposed inferiority. We limited them in every way imaginable, from their shortened lifespans, to their susceptibility to disease, to their rampant biological urges spurring them to become distracted by violent or carnal activities. Nevertheless, they

overcame such limitations through practice and perseverance. The great human leaders saw the rewards their people were being deprived of, and so they organized their numbers against us, killing our elders, burning our cities, raping our women.

“Your kind spread far and multiplied on their own, forming tribes, then villages, cities, kingdoms. As time passed, it became evident to the elves that they had made a grave mistake in trying to mold the Earth for themselves. They pleaded with Taurus for support, but he was so outraged by the state of his followers’ affairs that he left them to wallow in their own mistakes. He cut the elves off from Kyrth—forever.

“This, of course, meant the elves and the humans were to coexist in the same realm—a fate neither species much appreciated. The humans, though emancipated from their elven masters, were still mortal, and still at the mercy of time and the elements. Elves are mortal too, but we have the inborn ability to control our environment. Humans are not born with magic in the blood. So, when word spread about our abandonment, the humans decided to gain leverage in any way they could. They created tools to harvest our mana; they had their sons, our daughters interbreed in the hopes the offspring would inherit the elven strength, longevity, and beauty; they conquered this realm for their own using a makeshift form of magic: science.

“One could argue that the humans were merely responding in kind to the treatment they themselves had endured—but like any race, there are the good and the bad. Not all elves supported what our kin had done. Many of us were merely villagers, farmers, traders. We did not support our peers’

treatment of the human race . . . but we were nevertheless made to answer for the crimes of others.

“Wars were fought over land and resources. Many lives were lost. But because of certain cosmic rules forbidding divine intervention in all but the most devastating of circumstances, it was up to the humans and the elves to work through their differences alone. Many of us, weary of the conflict, chose assimilation. If you had some human blood in you, some connection to a human family, chances were you’d be spared during the raids. The rest of us fled to those places humankind finds distasteful—usually the deserts or the tundra.

“Tameran was born into a tribe of elven warriors. Greensbough had been their land for four-thousand seasons when the first human ships ran ashore, carrying with them a ruthless human conqueror named Beston. Kelvin was his warlord. His sorceress, Maire, had a unique way with magic that kept her and her consorts perpetually youthful through the use of elves as retainers—wells for mana slowly consumed by human elites. Most nobles each had their own retainers, most often young adults, or children—and here was a land rife with purebloods, previously untouched by humankind.

“Purebloods are known for having extremely potent magical abilities, and Tameran was no exception. When his brothers and sisters were captured or killed in battle, he carried on, traveling from village to village and uniting his people against the humans. The Last Battle, as you probably know it, lasted four-hundred years, only ending when the old world ended, for you see, in the background, human sorcerers—called scientists—were working to eradicate some of the

reasoning behind the war by disproving the existence of magic altogether. But without magic, elves are no longer elves—we might live and work and play, but our primary element would have been taken from us. Knowing this, Tameran gathered up as many of our kind as he could in those final moments . . . and he packed them away, safe, asleep between worlds until the day his summoners came to wake them up . . .”

Yana’s voice faded, and Matthew realized that during the storytelling, he’d been freed from his body, away from sore limbs, agonizing hunger pangs. Unaccustomed to navigating bodiless, it was only natural that he follow the flow and latch onto the person nearest at hand. It wasn’t his intention to invade Yana’s privacy, but there he was, slammed so quickly into a mental scene that he had no time to prepare himself: Yana and Arrow, naked, bucking against each other—but something was wrong. Arrow wasn’t looking at Yana; he had his eyes scrunched tightly shut, and he was gasping a prayer for mercy. Yana was equally apathetic, and cried out in misery as she felt the physical manifestations of her partner’s culmination—and yet she couldn’t help herself, couldn’t control the earnest thrusting of her pelvis to accommodate her own climax—

Matthew’s eyes flew open. Yana was still holding him, in the graveyard, but he could also hear and feel her in that other place, that nightmare where she was inexplicably driven to force herself upon Arrow.

Oh, Yana, he thought, shivering, unable to move.

She stroked his forehead. “It’s all right. I’m here. What do you see?”

I-I don't know. Arrow. I—we can't let go of him. He trailed off, uncertain as to whether or not he was speaking out loud or merely *thinking* he was speaking out loud. Regardless, there were tears in Yana's eyes, for she was undoubtedly thinking the thoughts Matthew was spying upon.

He forced himself off, up, and away. *That's none of my business*, he thought. *Not right now, anyway. What's important now is finding the elf king and stealing his thoughts so that we can wake him up and have him do whatever it is he's supposed to do to fix things.*

Matthew listened carefully, tuning out Yana's soft sobbing, as well as the more distant voices of Arrow and Darius, speaking in hushed tones . . . and he was able to hone in on a single noise, a single note emanating from the far end of the graveyard. It was a breath, a moan—utter silence that became deafening the instant it became aware someone was listening.

Here I am, it called.

Matthew did the spiritual equivalent of a lopsided somersault and felt himself diving into a whirlpool of thoughts and memories, moments packed away inside the cocoon of sleep, the elf king sitting cross-legged on his pavilion, the warrior-child splashing his brothers and sisters during a lunchtime swim in one of Oremwatt's many coves, the master sorcerer kneeling alone in darkness and conjuring up the first seeds of his null world—

—night. The quiet composure of nature close at hand, and, on the fringes, the distant thunder of twelve-billion footsteps, the vague shapes of men and machines, trampling, echoing in the leafy substance of the Earth.

Matthew found himself standing at the foot of a shallow

creek, where the cold solace of the moon trickled through the emerald leaves and branches of an immense forest. As he watched, a previously unnoticed resident awakened in the depths of the lagoon. Gently and without sound, the fragile surface of the water shimmered and then parted, the almost serpentine form of an elven boy revealing itself in the semi-darkness.

Tameran.

At first, the elf king merely floated on his back, his dark eyes glittering in the moonlight, sparkling droplets of water sequining his skin. Eventually he started breathing.

Matthew crouched. "Er, Tam—sir?"

Tameran blinked, came awake more fully. After a moment he swam to the mossy bank where Matthew waited and knelt on the ground. His eyes were heavy-lidded, his movements groggy; he was waking for the first time since the old world had receded.

"Matthew," he said, slicking back his hair and bowing humbly. "You have come at last."

"I, um . . ." Matthew scratched the back of his head and thought *he* should be the one bowing, not Tameran. "There are four of us—"

"Yes," said Tameran. "The gatekeepers, the village girl, and yourself."

Matthew nodded. "We've come to wake you up."

"I am ready, but tell me, is the new world . . . accepting?"

"I don't know," Matthew replied. "If by 'accepting' you mean is the world ready for a bunch of elves to suddenly appear on street corners across America . . . I don't know."

Tameran sighed, made a 360° turn, as if sizing up his

dream ward for the first time. “I see. Then . . . there is still strife?”

“A lot has happened in the last hundred years. There are still wars and murders and politicians lying to each other, but I guess things are better than they used to be. We have cars, cable TV, um . . . theme parks.”

“None of that will have meaning for my people,” Tameran said.

“Well, there’s going to have to be a little adjusting, sure —”

“We cannot stay here any longer, but to deliver my people into a world as alien to us as we are to you . . .” Tameran faced Matthew, and he looked, in this moment, like a frightened, helpless little boy about to take his first steps from his mother’s yard. “I fear I have made a grave miscalculation.”

“No, your, er, lordship—”

“Yes. I knew the old world was soon to pass, and I reacted instinctively. Instant gratification. No plan for what was to come after. My people sided with me on a promise of a new life, if only they were patient, if only they waited here with me for something that I did not properly conceptualize. We have suffered. Yana has suffered. When the wait was too long, I became restless.”

Matthew didn’t know what to say. Consoling centuries-old elf lords wasn’t his forte.

“We could merely remain asleep,” Tameran said. “Until such time as humanity has worked through its problems.”

“But that’s crazy,” Matthew said. “The world’s never going to be perfect, and to wait, like, a million years for every-

one to evolve to a point where prejudice and violence is obsolete . . . that's nuts. Besides, you're *Tameran*, the elf king. Your people will follow you if you wake them now or a thousand years from now."

Tameran laughed. "I was merely a warrior, one of many. I just happened to be the one the history books decided to immortalize."

"Yeah, and I just happened to be the fat-ass who slipped through the cracks and fell into this shit-hole." Matthew stood, put his hands on his hips. *If all the little fucker needs is a speech*, he thought, *then a speech he'll get!* "And it never would have happened if I hadn't tried to break the mold. Sure, my idea was suicide, with my ex-girlfriend calling the shots, but you know what? Now that I look back, it wasn't so bad. It only got that way because I ignored the obvious for so long. Your majesty, if you stay here like this, Kelvin and his cronies will continue to feed off their own disharmony, you'll be tossing and turning in your sleep, and things will just fester until another part of your plan rots away and some other poor sap is sucked into the null world, just like I was. The time to act is *now*."

Matthew held out his hand; Tameran took it, rose to his feet, his expression morphing, sadness dissolving, determination replacing fear. "What you speak is true. I . . . I suppose it has merely been so long. I will make for myself, my people, what circumstances have not provided."

"I'm glad to hear that, your majesty," Matthew said.

Tameran scowled. "Please, call me Tameran."

Matthew nodded. "You got it—now, what do we need to do to get our asses out of Dodge?"

Tameran reached up and brushed his hand across Matthew's forehead—

—at which point Matthew's eyes snapped open, and he sat up in Yana's lap, back in the stonework graveyard.

"I know where Tameran is," he began, but stopped when he felt Yana go rigid. "What . . . ?"

She didn't have to answer, for at that moment Darius and Arrow came scuffling into view. Dusty and bloodied, they were being herded by a quartet of guards—fronted by Kelvin and Maire.

Matthew heard Yana gasp, "Goddess . . . it's impossible!"

"Not at all, my dear strumpet," Maire called, stepping forward in the torchlight and holding up a miniature doll version of Kelvin. "You may have killed our dear lord and master, but you forgot to destroy his retainer."

Kelvin nodded in agreement, though his eyes looked nowhere in particular.

("You killed him?" Matthew asked, seeing but not believing.)

"Now then," Maire continued. "Guide us to the resting place of Tameran, the elf king."

Matthew got to his feet, glanced quickly at Yana for an explanation. But she was mesmerized by Kelvin's presence, not looking at anyone or anything else, even as one of the guards prodded her to start walking.

"Get a move on, all of you," Maire ordered. "And no tricks, unless you wish to die out here in the dark."

With little recourse, Matthew forced his legs into motion and began leading the way to Tameran's sanctuary.

* * *

Angry with himself for allowing the humans to usurp him and his companions, Arrow said little as Matthew led the group through the promenade. All his years of waiting, studying, and training had produced a mock-warrior hardly worthy of being even a gatekeeper. He glanced at Yana every so often, but she never looked back. Her eyes were always fixed on Lord Kelvin—the novelty of unearthing Tameran’s resting place seemed to be peripheral to having a dead man animated as such.

(Interestingly, what worried Arrow the most was that every time he happened to step close to Yana, she shied away, moved quickly ahead, or outright placed Matthew between herself and Arrow. It got to the point where he wanted dearly to remove her from the group, pull her aside and somehow exorcise what had happened between them back in Maire’s laboratory. However, these sorts of thoughts he attributed to his human half, his carnal half, obsessing over a fantasy that most certainly was never meant to come to fruition. He was not Yana’s hero, he would never be her lover; he was merely the person who’d happened to receive her distress call. In that vein, he considered himself fortunate to have been a part of her life.)

The sanctuary was little more than a mound of dirt and crumbled pillars, its entrance an obscured hole that had, at one time, been an actual doorway.

Matthew stopped several paces off and announced, “This is the place.”

“Very well, then,” said Maire, motioning for Matthew’s

guard to nudge him forward. "In you go—all of you."

Arrow fell into step behind Matthew. "Are you sure it is safe, Mr. MacBride?" he asked as they descended a narrow stairwell.

"As sure as you are," Matthew replied.

The stairwell led downward for several minutes before opening into a broad, high-ceilinged chamber, empty, save for a long-parched fountain that lay crumbling in the center. The walls contained a multitude of niches; in each niche rested a statue modeled after its elven reference. The niche at the rear of the chamber contained a statue that was an unmistakable rendering of Lord Tameran.

Maire made a circuit of the chamber, peering here and there, touching this or that. When she returned to where Matthew and his crew were standing, she spat and said, "Why, this is merely a shrine. They're all over this godforsaken rock. There's nothing in here!"

Indeed, Arrow could find nothing compelling about the chamber beyond the magnificent stonework—but Matthew seemed to know otherwise. As Arrow and the others watched, he approached Tameran's niche, put his hand on the elf king's statue—and awoke a thunderous jolt that reverberated within the chamber and brought everyone to their knees. With his hands cupped tightly over his ears, Arrow watched as Tameran's statue began to crack and crumble, bits flaking away to reveal glistening skin, matted hair underneath . . . and in a moment the elf king stepped free of his stone casing, stumbled forward into the firelight.

Into Maire's arms.

"There, there," the witch said, coaxing and coddling him.

"You're absolutely frigid!" She quickly removed her robe, draped it about Tameran's bare body. "I must say you've given us quite a chase—how clever of you to choose an ordinary everyday human as your summoner!"

Tameran rubbed his eyes. He glanced at Maire, at Matthew, then at everyone else. "This is unexpected."

"Don't you worry. You just get yourself warmed up, then we'll discuss the details."

"Details?"

"Why, the details concerning our deliverance, of course."

Tameran removed himself from Maire's grasp. "There has been a misunderstanding."

"You are a benevolent king, are you not? Yours has always been a mission of preservation rather than conquest—hence the Sleep, correct?"

"The Sleep," Tameran said, "was a last resort against the invading humans. The spell was for my people. It has nothing to do with you."

Maire's demeanor darkened. "You imprisoned us in the castle, and then spirited us here, into this purgatory, trapped for the last hundred years. I think your spell has a great deal to do with us."

"Greensbough is no ordinary castle. It was built to house soul as well as body—it was never intended as a guest house for humans. Your kind vibrate to a different frequency. You could plunder the rest of the land, but it was always well-known that Greensbough was *ours*, that there were dire consequences for humans who trespassed. You came anyway."

"Stubborn," Maire growled. "Stubborn little brat."

Muscles tensed, stance at the ready, Tameran shrugged off

Maire's cloak and put several steps' distance between himself and the witch. "Regardless of the events leading up to our current predicament, I am only one man—"

"You are but a boy whose voice hasn't even changed yet!"

"—and I have no magical influence over your people. I can unmake this world, but only those wrapped by the original spell will be returned to the Earth realm. Those without elven blood . . ."

Maire rose to her feet. At her whim, Kelvin took a menacing step towards Tameran. "Perhaps you misunderstand: I am not *requesting* that you send us home."

"Even if I wanted to," said Tameran, "I could not transfer your people along with mine."

Maire laughed hysterically. "Is all of this meaningless, then? Are we doomed to remain here for all eternity?"

"Once my spell is complete, this null world will cease to exist."

"Ah, a fate worse than death? Is that it?" Maire had Yana's guard bring her forward, holding his blade against her throat. "I think you're bluffing boy. A sorcerer with the power to encapsulate a thousand of his people in a world of his own making surely has the power to extend his magic beyond a choice few friends and family."

Arrow squeezed the fabric of his robe and shifted from foot to foot. One of Maire's men was slinking up behind Matthew; Kelvin's corpse was edging his way towards Tameran; Yana whimpered in her captor's arms—Arrow could take no more. Borrowing from Matthew's act-now-think-later style, he charged forward, leaped at Maire.

The witch was quick to respond. With a deft manipula-

tion of her doll, Kelvin intervened. Arrow struck him in the face, leaving behind a grotesque wound, but Kelvin was otherwise unaffected.

“Fool!” laughed Maire. “The dead feel no pain!”

Kelvin swooped forward, grabbed Arrow by neck and crotch, and threw him halfway across the chamber without the slightest trouble. He landed (quite painfully) in a heap on the floor—but not without reward, for he could see Tameran taking advantage of the diversion, slipping off to one side and picking something off the ground.

“Watch him!” Maire called—too late, for at that moment Tameran made a quick, efficient flick of his wrist, sending a shard of stone into the face of the guard who’d been stalking Matthew. With a sickening pop, one of the man’s eyes was dislodged from its socket.

Then chaos ensued.

Kelvin went for Matthew, toppling him onto the floor. As both men wrestled, Tameran grabbed the wounded guard’s axe and, without the slightest hesitation, drove the blade through the man’s chest. Then he whirled around and pounced on Kelvin, first cutting off his legs, and then, when Matthew was able to throw the corpse clear, lopping off arms and head.

Arrow got to his feet. Nearby, Yana had started to struggle, and bit her captor’s arm—hard. Though he didn’t let go, his sword was no longer at Yana’s throat.

Seizing the opportunity, Arrow went for Yana, grabbed her by the hand and yanked her from the guard’s grasp as he kicked the man in the abdomen. It wasn’t really an effective attack—but, then, it didn’t have to be, because at that mo-

ment the chamber became illuminated by an unearthly light that stopped everyone in their tracks.

Darius and Maire were engulfed in crackling halos.

Their battle circles.

At this point, the surviving guards dropped everything and fled. Matthew gathered up a torch in one hand, an axe in another, and jogged over to where Arrow and Yana were.

“The shit’s *really* hit the fan now,” he gasped, handing Arrow the torch.

Yana let go of Arrow, attached herself to Matthew. “Can he take her on? His palms—”

The first blow rang out like a thunderclap. Her corpse-soldier now useless, Maire had thrown away her Kelvin doll and was now having at Darius with all her magical might. The two parried each other’s attacks, which took on varying forms, from bolts of lightning to pseudo-swords to raw waves of mana.

And Master, Arrow thought, *with his mutilated palms . . .* Even now, he could see the strain in Darius’ face, the physical wear on his body.

Over in his corner of the chamber, Tameran remained still, braced for battle, but otherwise neutral. A pureblood of his caliber could no doubt have snuffed out a human sorceress without much trouble, but it occurred to Arrow that if Tameran joined the fray, he would be expending energy necessary for the unmaking of his null world spell.

“What’s he doing?” Matthew asked, jerking his thumb at Tameran.

Arrow explained the situation.

“Can’t we do anything?”

“It is unwise to interfere until the battle circles recede.”

Matthew uttered a human profanity, his frustration manifesting itself in the way he gripped his axe, the way he kept glancing at Tameran for some sign of action. He looked utterly helpless—and yet Arrow could see how Yana had warmed to him rather than to Arrow. *I am the dreamer, he is the hero. He's lived a life, I have only imagined one.* Yana had had to forestall hers for four-hundred seasons, playing the girl of his dreams in order to get across her message—but that's all she was: the girl of his dreams. Now, after all her waiting, she needed affirmation from the man who'd been there for her since the beginning—her spirit guide.

But again, Arrow realized, there was his human half, thinking the wrong things at the wrong time.

He focused on the battle. Darius fought gallantly, but it was only a handful of turns before his sphere abruptly receded and he collapsed to the floor. His hair was streaked with white.

“Foolish,” Maire breathed, “expending your energies as such. You've all but burnt yourself out—and your precious lord, look how he stands frozen! He knows in order to face me he will have to sacrifice the mana necessary to whisk you all home!”

She pounced on Darius; he was able to throw up a defensive sphere, but he remained on the ground, his posture rapidly weakening—and as Maire pushed harder, the strain on Darius became even more evident, his hair continuing to whiten, his face becoming streaked with wrinkles, fined-lined at first, and then deeper as the mana was squeezed out of him.

Matthew could watch no further. Arguing with Yana to

“let me have at that bitch,” he started forward—

“*No.*”

—and stopped again at Tameran’s command.

“I will handle this.” The elf king stepped forward, spread his arms, summoned a mana sphere so brilliant its light filled every corner of the chamber. Small in stature, and naked, to boot, but crackling with power, hair standing on end, muscles flexing, writhing, Tameran was a sight to behold as he stepped between Darius and Maire, gently shoving aside the former and knocking the latter so violently against the wall that it cracked aloud. The witch fell to the ground, nothing more than a pile of whitened hair resting atop a crumpled robe.

Tameran’s sphere faded; the chamber was once again delivered into subdued torchlight.

“Is she . . . ?” Matthew began.

Tameran moved in cautiously, nudged Maire’s robe with his foot. He nodded solemnly.

Meanwhile, Arrow had crossed the chamber, and was now crouched over Darius. The man was in a terrible state, aged well beyond his years.

“Master,” Arrow whispered, tears welling in his eyes.

Darius opened his eyes. He glanced around the chamber, then frowned at Arrow. “You fools, are you still here?”

“Of course, Master.”

“You should have saved yourselves.”

Arrow shook his head, and was about to voice his protest when he heard a raucous coming from behind. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Tameran jumping back as Maire quite literally rose from the dead—well, maybe not Maire herself,

but something dark and massive and fearsome. It billowed out of the witch's mouth, nostrils, and ears, taking the form of a beast with the body of a grossly musclebound man, the head of a bull.

Recognition sparked in Arrow's mind; he needed no further instigation as he scooped up Darius in his arms—

—and, along with the others, ran for his life.

“Holy shit, *boly shit!*” cried Matthew. With Yana in tow, he charged up the stairs—no matter that his heart felt like it was about to burst through his chest, that his legs felt like massive slabs of meat on the verge of going bad; he'd only gotten a glimpse back in the keep, back when Arrow and himself had first fallen into the well, but he was sure this was the same creature, and he had no desire to make its acquaintance.

Yana and himself were first out into the graveyard. Arrow, carrying Darius, followed close behind, with Tameran bringing up the rear.

Yana called light.

“All right, what now?” asked Matthew. Down below, he could hear the beast coming to life, snorting, beating its feet against the ground.

“We can stay and fight,” said Tameran, “but that will only weaken me further.”

“How long will it take to work your spell?”

“Only a moment.”

Matthew nodded. “Let's get to it, then.”

“There is a problem.” Tameran sighed. “In defeating Maire, I drained myself considerably.”

“So, we're stuck, then?”

“Not necessarily.”

It was Darius who’d spoken.

“I can serve as Tameran’s battery,” he said. “What remains of my mana, as well as my flesh and bone, can be converted into the energy needed to perform the spell.”

“No, Master—” Arrow started.

Darius held up a withered hand. “Look at me, Arrow. I am near death anyway. It is merely a choice now, to see to it that my kin are set free, or to waste away in some corner of this accursed null world until Lord Tameran can devise another method.”

It took a moment—but when Arrow heard the bull man’s horrendous roar echoing up the stairwell, he nodded and set Darius on his feet.

“We will need to join hands,” Tameran said.

Matthew slipped his left hand into Yana’s, his right into Arrow’s. Tameran spoke for a moment in the elven tongue, the closed his eyes and started humming deep in his throat as the details of the promenade got thinner and thinner, like the fade-out at the end of a movie—and just before everything winked out completely, Matthew saw, out of the corner of his eye, the bull man emerging from the shrine, charging at him and his friends . . . stumbling onto hands and knees when it discovered there was nothing left to attack.

On a hoarse, agonized, long-held note, the null world blinked out of existence.

The sky was overcast as, one by one, the elves of Greensbough—and their human summoner—came awake on the edge of the Pacific, the cusp of Cambria.

The castle, the mansion, the null world were all gone. Greensbough's former hillside was now discretely covered by a canopy of foliage that had waited a century to encroach upon the final relic of the old world.

Matthew got to his feet, checked to make sure his arms and legs were still attached. Beside him, Arrow was kneeling in the sand, his former master's clothes bundled tightly in his arms. There was grief and triumph in his expression. Beyond, all along the shoreline, there were the refugees, some sitting huddled, others poking around for coverings, others watching Matthew and his group for some sign, some formal announcement that their journey was complete.

Yana faced the ocean. Then, bursting into tears, she hugged Matthew tight. "It's so . . . bright."

He held her, stroked her hair.

Momentarily, Tameran came over to where they were standing and said, "We will need to organize ourselves."

Matthew nodded. "Immigration's going to have a field day."

"Immigration?"

"Human politics—new world bullshit."

"I see." Tameran bit his lip. "You will have to guide my first steps here in this world—if that is acceptable."

Matthew shrugged. "Hey, I'm going to need a few days off work anyway."

Yana smiled, took his hand in hers, and faced the coast. She bowed to Tameran. "We should get started, my lord."

“Yes,” said the elf king. “We should.”

A seagull squawked overhead. Without the slightest clue as to what he was going to say, Tameran climbed onto a rock, raised his arms high, and addressed his people.

