

Agnosis

Darren R. Hawkins

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For my sons and for the man I used to be...

1.

The spider was fat.

As all hoary predators, it was alternately brazen and sly, cagey and belligerent, compensating with guile what it had lost in to age and the ravages of time. Into a meticulously rendered universe of milky matrices and opalescent geometry, Dorian fluttered after it, tickling skeins, tugging at anchors, freefalling through the immeasurable vastness of a cerulean space. His palms were damp, his fingers trembled. The spider might have been bloated and limping along on legs so old and cockeye hacked that the compilers couldn't even decipher its business anymore, but it was wise, and if it suspected for even a moment that he was stringing it along, it would scurry away into one of its endless black warrens of binary detritus where he might never see it again. Dorian was savvy to all the latest tricks, but the spider was the master of this environment. It had likely been feeding on the network a dozen years before he had assembled his first Vorman-perl script.

That was what he believed, at least, that the spider was ancient, an unearthed artifact, splendid in its antiquity. And crafty. Ever so crafty to have survived undetected for so long. So he had come after it with guile of his own. He'd been laying his traps for almost two weeks, off and on, salting packets of bait along the back alleys of the data structure, each bundle of code a lexicon of chaos text that was more noise than signal, but noise pregnant with its own nefarious structure. Tasty bits

like the pixellated approximation of a skittering housefly. He taught himself what the spider liked, what it ignored, what it processed and what it left behind once the gorging was done. Then he built his own database of its tastes, and refined his applications to suit the particular interests of his target. He watched and waited, measured the spider's strikes in picoseconds and studied the web vibrations as it dragged its soft and pale underbelly along the dynamic datascape.

And all the time, he scuttled along surreptitiously behind the beast and plugged the holes it had chewed in the fabric of the network. He learned many of its favorite paths and its trapdoor escape routes. He buried his sensors and dug his holes, lined the walls of data-dense caverns with pungi sticks of Escher algorithms and Moebius logic.

He bided his time.

And waited.

Made guesses.

Made himself miserable, in fact.

He'd only gotten a good look at it once. No, that wasn't true. It hadn't even been a proper look, just the poor facsimile of a faded image. The spider was a thing of nightmares, line after line of the most scabrous and key-jacked code he'd ever seen. Old perl, some original pre-Protocol Vickers Standard, a sublime injection of Gancet and R-ASP synthesis logic. He'd somehow snapshotted the tail end of it, a lucky cache dump in the fraction of a second before the temp logs evaporated, and what he had extracted from even that bare snippet had kept him busy for days untying logical knots and parsing impossible strings. So much work just to deconstruct a thing that should never have been. It was like excavating some antediluvian monstrosity.

The jack who had written it was a pure genius.

But Dorian had it now. Almost. He'd tracked it here, to a confluence of nodes where the spider peered out from an undocumented port with a dead ping address. The port was left over from some decade forgotten upgrade most likely, and had been elegantly concealed by code-magery Dorian still didn't properly understand.

He watched as slowly, stealthily, the hidden gate to its lair swung open. A blast of camouflaging nonsense digits spewed

along the system backbone, and the spider peered out into the electric night, sniffing for the scent of prey, then shuffled along its favorite subnet, wicked and wary and full of malice.

Dorian heaved his orientation from render to the static universe, where he could study the beast from a careful distance and read his passive diagnostics the way a careful angler might gauge the wind or decipher the ripples in a rustic pool.

He couldn't help but be nervous. Likely as not, he only had one shot at quelling this threat.

This was what he knew: the spider liked neuraloptics. It liked metempsychosis. It really liked mysticism and Trismegistus and eschatechnology. But most of all, it liked zap and entropy and Ravillean physics. Those were the things it couldn't resist.

So Dorian had built his snare: a partial treatise on neural cognition seasoned throughout with a randomized Pythagorean diatribe in poorly translated Greek. A zap depot technical manual--unstrung into 32-bit discretes, then strung out again, only backwards. Odds and ends mostly, the product of all his maddening statistical analysis.

But the spider tasted none of this, not yet.

What it scented was a raw copy of the unauthorized Strand pirate of Raville's thesis defense from the late '70's. Highly apocryphal. This was the lure. If it was careful, as Dorian expected it would be, the spider would dart out from its safe haven, perpetrate a smash and grab against the curious bit sectors that had attracted its attention, then retreat back to its port to devour and digest in safety. But once it ventured near enough, there would be the enticing aroma of zap, of Hermes, and other cognitive delights. Tempted, it would draw near to investigate. It would attempt to sample, to poke and prod the curious file. Eventually, it would dig itself in to suck at the sweet fountain of a carefully crafted logical matrix. And so it would trigger the trap: an endless loop of data paralysis that mainlined into an abyss of random keywords that would last as long as the power grid. The spider would gorge until it popped.

It was a good plan. A sneaky plan.

But there was also some risk. Dorian had a malicious

counterscript ready to plug its port with a cascading hexadecimal screen to confuse the spider and cut off its escape. That was well and good, standard infiltration script containment stuff, but what he couldn't predict was how the spider would respond to such a direct frontal assault. Thus far, their game had been cat and mouse. He had made assumptions about the nature of the beast for which he had no supporting evidence. Most worrying, perhaps, was that he couldn't be absolutely certain that there wasn't a cache-delete routine in the spider's grab bag of tricks. Once Dorian slammed the door on its escape, it was distinctly possible that he wouldn't be able to get that door open again, and while he fought with the lock, the port could very well be mass purging the entire trove of purloined files the spider had been hoarding. Dorian might never know what it had been mining to these many insidious years.

And to make matters worse, there was always the possibility that he might lose track of the spider itself when the digits began to fly. It would have other lairs that he hadn't discovered or outright evacuation nodes that would bounce it off the network and back to wherever it had come from, taking all its harvested bits along with it.

He just didn't know, and the not-knowing was maddening.

That was why Dorian didn't want to just kill the spider. He wanted to autopsy it. He needed to know where it came from and what it thought it was doing. Killing it outright was as good as losing, because otherwise he might never learn how his network had been breached.

So he watched and he waited, a little more breathless than he would have liked to admit. He tracked the spider's progress from bait packet to bait packet, devouring the happy little breadcrumbs farther and farther away from its lair.

The spider didn't resist. It couldn't really. It was, after all, just a rogue application, a packet of ancient and obsolete languages, whose only real defense after all this time had been stealth and its ability to shuffle bits back and forth with such meager throughput that the network efficiency routines didn't notice it.

It heaved its ponderous bulk along the logical path of a

backwater subnet, still deceptively quick on its fat and agile constructs, drawing farther and farther still from its safe haven. At random intervals, it sprang a tremulous flicker of diagnostics ahead, wary of data sentinels, competing scavengers, or security protocols. It sensed nothing.

And gently as the drop of a curtain, the trap snapped shut. The gatekeeper script executed and sealed the port behind it. Dorian ground his teeth together and waited for the signal that a mass purge had been initiated, but none came. If the spider noticed, it gave no sign. It lumbered to the edge of the pit Dorian had dug for it, snuffled the ground for clues, then plunged headlong into the abyss.

It sucked deep and it sucked long.

Dorian geeked into datascape just to get a look at it. The spider rendered as a great gelatinous glob, all black eyes and reticulated limbs, and it was still very much alive and kicking. It heaved against the jaws of the trap, buried to the thorax in binary mire, back legs angled toward the blank sky, clenching and releasing in a mindless autonomic rhythm. But there was no escape. The moment the spider had executed into its extraction routines, Dorian's pit had logged the read/analysis-request and launched a standard trollware defense counteragent which immediately began opening the spider in a dozen analysis tool formats. Bit generators strafed its internal code segments with randomly generated spurious characters. The pit itself fired up quik-load bitstream accelerators that dug into the spider's buffer array like so many jagged hooks and flooded its SAM stacks at an alarming, transfixing, and ultimately inescapable rate. It was the equivalent of piercing the spider's hide with a score of surgical needles and hyper-injecting into its heart a redundantly lethal dose of targeted neurotoxin.

The spider shuddered once more, like a man shown the head of the gorgon, and turned to stone.

Dorian geeked out again, ran a routine capture and quarantine on the address block, and sat back in his chair. He clasped his hands together behind his head and sighed. He'd really hoped for something more challenging, more epic after so much time and effort.

An immensely unsatisfying task, all in all.

During the several minutes it took to set up and begin delivering a recover-and-archive ghost of the dead port, he amused himself with an anonymous node crack of a server at the regional offices of the ubiquitous one-stop megamarket chain, Hometown Mart, using an exploit he had picked up off the Strand from a well raved and reliable jack in North Delhi Enclave who called himself Ahura Mazda. Click-click-tat, and the ready-for-release quarterly profit transfer was diverted from corporate coffers to those of a bobcat silicate mining colony in Eudora that the day's newswire had mentioned was suffering under a combination of factors ranging from general financial destitution and the collapse of the Universal Health Organization, to the skyrocketing cost of antivirals and the plain old money-grubbing of pharmaceutical conglomerates. The outbreak of encephalitis was almost incidental.

He resisted the urge to tag a snarky *Thanks for your generous contribution!* encrypted NFO file to his hack for Hometown's IT flunkies to pore over, and finally settled for authorizing the funds transfer with his customary jackid--j0n d33. By the time they parsed what had happened, it would be too late to stop the (proprietary) medical scheme zap to Eudora (an order he had courteously logged and retro-dated for immediate transmission first thing in the morning from the Hometown pharmacy orders database). They could find and read his crack hx on any of the public lists if they really wanted to know why. It wasn't exactly anarchy, but a few dozen dying moners and their families who would otherwise have perished would get their hands on the meds they desperately needed. Screwing Hometown in the process was just a bonus.

It wasn't his fault that the promised paradise of the post-zap universe had failed so miserably.

A short time later, Amara buzzed into his geek as a swashbuckling manga avatar, all limpid-pool clichés, plaid miniskirts and Lovecraftian angles. He'd completely forgotten that she was still buzzing around on the network.

"You're making mischief again," she said without

preamble, animated pelvis thrust forward, shoulders back, mouth an impossible pinhole. He should have pointed this dissonant pixellation out to her—he tended to be a stickler for functional anatomical accuracy in avatar design, where human-ish avatars were concerned—but didn't feel like getting dragged in to help her fix it.

"Nothing nefarious here," he assured her. "I'm merely savoring a victory over the forces of darkness and chaos. We had an incursion."

"It's more than that, otherwise you wouldn't have that grin."

"That would be the grin that says I'm up to mischief, eh?"

She did not accuse him of attempting to deceive her directly, only fluttered her eyelashes at him, the innocence of her expression undermined by the precocious flurry of pastel waterfowl which erupted from her ears. Dorian made a mental note to add "Never trust a woman who emotes in cartoon" to his list of Rules to Live By.

"I don't think you know me well enough to make that assessment," he said.

"Well, did you get it at least?"

"The spider? It's in quarantine, yes. I was just about to autopsy it." The words tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop them. "Would you like to watch?"

"Geeked or old school?"

"I geeked a wrapper around the script to track it, but I'm going to decompile it in analog. You can see my nifty render if you want, though. I'll flash you the ip."

She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Ick, no thanks. I can't stand to grub around in the text. It's so tedious."

"The whole world is text, Amara. Some people just choose not to recognize it for what it is."

She spun on her tiptoes in a balletic pirouette like the tumbling of autumn leaves. For all Dorian knew, she might just transmogrify into a shower of foliage at any moment. Puffy, pastel leaves, in fact. But instead, she turned on him with her vast round eyes and rodent giggle of amusement, clapped her hands together in front of her chest and trilled, "Oh, you are so precious!"

"I'm being precious?" he snapped. "Hello, my job is

deconstructing malicious loads and figuring out how they work."

She didn't speak, but the local environment reverberated with her response: *The whole world is text, Amara.*

It was his own voice, rolled down a mocking octave.

Cute.

"Look, this doesn't strike you as remotely odd?" he asked. "You're sitting two meters away from me, and instead just asking me what I'm doing, or God forbid, coming and looking over my shoulder, you jack into my geek and start giving me a hard time."

A flock of spontaneous neon question marks sprang from her forehead. "I was already on the Strand."

"It isn't natural. That's what I'm saying."

"That's the whole point, darling. It's better than natural."

"Better?"

"If we do it your way, I have to preface a simple question—*frex*, 'So what are you up to, John?'--with a bunch of silly and pointless chattermongering. I ask you how your evening is going; you grunt something noncommittal because you hate being disturbed when you're working. I ask if you have any big plans for the weekend; you respond with something that may or may not be true just to keep up your end of the conversation. Trying probably unsuccessfully, I might add, to act amiable while secretly hoping that I'll just get to the point. When I do finally get around to dispensing with the accustomed social pleasantries and finally ask what you're doing exactly, you experience such a profound sense of relief that you become convinced it might actually be a good idea to tell me. So you launch into a tediously detailed technical summary of your entire afternoon's activities that led ultimately to your grin of satisfaction that attracted my interest in the first place. You unnecessarily try to explain the logic, the binary, and other sundry intricacies of the data structure in such a way that I'll understand the full scope and magnitude of your brilliance." She flashed him an insouciant wink. "I've sought to avoid all that conversation porn."

"Conversation porn?" he repeated dully.

"Mindless and disposable verbal transactions that exist solely to preface the ultimate event, but which otherwise

completely fail to move the action along. By cutting out all the conversation porn, we skipped all of that annoying interaction and got right down to the important bits, to wit, that you were spiking an intruder and proud of yourself for it. My way is a more efficient mode of communication."

He sighed. "It's more efficient data transfer."

"Yes, that, too." She grinned, and if she'd attached another saucy wink to it, he had no doubt that he would have been forced to infect her system plugs with a file eating viral agent, just on general principle. "But hey, it's getting late. Do you want some coffee? It sounds like you've got a long evening ahead of you."

"Please."

The avatar waved at him. "You're such a luddite, John. That's what makes you so adorable."

Before he could respond, she popped out of existence, leaving behind a shower of marshmallow stars that insisted on defying gravity in the most aggravating way.

In a universe pregnant with quantum packets of data signal, mega-bandwidth spew and infotainment on demand for anyone who wanted to jack in any time/anywhere, personal office space had become an obsolete concept. Anything that was networked, noded, or otherwise woven into the Strand could be accessed from anywhere else, provided you had the gear, the wetwires and the access--or the skills to slip around the security barring you from access. Most of these nodes were cleverly rendered in geek as towering and byzantine edifices, pseudo-Gothic pagan temples, or anything else that could be imagined and subsequently pixellated. If he chose to, John Dorian could make the virtual walk to work from his coffin in Quiksand passing along the way a pearl studded replica of Notre Dame, the lovely and imposing Reichstag, a withering graphical ode to Old Fenway Park that interminably looped through the final, heart shattering play of the '96 Series and the Man of Steel's Fortress of Solitude, all without ever physically leaving home. In between were more modest structures cribbed from architectural drawings, historical landmarks and the pure stuff of fancy (ref. the Gilman Brothers reinterpretation of Walt

Disney's reinterpretation of the fairy castle). The cheap structures were defended at the gates by cross-armed code heavies known to the industry as golemechs--glorified sentinel scripts that unobtrusively read your .sec file and granted access based on the permissions they found there. Upscale constructs used outright .sec recognition portals of varying complexity, invisible to the unauthorized geeked eye, and tougher to crack (in theory) than a golemech.

Geek had churches and pornariums, freeways and billboards, free speech and gangland violence. Fake cafes in which to chat. One hour motels for more sordid business. Banks and beaches, museums and casinos, everything the heart could envision, the congloms could make a buck on, and jacks could code, render, borrow or steal. And everywhere were beautiful people: rock stars, vid characters, clumsy n00b renders and horribly (or--gasp!--competently) cobbled cliparts that jerked down the sidewalk like Romerotesque zombies. Half the people Dorian knew walked the real streets in geek on those rare occasions when they did venture out into the flesh and blood world because they didn't recognize the natural landmarks without it.

And for other reasons, too. Richness was one. Experience. Diversity.

The fact that Sonali Real *sucked*.

That was the world as he knew it. A dead end, anonymous cityscape teetering on the outermost limits of human commerce and exploration, plugged into a fake experience that was popularly accepted as more real, more vibrant, more *everything* than reality itself.

So really, if you could get the whole universe on the Strand, who needed--who wanted--to physically move the meat to get to work? Who needed to actually be *present* when the space that would have been your office could be much more usefully applied to the purpose of storing stuff that had legitimate commercial value? That was the billion rupee question, wasn't it?

Who needed the world when you had the full and immanent potentiality of the infinite metaverse at your synaptic command?

All of this served to explain why Dorian's office was a

grubby cubicle in the basement surrounded by blinking quantum server boxes that exhaled noxious, supercooled electronic effluvia into a cramped warren of packing boxes, metal shelves and rolls of fiberoptic cable. He'd had to fight just to get a simple thing like a desk, a box of pens, a stapler. And he was the only member of the crack technical staff who set foot inside the office more than twice a year--one of those times being the freaking corporate Christmas party.

And *that* was why he walked to work.

Dorian *was* a luddite. He liked the tactile pleasure of clicking keys. He liked the existential distance of digital interactions mediated by motherboards and photon guns rather than images rendered directly into his cortical mass. Most of all, he liked to live in a self-contained and consciously delineated reality that was distinct from the intrusions of the Strand. His reality was a determined and emergent *sum, es, est*, rather than a representational communal fantasy of *eritis*.

He liked to grub about in the text, for God's sake. He took a deep and illicit pleasure in it.

In geek, he had a dozen tools at his disposal for dealing with the spider. He kept them locked in a virtual workshop on the network, hung on pegs, neatly arranged, frequently dusted so they didn't look like they were mouldering from lack of use. The complex extractors that rendered as shop vacs; binary constructors that pretended to be clamps and nail guns; three flavors of decompiler that tried to pass themselves off as air hammers. Rows upon rows of sundry analysis scumware purchased for him by departmental leads with more money than sense and too much access to tech literature for their own good. (Not to mention, all those good natured, glad-handing, ethically dubious vendors who pushed the bleeding edge releases of these internally cohesive Strand phenomenals as a going-places corporation's best defense against the constant assault and new-fangled tricksterisms of malcontents and madjackers lurking in the virtual alleys of the Strand.) Each of these products was not only capable of, but happy to, reconstruct the senseless muck of code structures and arcane language modules he was expected to encounter in the course of his duties into readily grokkable artifacts. Technology so simple and user friendly a secretary could run

it, they crowed, as if that was something to be proud of.

Dorian hated those tools. Geek made everything falsely intimate. It filtered an alphanumeric world of simple absolutes through the deceptive cheesecloth of messy sense experience. By slabbing more code onto the original in the interest of interpretation, geek introduced imprecision, fuzzed the edges, until you couldn't be certain if you were deconstructing the object itself or your subconscious prejudices of the object.

Geek was a map, and no matter how easy it was to read, how provocative the render, the map was most certainly not the territory.

The territory was characters and digits, black and white, and everyone who didn't recognize that fact was utterly and completely lost. They just wouldn't admit it to themselves. Because they had a map, of course.

Dorian was in the business of knowing things, of really understanding the works--and through them, the minds--of thieves, exploit hacks, data miners and jacks of all trades. Code told you secrets that a render could only approximate. It whispered oracles about the creators, tricksters and techjockies who really controlled the universe.

People like him, to some extent. The diversions of his nihilistic Hometown fetish aside, geek security was what he did. Or at least it was what he did for the small haven of the data pleroma that was the Sonali (Real and Imagined) Masonic Archive Infocache. His father would have called it a self-storage barn for the snooty set, and would have called Dorian a security guard, which was partially true--except that he got paid quite a bit better, and didn't have to carry a gun.

He rolled his chair up to his desk and refreshed his monitor screen. The monitor was connected through a wiring conduit and accelerated fiberoptic lines to the primary quantum Strand box in the next room. The machine was called Abramhelin, and it was the Archive's network backbone. His interface was a standard keyboard he'd had assembled from an old computing schematic he'd located in one of the digital stacks.

Amara appeared a short time later with coffee. He hardly glanced at her, recognized her even less. This week, she was

some sort of quasi-saurian thing. Crimson scales like flecks of ruby that shimmered in the buzzing, bleached purple glow of the fluorescent lights. It made her look as though she was enclosed in a penumbra of blood. Her eyes were slitted, red at the edges, black in the center. There was a startling golden mohawk down the center of her elongated skull. Completely androgynous and naked, as far as he could tell, which truthfully, was not that great a distance. The scales made it difficult to surmise without staring, and her fangs were an adequate deterrent against egregious ogling.

Amara Cain had been his office mate for all of six months. She was a hard copy archivist who had been displaced from her cube upstairs when management had brought in the big MicroSun Docutizer™ to replace most of the standard dox archivists in her section. She specialized in written texts, personal journals, scribbled diaries--items that required hand scanning and individualized verification, usually for high end clients.

Dorian didn't know what she'd done or who she'd pissed off to end up consigned to the dungeons with him, but he liked having her around. She came to work every day. Which probably meant that there was something wrong with her that ran deeper than her sociopathic selection of avatars.

"I like that better than the last one," he said, because some part of his animal brain told him that he was morally required to say something in return for her effort in getting the coffee. Pay her a compliment on her appearance--the verbal equivalent of chimpanzees picking nits off one another's backsides. "Seriously, that other one was--eh--it was...what was it supposed to have been exactly?"

"A Mi-go," she said. "Or an artistic reinterpretation of one. The tentacles kept getting caught in my coffin door."

"Well, this one is better. Definitely. I mean that."

"You don't like it." When she frowned, he could see the jagged line of her canines with alarming clarity.

"Not at all. It's just that I sort of imagined you as more avian. Not a criticism, of course, just saying. You have--had--a natural avian build, I thought."

"Ugh. Avian has been done to death, and it takes weeks to mod the wings." She set the cup on his desk, out of the way of

his elbows.

He looked away. "Well, this is interesting, at least. Very unique."

Which was high praise, as he measured such things..

"It's my own design. With summer coming on, cold-blooded seemed more natural. The rest is dramatic effect." She grinned at him, exposing the full double row of her filed, predatory teeth. "But I'm leaving my palms and soles native. So I can sweat."

"You should pixellate it," he said, nodding vigorously. The universal sign for waning interest.

She blinked her epicanthal folds at him as though he was being nonsensical. "That's silly. No one would know me if I changed my avatar now. I've been Ryoku for--well, for *months*."

They would recognize her in spite of any modification she made, of course. They'd just overwrite her new render with their preferred avatar of her, probably were doing it already, if they had any sense. He'd gone through a phase a couple of years ago where he jacked all the avatars in his address cache into balloon animals. It was difficult to take people so seriously that way. Downside was that it was hard to tell what a balloon animal was thinking from its expression and body language. He'd thought about experimenting with color and shading simulations of emotional triggers and had actually started working on the algorithms before it dawned on him that doing so would be like admitting he had most likely gone completely and immedicably insane. He had scrapped the whole project for the sake of his mental health.

Amara patted his shoulder. "I've got to get back to this new bequest of dox. Are you going to purge the local net over this incursion?"

"Not on purpose. It depends on how deep our friend drilled and what systems he may have compromised. I can give you a Schrödinger bubble address on one of the other boxes if you need some temporary storage as a precaution."

"Don't worry about it. If you crash my data, I'll just eat you."

For some reason, he doubted that she was completely kidding.

2.

It was worse than he had thought--an absolute worst case scenario by all indications.

With the code shell decompiled, he was finally able to nail down the spider's quantum log signature and make reasonable guesses about the way it had gone about its business. Its *modus operandi* appeared to have been a standard quick-couple and scan of incoming bits, then the rapid application of some seriously sophisticated pattern recognition algorithms, followed by a catchall keyword search-match, all perpetrated across a variety of media platforms. Most of the original source plugs and codecs were grievously outmoded--.swfs, .cags, .mngs--but there was evidence that adaptive cognition strands had been engineered in the R-ASP using rudimentary logic trees that allowed for cross-platform extrapolation. The logs indicated it had stuttered a bit while making the initial evolutionary leaps, but eventually it had adapted from text and character signifiers to corneal-cochlear-neural object phenomenalism, which had been barely an infant field of study when Gancet and Vickers Standard were pushing the far boundaries of their models.

The jack who had written the spider had predicted CCNP's (seenop, the mediative language of geek) emergence as the dominant coding convention by at least a decade. Such prophetic thinking explained how the spider had navigated the network's security protocols undetected for so long. By the time the servers had been upgraded from text based

applications to phenomenal object drivers, the spider had already entrenched itself into the network's core and woven its invisible skeins. It wrote itself into the subsequent upgrades as an atypical prediagnostic superpacket tasked with outsourcing particular binary stings into the same spontaneously generated quantum foam the viral scanners used to quarantine suspicious data blocks. By the time the probability field where the quarantined data was being processed collapsed, the spider had already routed its own data into a warren of transfer bubbles preselected to collapse into patterns that matched the original binary packets. These bubbles transformed into discrete focal literals that, in effect, precisely replicated the encoding of the original file without ever touching it in its post-transfer, assembled state.

It was, to be blunt, a magnificent bait-and-switch. The servers assumed that the small bit loss that occurred between transmission and viral certification were infected blocks shunted off into the metaverse.

But the real brilliance of the design was that data *was never actually lost* in the process. Information theory's fundamental principles of redundant signal transmission meant that the packets which went missing were always recovered. Signal accounted for the "skips" in the datastream and rebuilt itself. Which meant that no one ever went looking for documents that didn't exist, so no one caught on.

Dorian could only wish his own cracks were so elegant. A crack that took what it wanted but left it at the same time. Not a copy of the thing, but the thing itself. Not a duplicate, but two originals nonetheless.

The spider had been everywhere. It had drunk deep from the input spew from the very beginning, like a great yawning cat hiding in a screen of reeds about the local watering hole. The imperfectly collapsed foam shards in the error log files--flags of its early transmogrification from text eater to phenomenalist omnivore--popped up in files and quantum lockers that ranged the length and breadth of the network, not a few of which dated back thirty years or more. How long it had been extracting documents before that was anyone's guess.

He uncovered its temporary weigh stations: system files

corrupted to stack unrecognized shadow bits, rider envelopes in the registry, larger opportunistic packets that attached themselves to full blown user applications. Whenever and wherever an object had been created, the spider had already been there weaving a sack for the eggs it expected to lay there one day. The spider was a virus that had penetrated the system so deeply and so long ago that it had become integral to the architecture. Not a parasite that lived off its host, but a host that existed for the sole purpose of quickening its parasite.

Dorian could think of maybe fifty jacks in the business who could have executed such a clever, complex and bitchingly egregious penetration as this one. Forty of them were younger than he was, younger than the script itself. The other ten had taken positions in the defense industry and wouldn't have bothered with something as relatively low value as the Archive in the first place.

Not that the Archive was immune to assaults by rogue or hxless jacks. Dorian spent his days repelling the clumsy incursions of Illuminati nutcases, Templar fetishists and right wing script kiddies who had convinced themselves that the Archive was the Vatican's Secret Library Annex and ultimate repository of documentary proof for such blockbuster conspiratorial truths as the clandestine bloodline of Jesus, the Gates Foundation-Rothschild connection and the alien origins of Egyptian mystery cults. Most of them never got past the first CAS buffer. Every once in a while, a really clever amateur jack would take a hint from the successful crack of the Trinitarian Banking Trust and launch an old fashioned, ungeeked code line assault, but Dorian's homegrown scripts were inevitably more than a match for their n00b ingenuity.

Still, it was a reputation business, and when a kid showed talent, people like Dorian kept tabs on them--usually with recursive viral agents that backtracked the break in and wedged themselves into the jack's datacore. It helped the kid build a hx; gave him some whuffie to spend. In some circumstances, the benign tracking flags allowed more experienced hands to pull him out of the fire if he botched a big score. It worked until the emerging jack developed the tool set to roust the intruders from his system without

crashing it, at which point he (or she) stopped being a kid and was generally recognized as pro competition. Call it altruism, call it tough love mentoring, call it industry self-regulation; Dorian called it keeping your enemy closer.

Bottom line was that Dorian knew everyone, at least by reputation, who could have written the spider. He knew their methods, their conventions, their signature tricks.

This was someone else, an ancient, a Grand Alchemist with one last crimson tincture baking in the furnace.

It gave him a little thrill of excitement, to be honest. *Exigo a me non ut optimis par sim sed melior.* The currency of the culture was contributions to the knowledge base. For most of the talent, the ascent to legend in the burgeoning community of freelance jacks came by the cunning they displayed in their successful exploits (or less often, in the style which they manifested in their colossal failures). Others made rep by stopping them, by figuring out how to foil the designs of the best. Thwarting a jack of this apparent magnitude could transform Dorian's hx profile from that of merely an ultra-competent corporate drone to head-turning Dungeon Master.

So he dug deeper. He traced the connections between the nodes and wormholes he had previously discovered and looked for screens which he might have missed, camouflaged pathways that dug deeper or ranged farther along the network than he had explored before. He plugged sub-architectural chutes the spider had used to operate behind the scenes. He wrote filler scripts to augment the system's defenses based on what he had learned from the spider's successes. He seeded the datascape with tracers and leeches that would attach themselves to future data access requests, then ported the logs into a synthesis engine that would evaluate and tag suspicious requests for future review. Through it all, he looked for bounce points--hidden ports the spider could have used to transmit its data outside the Archive's network.

Because that was the point, really. The spider was a data scavenger. Its sole reason for being was to gather pre-defined sets of raw information and shunt them off the Archive's net and into the jack's remote datacore for storage, analysis or eventual sale.

Except he couldn't find a bounce, which was a bit

disappointing. Such a disturbing and elegant undergrowth of nodes and storage fields and hidden bit pockets, but no equally complex cross-network shuttling system presented a startling inconsistency. He spent a couple of hours scouring all around the dead port the spider had used as its base of operations, then another hour on system history documentation, trying to trace the port's datascape ip through a progression of hardware upgrades, system patches and assorted recompilations. There was nothing. If the port had ever been active, or had ever pointed anywhere other than interarchitecturally, that fact hadn't ever been written down.

Of course, the spider was old, and inter-platform hardware compatibility was more difficult to pre-engineer than anticipating the evolution of coding conventions (as the jack had done with seenop). It could be that all the bounce points had long ago been shut down by hardware migrations. Or that the Alchemist had gathered the dox he wanted and simply sealed the ports behind him when he was done, leaving the spider an orphan.

But Dorian didn't think so. One simply didn't construct such an elaborate and clandestine mining operation to abandon it after short term gains. Too much overhead. Somebody had thought long and hard writing that spider, and they'd meant it to last a long time.

And there was also the fact that hitting up the Archive had been a prime jack. No one walked away from a score of this caliber without documenting it. If no one knew what you had done, it might as well not have happened at all. That was why all the pro coders left behind a rep cookie. It was like mailing an old jilted lover an invitation to your upcoming wedding; it was basic courtesy. Intrusion for the sake of intrusion alone was the work of an amateur. The spider was not an amateur script. It was professional, time consuming, labor intensive. The jack who owned it would have dropped a cookie if he'd been forced to abandon it. One way or another, he would have made certain that Dorian got it, and that everyone else in the community got it as well.

Which meant that Dorian had missed it. (Pfft.)

Or that old age or something otherwise lethal had befallen the jack himself. (More likely.)

Or, even worse, that he still had a bounce, still was mining data, and was quietly thumbing his nose at all of Dorian's best efforts. (Ugh.)

So he went back to the text and buried himself in a line by line dissection of the spider and its attendant sub-scripts. The internal activity log was time-stamp deleted every twelve hours, which was only a surprise in that the log existed at all. Most spiders were compiled without them so their activities couldn't be traced and reconstructed if they were discovered. There wasn't a sniff in the logic tree of dynamic rep cookie executables, and no references to phantom blocks in the outsource logic. The keysearch list was several thousand lines long, and even with his most sophisticated pattern recognition applications, Dorian didn't find anything that looked like a *gotcha* message.

No bounce points. No rep cookies. It was almost as if the spider had spontaneously self-generated from random bit accretion--the proverbial million typewriting monkeys over a million years accidentally reproducing *Othello*.

And that was perhaps most disturbing of all.

Because if the spider wasn't bouncing data, it wasn't a proper crack at all. The enemy wasn't outside, but on the architecture itself.

It meant the spider was an inside job.

Dorian sat back from his terminal and scrubbed at his eyes with his palms. His corneal implants itched after staring at the screen for too many hours. His coffee had long since gone cold, but he sipped at it anyway. He was long overdue for some sleep.

There was a flashing icon in the corner of his screen. The ETL tool had finished ghosting the contents of the dead node and had compiled an index for his review. Sighing, he brought up the tab and checked the diagnostics. The port's contents weighed in at something over eight hundred terabytes of data. Not massive, he thought at first, until he started scrolling through the list of files. The most recent ones were fat. Geeks and triDvid. Some audio clips in the gigabyte range. But there were thousands (and thousands and thousands, from the look of it) of old fashioned raw text files.

Most of these were something considerably less than a thousand bytes. The date stamps in some cases reached back forty years.

Which was good because Dorian hadn't been around that long and couldn't be held responsible for the original incursion. Though he had been around for *five* years, which should have been plenty long enough to have found the spider before now. Assuming he decided to tell anyone that is, which was looking less and less like a good idea the more he learned.

Dorian continued down the list of recovered files. The file names were ambiguous, following an internal, sequential renaming convention organized by theme. Entropy0001. Signal0004. Raville0185. He was going to have to parse them individually, write something to subject them to context analysis. Just thinking about it gave him a headache.

Chewing his lip, he kicked back from his desk and rolled his chair over to the partition which separated his cubicle from the neighboring one. He peered over the top edge at Amara. She sat at her own desk amid piles of warped bound journals and loose sheafs of age worn paper stock. At the moment, she was hunched over a delicate leather bound diary which lay open in her hands. She scanned a page, turned to the next, scanned again, as though reading.

"Hey, can I ask you a question?" he asked.

She didn't respond at first, and Dorian wondered if she'd heard him, but after two or three pages, she sat back and sighed.

"Yes?"

"Engrossing work?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea. I don't read German."

Amara spent her days reading in and out of geek, comparing the results, and uploading the corneal signal onto the network.

"Frau Stein is going into zap sometime midweek and has requested a complete storage refresh," she explained. "It's a rush job. The lady fancies herself an historian. Did you want something?"

"You're pretty knowledgeable about the data in the archives, right?"

"I suppose. To the extent that anyone can be, Dorian. There are billions of files."

"But you get around," he said, then added quickly, "on the network, I mean. You've been inside hundreds, maybe thousands, of client lockers."

She thought about for a moment. "Well, probably not to the extent that you have. I don't have your access to the architecture."

"No, that's different. I can see all the files, sure. I know how they're organized and how to optimize the data flow, but I work on a macro level, with categories of files rather than individual client packets. I really don't know the data."

"Okay, I see what you're saying. What did you want to ask me?"

"Based on your experience with the data, if you were going to steal something from one of the archives, what would it be?"

"I don't think that's a very polite question."

"I'm serious. It has to do with this problem I'm working on."

"It would have to be something small," she said after a time. "Something that wouldn't be easily missed."

Dorian waved her off. "Forget that. Let's assume that the size of the file is irrelevant. You've worked out a mechanism for moving files of any size off the network without tipping off security. What would you go after?"

"Thelonious Beck." She didn't even miss a beat. "Oh yeah, it would be Beck."

"The rock star?"

"Section 14, Sector 121, Locker 9." She winked at him. "I loaded some of his college poetry about six months ago. Beautiful, lascivious, outrageous stuff. Very sexy. He was prepping for a zap to New Holyoke. That's where they're recording his new gig. He transmitted a core update right before he left. Mmm, a complete wet package backup, just to be safe. He was so fresh in the locker, you could almost smell his sweat."

"You would steal a rock star?"

"Sure. Sanitize it, upload it into my personal cache. Can you imagine?"

"No. All right, let's *not* imagine. Stick with me here." Dorian rubbed his eyes again, trying to clear his thoughts. "This is the complete Masonic Archive and Infocache, purported to be the largest, most secure, most important library of arcana in the entire universe, and you're going to go after a rock star rather than, say, the truth behind the Whiston Murders or the Archae Stoddard Conspiracy?"

Amara rolled her eyes. "What for? Who cares about a bunch of people who have been dead for a hundred and fifty years? I think you've been playing secret security agent for too long, John. Most people don't care about what dox might or might not be in our lockers. They're much more into things that are relevant to them, things that they think we're hiding that would benefit the world. Did you know that word on the Strand is that we've got a copy of Federico Franzetti's death package? Some people believe that we've buried it in cold storage and won't release it to his family because it proves definitively that Heaven and Hell are just myths and the Roman Catholic church is paying us to suppress it. That's what people are interested in. They want something they can experience, something meaningful."

"Like Thelonious Beck?"

"Oh, we'd be happy for a long time, his package and I."

"Do we really have Franzetti's death upload?"

Amara curled her lip in derision. "The techs pulled the plug on him when he went into cardiac arrest. Such a shame. For all the fuss, he was a very uninteresting man."

He had no idea if she was being serious. She was as inscrutable as a balloon animal.

"How many other celebrities do we have in lockers?"

"Oh, thousands at least. Hundreds of thousands if you count the politicians. Nelson James is here. Ryan Stevenson, the soccer player. That poet Penberthy. The former commissioner of baseball...Simon something. Everyone who had a Masonic connection. Some of their wives."

Boom.

"What about scientists?"

"Sure."

"Like who?"

"Colm Freeny, for one. The guy who found the cure for

cortical flash. Christopher Taute, the astrobiologist."

"What about Michael Raville? Is he here?"

"The father of zap? Sort of."

"How can he only be sort of here?" His pulse suddenly thundered in his ears. "He's either here or he's not."

Unless portions of his package had been raided. Stolen. Otherwise corrupted.

"There's an old copy of him down on the lower levels. I mean really old, from back in the days when they were still working out the details of upload theory. It's a complete waste, they tell me. He'd had none of his genetic predisps purged, and there were still skips in the signal because the technology was so unrefined. It's a really rough cut, not something he ever wanted to build on, but one of the science foundations bequeathed it to the Archive as a historical treasure. Because it was one of the first, I guess, and because of who he is."

Dorian's hands wanted to shake; they always did when he got too excited. He gripped the top of the cubicle wall to steady them. "About how long ago was that, do you think?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Forty years or so."

Of course.

"Are you going to tell me why this is so important?" she asked.

"It's Raville," he said, and dropped into geek.

He located himself in the Archive's Library System, a useful office render for locating files quickly. The space presented as a classic metropolitan library with large clear windows, sound absorptive carpets and row upon row of carefully organized card catalogue drawers. They were the old fashioned kind, brief descriptions and quantum addresses typewritten on yellowed index cards. The whole place smelled of dust and quietly decaying paper. Late afternoon sunlight perpetually slanted through the window glass, warm and vivid with dancing, insectile motes.

He went to the 'R' stack, found the right drawer and began picking through the cards.

Ryoku appeared beside him. "You're very rude, Mr. Dorian."

He kept thumbing. "I'm sorry, Amara. I just...I needed to

find something out."

And there it was. Raville, Michael. Complete Cortical Package Upload (damaged, historical). Rel. North American States Research and Defense Agency Laboratories, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, Great Appalachian Clave. NOT FOR PUBLIC RELEASE EVEN ON DEATH. Big letters, red felt pen, in case he had been tempted to miss it. Below that were file sizes, ip coordinates, schema details.

And the acquisition date: 19-May-2385

"The same date," he said, dull with shock. "Forty-two years ago, almost to the day."

"The same date as what, John?"

With difficulty, he tore his eyes away from the card and looked at her. "The same date the spider began mining our network. Raville brought it in with him."

She blinked her impossibly large eyes. "I don't understand."

"The spider has been stealing data from the network for more than forty years. What I couldn't figure out was why. See, the Archive has only been in operation a little longer than that, and in the beginning, it was really nothing more than just a small to middling data depot in the unofficial and unregulated chain of Masonic Lodge networks that had developed in the mid to late '70's to provide technical storage capacity for both corporate and private documents. It was all homegrown, self-supported applications at first, but became increasingly tech savvy out of necessity, as the less sturdy Lodge networks failed. By the turn of the century, it had consolidated most of those networks onto its servers, and eventually became the defacto technical arm of Freemasonry and its appendant organizations."

He was reeling, trying to encompass all of it. That had been in the early days of the phenomenalist revolution, about the time the creaky old Web had finally evolved into the Strand. About that time, someone had figured out that data storage and processing procedures--most of the brute force work of computing itself, in fact--could be shoved into quantum foam, where the massive calculations could be carried out seemingly instantly if they were executed in a parallel metaverse whose Schrödinger waveform collapses

could be accurately mathematically predicted. Someone else added the (relatively) simple system of cursory triggers signals that could not only predict, but manipulate the collapses in such a way that computational processing could occur coincident with the desired outcome, the reverberations of which could be available instantaneously everywhere at once.

What this really meant was that well-meaning scientists had inadvertently hacked the universe and determined a method for encoding digital data signals into the very mind of God. The quantum structure of reality opened up into something like thirty-eight alternate dimensions, plus infinite recursive potential states, all of which were theoretically vast, empty and free for the taking.

The ultimate fallout was that all of the data artifacts ever generated in the history of human experience could be effectively simulated and stored in the space of a grain of mustard seed.

Which was sort of mind-boggling and notoriously hard to navigate effectively without a whole laboratory loaded with specialized equipment and a team of hard-headed quantum physicists around to back you up. The universe was awash in data. People already had more data than they could stand. What they craved was information. Data in action; data with purpose.

Which meant pornography, of course.

Ubiquitous triple-X pornapalooza on demand. That was where the funding came from. All it needed to really explode was a delivery mechanism.

It was corneal-cochlear-neural-array implants that finally brought the revolution of quantum computing to the public and with it, for all practical purposes, the death of physical data storage. That meant libraries, museums, archives, university collections. All of it. They were dust. Analyze an item, break it down to its component parts, map it, digitize it, upload it. Make it available to everyone. No need to travel to Washington if you wanted to see a copy of the Constitution. No reason to visit Sydney to see the opera house. Why fly all the way to France to see Versailles when you could tour it virtually, perfectly, individually with all the attendant sense

response of actual experience? Geek translated it all into digits and stored it in the air you breathed and the ground you walked. Information wanted to be free, and by God, mankind had set it free. There were no limits to the things we could know now that we could index, catalogue and analyze the complete sum of human experience.

Then had come zap, and all the rules changed for everyone, for all time.

It was supposed to usher in the Golden Age of Man.

Until somebody finally realized that maybe having their Final Will and Testament floating about on the ether for any savvy and curious-minded jack kid to download might not be such a good idea. The same with personal home movies, copyrighted television programs, porn, porn and more porn. Add in stock listings, bank statements, credit card numbers, love letters from that old mistress and suddenly you had an entire social construct on the verge of a personal privacy crisis. It was all just data in the end.

Data, as they had said, wanted to be free. And while that might be good for data, it was disastrous for privacy, for business, for a whole bunch of marriages. Some data, people began to agree, should probably not be so free as other data. So the governments, who had their own interests in restricting access to certain bits and bytes, stepped in and started cutting up the metaverse into proprietary chunks the way they had once chopped up outer space: keeping the good bits for themselves, selling off the moderate bits to galaxy-spanning megacorps and doling out the crummy leftovers to regular joes at exorbitant rates. Private corps, various shareholder enclaves and fraternal orgs emerged to allow the regular joes to pitch their pennies together and set up Archives to manage their own slices of infinity or sub-lease slices of slices in the new data economy. Data lockers of the soul, essentially.

By the time of the big data boom, the Archive had already been neatly placed to expand into this brand new arena of data support services. Being tucked safely out of the way on the absolute borders of known space turned out to be more politically expedient than it was technologically inconvenient for a surprising number of people who didn't feel like being increasingly subjected to onerous governmental regulations.

Or people who wanted to hide things in a secure data haven that wouldn't be under the jurisdiction of assorted terrestrial courts, public agencies or military tribunals.

Dorian felt as though his eyes must be as large as Ryoku's now. "That's why there was no bounce point. Raville didn't need a bounce. He was already inside."

Because of zap. Zap was going to change everything, but before he unleashed an unproven technology on the world, Raville had to test it on something more precious than his dog, Barney, the first living being ever zapped from Points A to B (and everywhere in between).

Packaging was the technology that allowed you to digitize *everything*, even your immortal soul, if you could afford the hack. Store it away for a rainy day (or an untimely death). Back it up, put security on it, seal it off from prying eyes. The storage and recovery of the digital human essence had been a relatively new field of study when Raville was developing zap. It was supposed to be disaster recovery, the modern cryogenics for a technological age. The experts who had designed the mechanism didn't even know if it would work, much less Raville himself. But he had it done just in case. Just in case something went horribly wrong with zap and he was destroyed, atom by atom and scattered across the space-time continuum. Just in case, he had backed himself up, and then left the copy to digitally moulder on some dusty military-industrial SAN.

In the meantime, the Archive had emerged as convenient and cost effective storage for the various personal libraries, legal documents and private musings of Master Masons and their attendant Lodges large and small, all over God's creation. Later it added space to hold completely immersive memory strings for virtual replay. Eventually it was whole Master Masons themselves--digitized doppelgangers and their lifetimes of mental, emotional and, in some cases, physical baggage, all broken down to their fundamental elements and immortalized in Schrödinger waveforms, drowned in foam as dislocated phantoms haunting the metaverse. The Archive had space aplenty, a reputation for discretion and an impeccable history of data integrity and maintenance. What better place than the Archive to store the one and only original

copy of a living god?

He pulled himself back from the logical precipice he had been contemplating. What was he really thinking here? Was he, John Dorian, seriously considering the possibility that his network was being jacked not to *get at* Michael Raville, but *by* Michael Raville, the Father of Zap himself? Why? What did they have that Michael Raville could possibly want or could not obtain by other, saner, less potentially reputation devastating means? What, in short, was going on here?

Dorian thought for just a moment that he might vomit, if such a thing was possible in geek.

"You think someone tried to crack the Archive steal at Raville's package?" Amara asked.

"I'm not sure what I think," he responded, and flipped out of geek.

But he would know soon enough.

When he had oriented himself again, desk and chair and office space, he plugged back into his terminal and brought up his workbench session. It was well after midnight. He was too tired to think about Raville, about the spider and what all it might mean any more this evening, so he zipped up the spider, the port archive, and his personal notes on the deconstruction and shunted them off into his private foam where he could access them at will. He shut down his terminal and grabbed his coat off the back of his chair.

"I don't have the energy to deal with this anymore tonight." Or the courage, the clarity, or any of the other gut-check virtues he would need to tackle an investigation this explosive. "I'm going to swing by Checo's on my way home, if you'd like to come along."

He couldn't tell if she was stunned or pleased by the offer. "Why Mr. Dorian, are you offering to walk me home?"

He considered her powerful reptilian jawline and fierce, chitinous claws. "I was actually thinking that you might walk me home."

She laughed, then marked her place and closed the book. "Let me grab my jacket."

They left the building by a vaulted entryway off the first floor lobby, skirted the flowering fountain in the courtyard

outside and passed through the iron gates that defended the outer wall. It was an exact replica of its render in geek. Sturdy limestone, high and wide windows opening on pleasant galleries with floors of native wood, the massive Templar Rotunda in the center. Security passed them through without checking their ids. Dorian frequently kept odd hours.

The night was clear and cold, and Dorian shivered in his jacket. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets, searching for warmth, but finding little. His breath plumed from his nostrils as jets of steam. Most of the streetlights along the Rue de St. John were out, which wasn't uncommon, and he could see the bright stars overhead. The Lesser Moon rode low in the sky, fat and pendulous, and beyond it the thick band of the Milky Way flowed across the west like a bank of mist rising over the mountains. They walked in the middle of the street, away from the alleys and whatever might be lurking there. Most of the buildings that bordered the Archive were dark, many of them in serious states of decline. Some of them had boarded their windows over, abandoned for the long haul, while others simply sat empty, gaping, looking in the shadows like abandoned tombs. But here and there the red lights of security cameras tracked their movement. They tripped the Universal Commerce Bank's motion sensor and its portable spotlights tracked them from the guard shack until they were out of range. The night watchman, Karl, waved as they passed. Dorian waved back, but didn't feel like stopping to exchange pleasantries tonight.

There was a smatter of gunfire to the north, but it was several blocks distant, so he didn't let it bother him.

Amara strode beside him, her head almost on a level with his, and he was considered to be of above average height. She bounded forward with lithe and powerful strides. Each step was quick and sharp, like the preface to an assault. This mod had a stirring sort of grace, he had to admit, even if it wasn't exactly to his taste.

"I'm sorry," Dorian said to her. "I imagine you're freezing."

"I'm fine. I had them weave microfiber thermal coils under the scales, in case the weather turned." She hadn't even bothered to button her coat. Her chest glistened with condensation, and in places, her scales steamed in the chill air.

"That's handy," he said.

"It's a nice augmentation. I kept the Mi-Go night vision, and some of the musculature enhancements." She looked up at him. "You know, if you're going to insist on keeping these hours, you should get something yourself. Kevlar weaving around the skull and vital organs at least."

"I try to avoid contributing to the arms race," he said, shrugging. "I'm a firm believer in the theory that the harder I work to keep someone from killing me at random, the more effort they put into devising weapons that will contravene all known defenses. I've opted out of the madness. If someone wants to kill me, they'll find a way to do it regardless of my best efforts."

"That sounds like the voice of experience."

"Not really. I just have better uses for my money than preventative maintenance." So she wouldn't think he had a death wish or was otherwise insane, he added, "I take full advantage of the company plan. I backup every week."

She understood, and her eyes widened. "Are you telling me that's your original mod?"

"Does that surprise you?" He could see from her body language that she was forcibly resisting the automatic urge to touch his arm, verify his reality.

She looked away, as though he had embarrassed her. "I don't think I've ever known anyone still in their original package," she whispered, sounding awed. "Well, not since I was a child, anyway."

"It's not *that* hideous, is it?"

"No, not at all. I just meant--"

Dorian squeezed her shoulder gently. "I know what you meant. It's okay."

People were invariably surprised that he still had the skin he'd been born with. He had some scars, and bum knee from an old basketball injury that acted up in the damp, but he had a clean bill of health otherwise and no obvious genetic defects, though his proclivity for Parkinson's and sundry other degenerative neural conditions would become worrisome once he got into his sixties. And it wasn't like he was pure seed. He had the standard synaptic microtubule parallel-prox, a mish-mash of perceptive upgrades for orientation switching,

the full cognitive drilling protocol. But when it came to his physical incarnation, he'd just never seen any reason to complain about the ten fingers and ten toes nature had dealt him.

"I'm on my third corpse," Amara said.

"Ah, intrepid galactic traveler?" Dorian grinned.

"Bad neighborhood." Which, he thought, explained a few things about her choice of augmentations, and her determined androgyny. She went on, "You think differently about the utility of modding after the first time."

"Let's just hope that isn't any time soon."

The streets remained empty for several more blocks. As they neared the city center, traffic picked up and a cop flashed his lights at them and ordered them off the road. There were more streetlamps here, better atmosphere. Fewer of the structures were so obvious in the way they sagged. A robotic sweep shushed past them, spraying the sidewalk with sand and grit. At least it was making an effort.

A few people were still out, traveling gaggles of young professionals, more cops, hookers and pushers. A great number of them were mods. Tall and gossamer winged fairies like Ferrier paintings. Slick, leathered Yakuza samurai. A minotaur or three (must be a fad). Interspersed among the more radical mods, there was plated nano-woven dermals, lugubriously caricatured musculature, retractable bladeworks, any of a dozen standard augmentation packages readily available for purchase to the aspiring trans-human. The crowd traveled in knots of smiles and ridiculous laughter and the general ecstatic hubris of a youth hammered through the peghole of geek. Beautiful, customized people in a beautiful, customized world.

They steered down a side street and back into less affluent districts. The structures here were largely featureless, cinderblock squares. Most had tin roofs and faded, peeling paint. The windows were dark, and the chill wind moaned through the streets around them, giving the whole neighborhood an air of emptiness. What it really looked like, Dorian thought, was a public reclamation project, or the temporary Quonset shacks stuck up for shelter in a war zone. But in geek, they rendered as glittering Colonials, nineteenth

century carriage houses, the occasional Cape Cod. Neatly cut lawns, picket fences, apple pies cooling on the windowsills--steadfastly middle class stuff.

It was the difference between Sonali Real, where he lived, and Sonali Virtual, which contained nearly everyone else.

They crossed the street and stepped up to the front door of Checo's. It was just another plain structure in the monotonous wall of cinderblock constructions, indistinguishable from the shops and houses around it except that it was a bit larger and strung with gay strands of Christmas lights in the wide bay window beside the front door. A doorman sat outside on a metal folding chair, puffing on a cigar and shivering in his heavy overcoat. He rose to greet them.

"You don't want to go in there, Mr. Dorian," he said, shaking his head. "Trust me on this. It's a madhouse."

"I've got a craving for curry, Charlie, and I won't be denied."

The doorman shrugged his broad shoulders. "Hey, it's your neck. You don't make it out of there alive, don't blame me."

Amara peered into the window. "What's going on?"

"Poetry night. Open mic." Charlie shook his head. "Brings out all the freaks."

"It does look pretty crowded," Dorian allowed. He tilted his head to Amara. "Take out?"

"Go pick up your order. I'll wait out here."

"I haven't actually ordered yet. I have to do that at the counter." Charlie opened the door for them, and they stepped inside. Dorian grimaced in apology. "I should have mentioned it beforehand."

Amara looked up at him uncertainly. "I've never been here before."

"It'll just take a few minutes."

Just as Charlie had promised, the dining room was crowded with too many tables wedged into too little area. The air was stuffy and oppressive from densely packed bodies and the excess heat from dozens of flickering candles. The conversation wasn't so much a jubilant buzz as it was a chaotic roar of odd accents and coarse, shouted laughter. But

it also smelled powerfully of onions, garlic, basil. Absolutely intoxicating. Dorian took Amara's hand and wove through the maze of protruding chairs, gesticulating arms and unfamiliar faces. The counter was in the back, set up against the doors to the kitchen. Checo himself, a short, dark man in a white shirt and smart black trousers waited on them, smiling and nodding.

He had to shout to make himself heard. "Good to see you, John."

"Looks like you've got your hands full tonight."

"It's been worse. I'm not complaining." He turned away from them and bawled their order into the kitchen. Someone they couldn't see repeated it in answer. "Maybe twenty minutes, okay?"

"Okay?" Dorian asked Amara. In the flickering candle flame, her scales shimmered like burnished bronze. She nodded her assent.

"John will introduce us properly, of course," Checo said to her, winking, "if we remind him."

"Amara Cain. Checo."

"Pleasure," she said.

"Out for the evening? Pleasant atmosphere, good food, good company--so, you think Checo's? Obvious, yes? Johnny here, he knows how to show a girl a good time. *Munisca in braccio, attraversante il mondo reale*. Is there anything better?"

"Work," Dorian countered.

"Ah."

They waited. One of the would-be poets climbed up onto the temporary stage Checo had arranged in the far corner of the dining room and mumbled several dozen lines into the microphone. Something about angst and embracing consciousness and black helicopters. It was awkward.

Checo rolled his eyes. "Two more hours, I promised them. Crazy bastards. All they want to do is sit and drink and yap their heads off. Eh, at least they bring a good mob with them."

A bell rang and one of the busboys brought out their food in a box tied up with string. Dorian paid with a debit coupon, and they made their way back outside just as the next hopeful Shakespeare worked up the courage to attack the crowd.

When they had put a block or two behind them, Amara

whispered, "What was that place?"

"Checo's? Around here, we call it a restaurant. An Italian restaurant, or at least Italian themed, if you want to be technical."

"That's not what I meant."

He had seen her in there, blinking frenetically, flipping rapidly back and forth between geek and mundane. Like someone on the verge of panic.

"Real food. Real atmosphere," Dorian said.

"It was weird. A complete wasteland."

In geek, she meant.

"Checo's grandfather, Norberto, was first generation Sonali. His family shipped with Chrysostum and the set-up crew on the *Icarus*, back in the days before the zap. It took them eighteen months to get here from the closest settlement. Relativity stretched that to almost twenty-five years Terran. He started with a hand drawn greengrocers cart, fixing sandwiches for transit laborers at the construction sites almost eighty years ago. When he'd had enough of that, he built the restaurant. They've been there ever since. The Checo clan is very proud of who they are and where they came from. Layering a render over it would cheapen them, and their family history with it; a history which has largely played out inside those same walls. That's the only way I can explain it to you."

"That's why I'd never heard of it," Amara mused, thoughtful. "It doesn't show up in geek. The renders around it overlap. Hiding in plain sight."

"They're not hiding. Checo is just traditional."

"And all of those other people in there? None of them even had their avatars booted. They were completely off the Strand."

"They respect Checo's wishes. I don't see why that's hard to understand."

"And you don't find it a little suspicious?"

"What?"

"For God's sake, John, they could be doing *anything* while they're off the Strand, and no one would know it."

"Mmm. Nefarious activities like digestion and poetry. You're right. Someone should put a stop to it before they bring

the whole culture down with them."

"It's anti-social."

"Of course it is. That's the whole point."

Dorian stepped off the wide street and steered left, past the slag yards that piled around the old foundry. The breeze had fallen off, and low clouds were beginning to gather overhead. The side road quickly turned to gravel, then hard pounded dirt that looked both gray and barren in the moonlight. They hurried along the fence line, through a mostly vacant district of slab houses, many of which had fallen in on themselves. At the crest of the hill, they came to Dorian's front gate. Quiksand was a coffin community. Four spiraling superstructures interconnected with plastisheen skywalks above, a public infotainment area in the mutual lobby, all the modern amenities. Two thousand units, a like number of occupants, most of them strangers. A four meter wall topped with motion sensors and shockwires surrounded the complex.

Dorian flashed over his tenant id, and the gate swept aside with a hydraulic hum.

"Nice," Amara said out of the side of her mouth. "I see where you spend all that money you save on self defense."

"I like the view." He scanned the brooding skyline as it filled with ponderous clouds. "It's going to rain. You should come up for awhile. Until it passes, I mean." Dorian rattled the contents of the carry out bag and smiled. "Anyway, I don't think I can eat all this curry by myself, and Checo would kill me if he thought I had let it go to waste."

"I suppose I can't in good conscience refuse an offer like that," she said, and her laughter tinkled like the song of a night bird. "Lead on, kind sir."

3.

Amara stood in the corner, windows on either side, and peered out into the night as the rain began to tick against the glass, forty-two stories above the rumpled and crumbling cityscape of Sonali Real. Dorian busied himself in the kitchen, heaping curried chicken and snow peas onto plates and trying to track down where his clean silverware might be. When he found everything he needed, he carried the food and bottles of beer around the island bar that separated the two rooms and set everything on the black lacquered coffee table in front of the sofa.

"You were right about the view," she said over her shoulder. "It's fantastic."

"It's a little deceiving," Dorian said. "The glass is focus-oriented line of sight telescopic with a range periphery good to about forty kilometers. The surface microsensors read and correlate your focal and optical depth profile, then adjust the image according to complex pattern analysis algorithms. They're pretty good, but it can get clunky at times, especially with non-standard optical nodes. You'll see what I mean if you try to shift from near to distant objects too quickly."

"I was just enjoying the view."

For just a moment there, he'd almost slipped out of his secret identity and exposed himself as Super Dork.

"Oh, right. They're good for that, too."

The distant mountains to the west were black, more dense shadows than distinct formations, but following the line of the

nearer foothills south and east, one could see the jubilant, vibrant, shimmering lights of New Sonali Southrange in the distance. Traffic flowed smoothly on the I-9 circle, though from this distance, it appeared to crawl along in a steady, everlasting stream like a foraging party of luminous insects. The twin beacons flashing atop the Mauripon Towers swung back and forth like erratic antennae tasting the leading edge of the approaching storm. In the center of all the light and energy and primetime hyperactivity, sat the massive concrete carcass of the assembler station and zap depot. The Queen. The source of being for ten million immediate settlers and the unnumbered thousands beyond scattered throughout the towns and villages which pockmarked the mountains between the Sonali plain and Tarn Ferry on the lee side of the continental backbone.

It was twenty-five kilometers through the air to Southrange, and a much longer and more ambitious journey otherwise. One of those things that seemed like a good idea at the time, Dorian had often thought. Zap, nano-assembler stations, the end of want. They had all been heady promises once. Except there were some new and funky physics involved, things no one was certain they properly understood. Potent stuff, quantum data encoding. Ankara happened just about the time Sonali lined up in the queue, and though the land immediately surrounding Ankara had been reclaimed in only a decade or so by specially engineered nanozymes, the town fathers of Sonali didn't feel like they had the twenty-eight million lives to spare that Earth did, so they'd put a safe buffer between themselves and the assembler station. Twenty-five kilometers and a low bank of foothills, in fact. The radius of a serious blast and subsequent nano-contamination zone.

These had been the unintended consequences: New Sonali Southrange flourished, feeding off the free flow of new and modern goods, while Old Sonali, Sonali Real, wasted away like an infirm and slightly mad grandparent, home to a staggered manufacturing base, government offices and other shameful family secrets.

Dorian edged up beyond Amara's shoulder and shared the view for a few moments. "Can you see your building from

here?"

She turned her attention from the glittering lights of Southrange, and traced her finger over the wreckage of malformed darkness and indistinct abutments that formed their own city. After a moment, she tapped the glass just above the Landgrant Office downtown. The spotlights on the dome and the rain obscured much of the details surrounding it, and there were too few streetlamps for finding better landmarks.

"Over there," she said. "But you can't see it. It's just a three story walk-up on Braston. Nothing like this. It must cost you a fortune."

"It's not as bad as you might think," he said. He didn't know why it should make him feel awkward. She must spend a likewise fortune on mod salons and firmware upgrades, but somehow his apartment felt like the more conspicuous consumption, looking down on such an expansive panorama of social decline. "The building went up in the wake of the prosperity that followed the zap. The developers guessed there would be a housing boom as the new economy worked itself out. Right idea; wrong location. The Hab Co-op bought it outright about five years ago. The Archive pulled some strings and got me in as part of my recruitment package."

It was a decent enough space. The windows were what had sold him on the place, a way to look out on the world he called home. He'd added the carpets, rehung most of the walls, paid top dollar for handmade furniture and his assorted entertainment gadgets. The spiral-grained Famen cabinets in the kitchen were his own work, as were the bureaus and tables he kept stashed in the bedroom and den where no one would see his long and torturous progression from novice woodworker to master craftsman.

"You shouldn't call it a coffin." Amara broke away from him and paced about the living room, studying his prints and pictures and other accreted junks. "It's lovely, John."

"My sister did most of the decorating." He didn't have a sister, of course.

"It's very comfortable here." She settled onto the couch gently, cautiously, as though afraid that her tough scales might damage the soft leather cushions. "But I think I

expected that, somehow."

Dorian sat beside her. He popped the caps on two of the beer bottles and handed one to Amara. "I'm really very crusty. This is just my narcissistic and self-coddling side drawn out to its logical conclusion."

Amara gazed up at him with her wide and alien eyes. "You're oddly complicated for a luddite."

"Hey, thanks. I think." He took his plate and began to eat. "Do you want to watch the newswire? I've got a projection unit wired into the Strand." Unaccountably, he felt himself flushing. "Microprism nano-pixels. Um, embedded in the wall tiles."

She laughed. "And in other ways, you are so typically male."

"Should I apologize for that?"

"It's nothing you could help anyway. But I don't really want to watch the newswire. There's never anything on it but bad news and celebrity sightings." She took her plate into her lap and nestled into the sofa. "You could put on some music. I wouldn't mind that. I'm enjoying the rustic experience. It's almost like camping out."

Dorian did a quick, five second scour of the Strand, found something that looked interesting enough and piped the streamjack through his quadro system. The sound was warm, acoustic, slightly Meni-Taurian in flavor. Not his style, but it wasn't completely hideous.

"*The Mongrel Tongue*," Amara said, nodding. "I love this one."

"Beck, yes?"

"The very same. Thank you."

They sat quietly for several minutes, eating, listening. Dorian caught himself tapping his foot in rhythm to the melody and made himself stop. If Amara noticed, she had the good breeding not to point it out to him. When they were finished with dinner, he collected the plates and utensils and carried them into the sink. He returned with more beer.

Amara took a fresh bottle from him and shifted to the corner of the couch with her knees drawn up to her chest. Outside, the wind whistled sharply and the rain began to fall in earnest.

"Can I ask you a personal question, John?"

"As long as I don't have to give a personal answer. I keep a list of pre-scripted public answers printed up on index cards in the other room, though. You're welcome to those." She wasn't smiling. He took a hit from his beer. "Okay, go ahead."

"What is it with you and geek? You're so, I don't know, *contemptuous* of it sometimes. I notice it at work, of course, but even here at home, with your resonant sound system, your micropism nano-pixels, all of this space you don't need. You could geek a far superior sense experience at a fraction of the cost if you'd just leave your Strand session up, but you haven't done that, and I don't think that you ever would. You wouldn't substitute a render for this, no matter how much money it saved you. You've embraced the reality. Don't get me wrong, it is a splendid reality, John. I just can't help but ask myself why. Why would anyone surround themselves with so much unnecessary tangible experience? It's like you've intentionally chosen to cut yourself off from the rest of humanity. You live in this bubble of mediated experience that no one else has access to."

"You call *this* mediated experience? I don't know how to break it to you, baby doll, but this is the way humans have been hacking civilization out of the jungle of interpersonal relationships for a few thousand years now. A dry cave, a cheery fire and scintillating conversation was all our ancestors hoped for."

"Once upon a time, sure. But the Strand has changed that. Zap and uploading, too. We don't have to settle for the reality we've been handed, we can make whatever reality we choose—make it, and then share that vision with those around us. We've broken down the barricades that separate people from one another and begun to unlock our true creative potential." She hesitated, as though worried she might have offended him. "Except for a few diehards like you, I mean, people who don't want to live inside the circle of communal experience."

Dorian shrugged. "I've got eyes that see and ears that hear. Why confuse that clarity with the echoes and interpretations of a billion other people's 'visions' and overlapping sense experiences? I'm confident in my own

ability to draw conclusions and make decisions. And I certainly don't crave the constant external validation that you Strand-o-philes seem to."

"Oh, no, John Dorian. I'm not letting you off that easy. You can't dismiss the mass cultural migration to phenomenalist interaction as the aberration here. It's what the human experience—the real experience—has become. You can't argue with the culture."

"And you're advising me to hurry up and drink the Kool-Aid, is that it?"

"Not at all. I just wonder what you're so afraid of."

"Bzzt. I'm going to have to dismiss that argument as a *non sequitur* conclusion derived from a sub-cultural bias. Besides that, who says I'm afraid of anything? I'm not the one sticking my head in the digital sand because the world around me is a big piece of crap. I'm the one out there walking the streets morning and night, talking with real people and facing real personal hazards. In my unmodified native form, no less. I'm out there every day engaging the reality everyone else is ducking, thank you very much."

Amara arched a suspicious eyebrow. "O weary reality surfer, answer me this question then: what are your neighbors' names?"

"I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"You've lived in this apartment for five years and you don't know the names of your neighbors, do you?"

He grunted in annoyance. "So that just makes me a bad neighbor. What's your point?"

"My point is that you've largely rejected the interactive and socially immersive experience of the Strand, but you haven't replaced it with anything. You're just as disdainful of face-to-face human contact as you are peer-to-peer."

"Hello, I'm a programming dork, Amara. We're not exactly known for our social acumen."

"Don't hide behind clichés."

"I'm not hiding. I just happen to like the quiet life. I like the way I live. It makes me happy."

She frowned at his intransigence. "That's not an answer, and you know it."

"What does it matter? Am I hurting someone not staying

plugged into the Strand all day, every day?" It really wasn't the question she was asking, and he knew it. But he didn't expect her to understand him, either. Sitting here in the soft white lights of his coffin, thrice-resurrected from backup, integrally augmented, so experimental with her physical mod that she probably didn't even know what she looked like anymore, she was asking what was wrong with *him*. Where did one even begin to look for common ground?

At last, he said, "I like thinking my own thoughts and reaching my own conclusions."

"And you think that the Strand interferes with that?"

"When we confuse the tool with the work, yes it does. Look, I love the Strand. I love the access to information, the ready interface with like minds floating out there on the aether, the ability to expand my horizons and learn about what it's like to live a life in a place I would never otherwise be able to experience. Everything anyone could ever want is out there. But that's the problem with it, too. Absolutely everything is out there. It's a constant cacophony. Everyone's thoughts, everyone's opinions, everyone's public face. These insanely pedantic demagogues that're all process and no outcome--it's paralyzing."

"Paralyzing how?"

"Volume for one. Complexity."

"I don't follow." She grimaced. "I'm sorry if I'm prying. I'm just trying to understand. Your life fascinates me."

He wasn't sure how to take that exactly. Was she saying he'd stepped so far outside the circle that he now qualified as a sociological oddity?

Dorian sighed, but he couldn't refuse to answer her, despite the lateness of the hour. He had invited her up, after all, and the host had certain responsibilities to his guests. He had, in other words, adopted this stray cat completely of his own volition.

"You want to know my biggest objection to the Strand and the whole social milieu that comes with it? Here it is: On the Strand, it's all been done before. Whatever it is that I want to do, want to be, want to discover--somebody has already been there, learned it, uploaded their conclusions on the matter. That's where the paralysis comes from, and it infects all of us.

We've stopped thinking about things, caring about things, or God forbid, actually taking some form of action when we see things that strike us as wrong. It's so much easier to just tune your sessions to filter out the things you don't like. And why should we think about troubling issues? There's no reason to unless you've got some startling new insight to offer, which you don't since fourteen billion other people have already mulled it over before you, most of them with Doctor in front of their names and an academic alphabet soup behind it. They're certainly not going to take your input seriously. The only people who will, in fact, are the nutcases and trailer trash harpies and jerk-off home study philosophers who hold forth on the boondock bulletin boards."

"Don't you think you're being awfully cynical?" Amara asked. "The Strand has allowed people to come into contact with information and experiences they never would have been able to access before. It's liberated us from the narrow perspectives of our own native culture pockets."

"Sure, we have all sorts of facts at our disposal, but do we ever come to actually know anything new from them? Do most of us ever try to do anything constructive with the knowledge we've gleaned, or are we content to just sit back and experience a vicarious triDvid render of what someone else already did with it? All the knowledge in the universe is worthless if we're not stepping outside our custom made bubbles of filtered reality and doing something constructive with it. Which, once again, we wouldn't ever do, because whatever constructive thing you may want to do could be or has already been much more ably be done by someone more qualified. The Strand has made us richer in data, but poorer in spirit. That's all I'm saying.

"Take something simple like, oh, for example that encephalitis epidemic in Eudora that's been in the news lately. A billion people out there are calling on the regional health organizations to do something, to zap them a scheme for some standard anti-virals. Another billion people argue that if they can't pay, then they've got no right to the treatment, human compassion be damned. They point out, quite correctly, that the new manufacturing economy is based almost solely on licensing royalties derived from proprietary schemes. If

somebody decides that we should just skip the royalties on some schemes for the public good, what does that mean for people and the congloms whose function in our society and our economy is to destruct objects into digitized schemes? I'll tell you what happens: they take it hard where it counts, in their bank books and they start exploring other career options. They have no motivation to work for free, after all. And for every one of them who can't turn a profit, fewer schemes get made. When you start looking at it that way, you start to say to yourself that everybody has got to make a living after all, so maybe it's actually in the public interest to just let those miners die. They suffer, sure, and it's tragic and all that, but the rest of us have to forge ahead. Things continue to be destructed, more goods become available at cheaper prices, and the zap economy continues to flourish, which ultimately raises the standard of living for everyone.

"So where do we draw the line? All medicine is free? There goes the vested interests of pharmacological R&D's, not to mention their revenue streams, which eventually has real consequences on our ability to fight future diseases. And if we're going to give free meds, shouldn't we include food, too? That's maybe even more important than medical schemes to a lot of struggling colonies. I mean, isn't access to food a fundamental human right? Surely we can all agree on that. Well, once you start down that humanitarian slippery slope, then we have to talk about construction materials for basic housing. Or how about clothing? Each one of those is another argument. Each one is potentially an industry out of work. It's easy to think altruistic thoughts when those thoughts don't cost you anything.

"Fine, then. Let's imagine that as a human community we actually manage to generate the political will to take the situation these miners are in seriously. Somebody digs through all the arguments, catalogues all of these positions that have been put forward by people who don't have any stake in the lives of these miners and somehow manages to come up with a consensus opinion. We collectively decide that Something Has Got to Be Done. Then you've got a whole new bunch of worms to try to cram back into can. What exactly are you going to do? How are you going to do it? What are the

potential ramifications of this precedent setting involvement? That's where the real fight starts, because then the 'experts' weigh in with historical precedents. How fixing the AIDS crisis led to overpopulation and ecological collapse in sub-Saharan Africa in the twenty-first century. How the Black Death stunted the technological development of Western Europe by a hundred years. How the Garow Root Famine directly contributed to the democratization of New Canton and the downfall of the Shen-Tse regime. And every time you think you've accounted for all of those historical events with some important similarity to this one, another one pops up, because *everything is out there* on the Strand, just waiting to become a factoid in someone's political argument.

"And in the meantime, those miners on Eudora die because we were too busy wringing our hands and trying to make a decision about what to do that wouldn't hurt anybody's vested interest in the process, when the bottom line is that somebody just needed to go ahead and do something about it and worry about picking up the pieces later.

"Humanity is only capable of assimilating so much information. After that, it's just noise. Just useless bickering that keeps anything meaningful from actually happening. To be completely honest, I have enough doubts about what's right and what's wrong without being constantly bombarded by other people intent on arguing all sides of every possible issue. I can't stand the lurking fear that just around this corner, or inside this room or at some other particular ip, I'm going to find the one perfect argument or coherent explication of the entire mass of human history that's going to demonstrate to me how I've been going about it all wrong my entire life. At some point you have to just make decisions and stick with them. That's what being human is. Coming to terms with our own fundamental doubt."

"But what's the alternative?" Amara asked, clearly unimpressed with his existential dilemmas. "No consensus? Whoever has the power or controls the resources makes decisions for everyone? They decide who to help and who to punish? That's just what geek prevents. It forges us all into a galactic human community that takes the power away from megacorps and dictators and gives it back to the people.

Information makes us free."

Dorian smiled glibly. "Or do the people who control the power just use the Strand to drown us with music and video and all the other mundane entertainments and distractions so we don't think about what they're doing when they're locked behind the doors of their secure foam?"

"I think you've been working at the Archive for too long," she said, guarded.

"Okay, how about this? They let us have all the information we want because they *know* we'll sit around bitching at one another for years while the real wheels of progress grind on around us. They're governments and megacorps, for God's sake! They know a thing or two about how bureaucracy works, and there's nothing worse than a bureaucracy of democratic citizens. Even ancient Greece figured that out."

"So instead, you'd give us a democracy of rugged individualists, half of which are doing things and the other half trying to undo the harm the first group caused."

"Right! And eventually they'd get tired of arguing and fighting and wasting their time engaged in localized geek flame-wars--and they'd get their hands on some real weapons and go at it tooth and claw until all the good people ruled the universe and all the bad people were dead and forgotten." Dorian dug his fingers into his temples and rubbed, rubbed. Happy little circles. "That's not what I'm saying at all, Amara. I'm not interested in conflict. I'm not interested in consensus. Who cares what anyone else wants to do? I just want to live my own life and be pleased with the results at the end of the day. That's it. I just want to live in a real world with real people who mind their own business, or at best, don't ask me to embroil myself in causes that don't effect me. I mean, didn't you just ever want to *know* someone? Not what they say, not their avatar on the Strand with all the trendy consensus opinions they've cribbed from someone else's screed, but the person himself, warts and all. The warts are what make us interesting, not these animated, machinated, falsely-informed, bandwagoneering soundbytes of people that don't have any more unique personality about them than a chunk of artificial intelligence script. I'm tired of fake people

who live on the Strand and show me only the side of themselves they want me to see rather than the real person behind the avatar."

He stopped himself there, well over the official border into Mad Rant Village, Population 1. Amara still watched him, still listened, absorbing it all. Dorian looked away.

"You sound very bitter," she said, finally.

"I have a right to be bitter. Buying into the Strand fantasy is what saddled me with a carping ex-wife." She said nothing, and he sighed, let his shoulders droop in defeat. "That was supposed to be a joke."

"Was it?"

"I didn't deliver it as well as the guy on the triDvid."

"I guess not." Her straight face crumbled, and Amara giggled at him. "I think I'm beginning to see you more clearly, John. You're not a cranky old luddite, you're an idealist. You're a Warbucks waiting for the opportunity to save an orphanage."

"Sure. You keep telling yourself that." He flipped into geek and consulted the system time. "I'm done talking about me for the night, I think. It's very late. I'm tired, I'm cranky and I've had just enough to drink to make it likely that I'll keep harping on this for hours at an increasingly sharp incoherence curve if I don't shut up now and go to bed. However, given that it's still raining and I'm gentleman enough not to put a lady out into the damp and dangerous night, I'm going to get up now and get a pillow and blanket out of the closet. I'll sleep on the couch. You're welcome to the bed, but I warn you not to try and move the cat. He bites if you wake him up from a dead sleep."

Dorian woke earlier than he would have expected. His back hurt where the couch braces had dug into his kidneys for much of the night. He was stiff and exhausted and generally miserable. The cat was perched on his chest, glaring at him for reasons only the cat gods could imagine. It was marginally better than waking to the alarm clock, he supposed. Groaning, Dorian rolled himself off the couch.

The cache messenger inside his array buzzed with a status alert. Before falling asleep, Dorian had flipped into his private

foam and unspooled one of his generic homegrown mining scripts. Then he had connected to an open source Strand architecture portal he knew in Sandoz and bounced it off on a fact finding mission through the pathless wilderness of public data infosites. His cache was now telling him that the requested query sets had been returned and archived per his request.

Remembering all the things he had promised himself he would accomplish today was the only thing that dragged him off the floor.

He made coffee, hit the pisser, turned on the newswire. The feed was local, a twoD port of a Strand broadcast from Southrange. They rarely covered events in Sonali that didn't involve a government agency, but Dorian didn't mind. Most of the news that came out of Sonali was both bad and repetitious. He opened the curtains he'd closed the night before to deaden the monotonous ticking of the rain. The clouds had cleared out in the night, and the dawn was bright and pale. There was mist in the foothills, but the stony peaks were ablaze with light, reflecting the morning sun like gilded daggers. It looked like it was going to be a glorious day. Perfect for hiding out in a claustrophobic basement.

After washing up the evening's dishes and dumping the beer bottles in the recycler, he seated himself, still in yesterday's clothes, at the kitchen table, and sipped at coffee that burned his tongue. He thought about taking up cigarettes again. He always thought about cigarettes in the morning. It was one of the grand and time-consuming vices he'd never been exactly certain why he'd given up in the first place.

The newswire's anchor, some impossibly perky girl named Danifer with digitally brushed curves and spotless skin, went on about an apartment fire on the lower west side, the government's new crackdown on scheme piracy, soup lines in Colinga that had broken out into riots. There were travel advisories for Kent, Phillips-Overman and Sri Tung where a nasty territorial dispute had finally turned bloody. The increasingly neo-liberal United Terran Confederations had come out with a new list of banned augmentations that had been deemed Dangers to Public Health and Safety. Danifer did not mention that all the mods they had agreed on had been

out of fashion for more than two years.

The great thing about living near the ass of the universe was that Sonali and the other independent states of Trithemius Orbis couldn't be picky about who their citizens were. They needed bright, energetic, risk-embracing folk. The sort of people who were more interested in exploration, adventure and a bit of danger than in maintaining the sort of rigid social order where traditional commerce flourished. Folks like that also tended to be the sort who would be most likely to experiment with physical and mental augmentation--anything, in fact, that appeared to provide a creative or commercial edge on a galactic economy that had a considerable head start on them. The assorted governments of Trithemius Orbis had widely adopted a live and let live stance (only partially out of political necessity) and tended to turn a blind eye to legal definitions foisted off on them by external agencies that impinged on personal freedoms. As a result, T.O. had developed something of a Freaks On Parade reputation. Most of the long-timers liked it that way. In fact, they liked anything that looked like it might spark the stuttering immigration and economic engine upon which they all depended.

Finally, at the half hour: *Homestead Mart financial auditors are scrambling this morning to explain a computer system glitch that inexplicably diverted corporate funds to an unknown anonymous account. Financial Security and Enforcement Division Chief Henry Calico explained to nervous shareholders that the transmission error was caught early this morning and corrected by data technicians before there was any disruption in the sector's trade markets. He went on to stress that Homestead's own reporting protocols were at fault, stemming from a failed software upgrade last month. Market and Exchange Ministry officials declined to comment and are not expected to launch an independent investigation.*

Dorian shook his head, drank his coffee. Thought about kicking the cat.

It was a lousy way to start the day.

"That's not a happy face," Amara greeted him cheerily.

She went straight to the cabinets and dug around until she found a coffee cup. She joined him at the table and sat down across from him with her elbows on the edge, cup in her

hands, saurian nostrils quivering over the steam and aroma. "Good morning, sunshine."

"There are doughnuts in the fridge," he muttered, completely failing in his quest to sound cheery back at her.

"Thanks, but if it doesn't come from a carafe, it isn't breakfast."

A sound philosophy if ever there was one.

"I'm going in early today," Dorian said. "You're welcome to crash here if you're still tired, or I can drive you over to your place if you want to shower or change or whatever it is you do before you go to work."

She lowered her cup. "You have a car?"

"Sometimes." He smiled to himself. He had an ancient and only intermittently reliable Roland Trench Jeep, though the furrow blade had been removed before he bought it. He took it up into the mountains sometimes, or along the winding and frequently washed out roads through the foothills on those rare occasions when he needed to go to Southrange. "It gets stolen a couple times a month if I leave it around the Archive, so mostly I just walk."

"I'll hook a ride with you, if you don't mind," Amara said. "I've still got some work ahead to catch up Frau Stein, and I'd just as soon get it done early."

Dorian pushed away from the table and climbed to his feet. "Then I'll change into some fresh clothes, feed the cat and we can get out of here." Assuming that he could find his keys. "There should be an extra toothbrush in the bathroom if you want it."

While he dressed, Dorian routed the data he had downloaded in the night through his cortical seeder and began the slow process of encoding it into wet synaptic storage.

By the time he reached the Archive, he expected to have learned everything he might have ever wanted to know about the life and times of Michael Raville.

4.

Routine occupied much of his morning. A dozen users had locked themselves out of their working foam. One of the ex-connex routers inexplicably failed, shutting down roving access for all the staff geeking in from Southrange. Mail was sluggish until he wrote a quick virus that tracked down the host ips of a spam consortium and systematically devoured everything running on their networks, the least innocuous of which was their address feeder datacores. After that he spent a couple of hours in geek fielding irate tech pings from sysadmins halfway across the galaxy who wanted to know exactly what the hell he had done to their architecture. They were bystanders, really. Innocent public hosts whose ips had been spoofed by the spammers. Didn't matter. There were no innocents in the war on geek congestion. One by one, Dorian advised them to stop aiding and abetting the enemy and upgrade their security, then clicked off. Around lunchtime, he reviewed and purged the unauthorized access attempt logs for the primary servers--only a couple hundred thousand attempts in the last day. That would pick up in the next few hours as the outraged hosts tried to pay him back in kind. Good luck to them.

This sort of general troubleshooting kept him busy until well into the afternoon. At some point, Amara brought him a sandwich from one of the snack machines, but he wasn't sure exactly when that was, and didn't precisely remember having eaten it when it was gone. The rest of the time, she sat quietly

at her desk, the only reminder of her continued presence the whicker of turned pages and the crackle of old bindings.

About the time the suits, secretaries and geek staff were logging out, he was finally able to catch his breath, lean back in his chair and tather his thoughts. Pressure had been building in steady increments inside his skull for most of the day, and now his sinuses ached like he was coming down with the flu. He'd been trying unconsciously to snuffle them clear for the last two hours, but there was no help for it. It was his short term mem extensors advising him to process his morning download into long term storage before the action potential bridges degraded.

At last, he set his elbows on his desk and cupped his face in his hands. He closed his eyes and tried to think of nothing in particular for thirty whole seconds. Clearing the mechanisms.

When he had accomplished that, he imagined Michael Raville.

Emergent knowledge broke over him in a flood, thundering in his ears like rushing water.

...

Nobel laureate in physics. Indiana University '72. Masters in Strand Applications and Theory, Oxford '74, followed by his first doctorate in Applied Quantum Mapping, 2277. Additional post-graduate degrees from Collegia Belgrade, Harvard and Nippon Tech. Two hundred and thirteen individual patents; seven hundred forty four pending for devices ranging from seventeen syllable nonsense gadgets to quantum-something-or-other bric-a-bracs whose disclaimers alone filled six full title pages. Born in Valparaiso, Indiana, Great Lakes Territory. Three sisters, one mother, two Patriarchs. Staunchly middle class. Raised Buffalo Convention Roman Catholic. Minister of Education for three North American P.M.'s in the last fourteen years. Distinguished Rothman-Gates Chair in Post-Ravillean Physics, Harvard University. President, Board of Directors, Zatreus Group Data Systems; Majority shareholder, Polity Schematics; Technical Board Advisor, Garrison-Riley Metronics Corporation. A litany of financial transactions, mergers, stock reports. On and on.

...

Dark hair, worn straight back from his forehead, blue eyes. Thought lines furrowed his brow like deep sea crevasses. Long fingers and quick, active hands. Average height, going to fat about the middle like a typical academic, but the sort of sparkling, instantaneous smile that transformed him into a totally different man when he was amused. Then older, balding, but the eyes remain bright, the mind sharp and the tongue lucid. A pleasant voice, warm and rich, either naturally gifted or the result of vocal training in secondary school, where he had distinguished himself as a member of the swing choir. Johnny Walker Black. Guinness off the tap. Torcanello cigars. He smelled like freshly ground clove.

...

He'd been refreshed twice. Once in '29 after an accident in Italy, his first time skiing, an anniversary present from his wife. Once in '44 after the assassination attempt on P.M. Stephenson. That corpse had been entombed in the rubble of the Communal Congress Arch, now a Terran international monument in Toronto. Daughters: Angelica, Tori, Elizabeth. Sons: Ethan, Joshua, Thomas. Three wives, all publicly amicable splits. Knight of the Realm, Order of the Crescent, Laurel of Apollo. Active administrator of his own charitable trust. Giddy philanthropist. Minority owner of the Boston Pagans baseball team. By all accounts: nice guy, witty, likeable, without political aspirations and without pretensions. Preferred corned beef to caviar, whiskey to white wine. His current wife had been his undergrad Classics tutor. Didn't seem to know a lick about running a baseball team, but loved the hell out of the game. His grandkids called him Pops. His college graduation gift from his parents had been a trip to the Scioli-Franciscan Mission in Setra Brahma, Mars to assist in the famine relief. He'd come home with kernel of vision for what would become zap.

...

Dorian opened his eyes, scowling.

Michael Raville was exactly not what he had expected him to be. Not the sort of guy who had anything to gain by attempting to jack the Archive. Not, in fact, a guy who seemed to have any experience with or interest in intrusion

theory at all. The tools, yes. The dazzling intellect. The affinity for taking things apart, for complex systems analysis and multiple coding architecture comprehension. The deep grounding in foam dynamics. His early publications in science and technology journals--the first when he was only seventeen years old--read like a proto-jack's training manual: binary packet manipulation, the manufacture of Schrödinger interference burps, object oriented Vorman-perl declension theory.

But Raville was a visionary, a builder, an engineer. He created things because it made him happy to do so, and because he saw it as a way to help people in the process. His skills and technical expertise were tools for implementing his vision, rather than ends unto themselves.

What he wasn't was a troll.

He didn't break things just because he could, and he didn't take without asking.

The spider...ah, the spider was trollware if Dorian had ever seen it.

But there was an itch, a troublesome niggle fluttering about in his brain. Something that didn't match the public picture of the distinguished Michael Raville with the spider's assault on the Archive. He kept asking himself what it was, exactly, that someone like Raville would want with the Archive's foam in the first place. Certainly not his own personal copy of Thelonious Beck.

What was it Amara had said about Raville's package?

It's a really rough cut, not something he ever wanted to build on, but one of the science foundations bequeathed it to the Archive as a historical treasure. Because it was one of the first, I guess, and because of who he is.

And that was it, then. The key.

The spider had never intended to mine the Archive in the first place. That is, it wasn't written with the Archive specifically in mind. The transfer of Raville's package had only happened years after the fact, as a seemingly innocuous scientific bequest. No one could have foreseen the move at that time; few people on Earth would have even heard of the Archive back then. It'd still had its hands full just loading historic member files when Raville's package was being

scanned.

Not the Archive at all. The spider had been written for a fatter target.

One closer to home.

The North American States Research and Defense Agency Laboratories, Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Dorian stiffened. No, of course not. This was *Michael Raville* he was talking about.

But what if he really had done it? What then?

How had he smuggled something so dangerous as a data spider into military foam in the first place? And what had it been looking for when it got there? What could possibly make him desperate enough to take that kind of risk?

Dorian thought about the scripts, the files, the decompiled spyware tucked away in his foam.

There was only one way to find out.

The work took hours. Mind numbingly tedious stuff. Parsing values, diagramming logic flow, understanding not only how the spider had evolved, but why. Because the why would point directly to its original purpose, the reason the spider had been created, and that might just give him the key to what it was Raville had been after in the first place. He wrote the content analysis app that he had been dreading the night before and set it loose to summarize the contents of the spider's forty year data cache. But he had answered one question, at least. He knew why it had been so essential for the spider to duplicate data files before making off with them--and duplicate them in such a way that no record remained that they'd ever been copied. Jacks determined to go after defense agency datacores did not leave footprints. It wasn't healthy.

For some reason, that heartened him considerably. He didn't feel like he was groping about in the dark so much now. The spider's personality was emerging.

And in the end, it wasn't any of his sophisticated analysis techniques that cracked the spider's sacred, occult pattern. It wasn't a massive logical leap that tied together impossible assumptions. It wasn't really anything Dorian did at all.

It was a box score from last week's newswire.

Boston 7, New Orleans 2.

The spider had intercepted it from the input spew on the record's way to the Archive's Historical Documents Collection and tucked the text file in the queue with all the other dox to be stored, analyzed or processed. The HDC was an ongoing project to capture and catalogue a dozen news feeds scattered across human space for academic and research institutions: History As It Happens TM (all access passes available for a monthly fee). It was all straight public access data--disposable facts. It wasn't the sort of information one would set up a mining operation to harvest, not when it could be had for free from a million virtual kiosks on the Strand. The Archive only recorded the streams because it was betting there would be a market for historical broadcasts in the not too distant future.

A baseball box score was an odd thing to find among geeks of scientific lectures, the private diaries of renowned physicists and the latest scholarly analyses of Sethian hermeneutics.

One of these things, Dorian thought, is not like the other. One of these things doesn't belong.

So he ran an adaptive catalogue search and found more. Thousands, in fact. Years and years of baseball scores, compiled and archived by year into innocuously named compressed blocks.

He scoured the `outsource_key` file for hints to the logic behind such a strange set of acquisitions, disassembled the compression routines, and finally, in the spider's R-ASP code engine, found what he was looking for:

```
/* If &Parse = outsource_key179
Do Fortean_Load
Execute Grab_Seed_Box
Do Doubleday
Execute $_2xxx_Standings
Execute $_Update_plyr_db
/* Stitch $_key TO inc=binary_conv; date-parm; date-
stack; date-archive
Load virt_img_Herald
Reparse date-stack (Mon-dd-yyyy)
Insert; reload AS archive_2xxx
/* Spool virt_img_Herald//archive_2xxx
```

```

// * Convert archive_2xxxx-1;
Get sysdate, substr(12,4)
Transform &this_year
If &this_year = substr(archive_2xxx,9,4)
Do Compress_Grid_z
Else
Do Compress_Grid_search_match_substr
// * Else
      Next &Parse // *

```

Then, he pored over the text, investigating each subroutine in turn and subsequently extracted the contents of all the outside executables. When he was done, Dorian sat back from his terminal and gazed at nothing for several moments, almost too stunned to assemble coherent thought. He didn't know if he should be shocked or sickened; all he knew was that he was outraged. It was simply unthinkable. Impossible.

But it was there, right in the code, and the code was Truth.

The spider didn't take data, as he had supposed all along. It didn't bounce documents. It *seeded* them.

And seeds existed for only one purpose, to grow into living things that could be consumed by other living things, so that those organisms, in turn, might grow as well.

Dorian knew suddenly, irrefutably, that if he compared system snapshots of the contents of the spider's dead port from one day to the next, there would be one file in particular that grew faster than the rest, a relentless binary spread as data accreted hour after hour, year after year in its own private, invisible network bubble.

He could accept that the spider had been uploaded with Raville, maybe even been written by Raville originally. He could make himself believe that the spider had been designed to jack the Oak Ridge datacore--though he suspected it had less to do with stealing defense agency data than something darker and more frightening that he had not yet imagined. It even made perfect sense to him that after the transfer from Oak Ridge to Sonali, the spider would have continued jacking the Archive out of habit, a perpetual self-executing script adapting to the new environment as it went along.

But even stipulating all of that, what was he to make of

baseball scores?

He simply could not imagine was Raville risking a betrayal of the spider's existence over something so trivial. Not in the middle of the holding foam of one of the most secure datacores on Earth. Not when being caught jacking Oak Ridge would have destroyed his professional career at the very least, and more than likely seen him put on trial for digital terrorism. And that was assuming that Raville had known in advance that he could even access the sports newswire from inside the Oak Ridge datacore.

Because the biggest problem with that picture as Dorian saw it was that the spider hadn't begun retrieving baseball scores on the Archive's network until two years *after* Raville's package had been transferred from Oak Ridge. A full six months after the HDC had gone live and the newswire filters had been plugged into the foam, in fact. Of all the unlikely adaptations the spider had manifested, this was the evolutionary leap Dorian simply couldn't accept. Baseball wasn't evolution; it was modification. It was the hand of an artist at work, a ghost running rampant in the foam, an anonymous eye peering out into the world through its forgotten digital window.

It was the quantum spirit of the First Cause stooping to touch the waters of chaos one more time to quicken his errant creation.

Dorian could not have imagined a worse outcome to his investigation if he'd spent all day trying. It had the potential to be an absolute disaster, both for his career and the Archive's corporate reputation, the sort of thing that made weaker sysops tuck their chins against their chests and burst into tears.

Partly for the sheer novelty of actually speaking his doom aloud, partly as a warm up for how he would explain things to the IT Director, Dorian said to no one in particular, "Oh yeah, we have a big problem. I think Michael Raville is alive."

"Of course he is," Amara answered from her side of the partition. The flutter of pages continued uninterrupted. "He's can't even be a hundred and fifty years old."

Dorian jumped at the sound of her voice. He had assumed

she'd gone home for the night hours ago. It was after midnight by his system clock. "Not that one," he said. "Our Michael Raville. The package."

For several seconds, the only noise was the hum of the cooling system in the next room. Finally, Amara poked her head over the wall. "That's impossible."

"Nothing is impossible when you mix binary with Schrödinger waves."

"John, it's just a digital scheme. It isn't a living thing...it's just a map of the thing."

Dorian shook his head slowly. It was basic mathematics, really. Take an object, any object, and describe it with absolute mathematical precision. Wrap that math in a sorter application called a scheme and feed it into a special box. Turn the power on, unleash some physics so funky and fabulous that people name the whole shebang after you, feed the resulting signal pulse into a manufacturing unit and *voila!* Reproduce as many copies as you want, or as many copies as you can get out of your stack of superdense, element-rich silicate wafers, the raw material of nano-assembly.

That was fundamental zap technology. The equations, the formulas and digitized representations might not be the literal thing they described, but they could become it.

And when you talked about people, well, they'd been moving people through zap for decades. Just a few years after the first zap applications had emerged to revolutionize the manufacturing industry, biomemetics products had begun to hit the public market with a thirty second livestream playback--a technical feat that was heralded as the biggest advance in static memory capture since the point-and-click camera. Raville himself had been one of the first scientists to see the potential. A way to move not only products, but people from point to point without the dangers, inconvenience and Einsteinian barriers of traditional long haul space transportation.

Because what was a biomeme really? Just a radically complex scheme if you thought about it. A way to capture the whole person, mentally, spiritually, emotionally. Describe them mathematically, even down to the most precise variations in DNA, pass them on a beam of zap, then assemble

them again from the digitized map. In the final analysis, there was no difference between the package that was uploaded and the entity who emerged from the nano-assembler on the other end. It had been proven billions of times, with every traveler who stepped from the accretion pen to the depot concourse.

He said, "In the foam, the map *is* the territory. If we didn't believe that, we wouldn't bother with uploading in the first place. You should know that as well as anyone."

"Because I've been refreshed, you mean." Something in her voice made it clear that he was treading on dangerous ground.

"Exactly."

"And because I've been refreshed, you should believe me when I tell you it's impossible." She stood now with her forearms on the top of the cubicle wall, looking down at him. "There's no awareness in the box. No memories of being in storage. There is no before and after, John, or ongoing stream of consciousness inside the foam. Just missing time." She spoke to him as if he was a child, or as if he was being deliberately obtuse, but at the end, she smiled wearily and said, "Don't go all zaptronaut on me. I'd just about decided you were sane. It would be a shame if I had revise that assessment after I've slept in your bed."

Dorian shook his head. "No, you don't understand what I'm saying. When we get a package for long term storage, we put it in specially formulated foam. It's like a sensory deprivation tank. We control the stimuli so that the representation of consciousness doesn't attempt to emerge. When it comes time to download the package, techs at the receptor depot snip the last few gigabytes so the binary profile conforms with that of the original upload before Processing & Build. Some experts have long suspected that packages continue to possess some level of active cognition in storage, a sort of digital dreamtime. That's why they recommend that you upload at least once a year--not just to minimize the dissonance of lost time, but because the package itself could have soured."

"Soured." Amara wrinkled her nose as though she found the word distasteful. "You mean awakened...and what? Gone mad?"

Dorian shrugged. "There have been studies which suggest that might be the case. That's why they trim the ends. Just in case."

It was more complicated than that, of course. There was some highly complex binary comparison algorithms that went into P&B to make sure that the only people who came out of zap insane had been insane before they went in.

"But as you say, we process the packages so that they don't acquire consciousness. I'm sure someone in Package Management would have caught something if Raville was emerging. They've undoubtedly got protocols for dealing with that sort of thing."

"They do," Dorian said, nodding. "And if they suspect a package is even close to getting gamey, they notify the antecedent and purge the package as soon as they get a fresh upload."

Amara raised her chin sharply, understanding. "Ah, but they couldn't do that with Raville. His package is a historic artifact."

"Sort of. I ran a diagnostic on Raville's original scheme. It's in a specially constructed holding foam where the original spec diagrams are constantly recycled on a read-and-replace loop. It's expensive as hell in cycle costs, so the procedure is reserved for vips and special patrons. The corruption risk is absolutely minimal."

"Well, if you already knew that, why would you think--"

He held up his hand. "Because that's not the Raville I'm talking about. The original package is fine. The problem is the copy."

So he explained it to her. The spider, the delicate and undetectable thefts, the dead port cache. The connection to Oak Ridge, what he had learned about Michael Raville himself, and finally, the baseball score. Amara listened, blinked her wide eyes at him occasionally, but didn't try to argue. He didn't know if that meant she believed him, or simply didn't have the technological grasp to refute him.

"The bottom line," he said at last, "is that this dead port is attached to a fractal of foam that's been piggybacking on the network for years. And I think that this spider came across the link with Raville and immediately duplicated the upload

so it could set up his package on our network outside the protected areas of Package Management where he wouldn't be lulled into digital sleep again. How soon it found or manipulated the cache port after that, I don't know, but they've been there for a long time, just feeding off of us."

Amara took a deep breath. "So what do you do now?"

"I'm not totally certain. I've got control of his access point, and I've shut down his mining operation. Theoretically, I could keep him trapped in his foam forever if I wanted, especially now that I've got his spider, too. But that wouldn't stop him from just writing another one. If he could modify this one, I'm betting he could start again from scratch. And if he can do that, he might be able to find his way back onto our network--or worse, he could use our network as a springboard to the public nets. Who knows what trouble he could get into if he got outside."

"We can't let that happen," Amara said sternly. "Someone would eventually track him back to the Archive."

"I could track down the router that feeds his port and unplug it. There'd be some service outage, some fires to put out, but he doesn't have anywhere to run. Without the power couplings that maintain his foam in a steady state, the wave would collapse." Dorian snapped his fingers. "End of problem."

Amara gaped at him. "You can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's illegal. Isn't it? You can't unilaterally decide to terminate a sentient AI."

"It's not an AI by definition. It's a sour package. Or it's a jack. Both of those are within bounds."

"But that package belongs to the Archive. It belongs to Michael Raville."

"No, the one in PM belongs to Raville. This one is more akin to a virus, and standard procedures gives me all the authority I need to purge it."

"How can you say that?"

Dorian arched an eyebrow at her. "Now who's going zaptronaut? It's not like the package is alive. Not technically. It doesn't have any independent rights, and any rights that it would have had as Raville's appendant person were signed

over to the Archive with the bequest from Oak Ridge."

"But aren't you even curious about it? You're saying that he may have been conscious for at least forty years. Forty years of independent artificial existence! Don't you wonder what he's been up to all that time?"

"He's undoubtedly been babbling to himself about bugs, Jesus conspiracies and admiring the pretty, pretty colors while he went merrily, homicidally insane," Dorian said with a snort. "Purging is probably the most humane thing I could do."

Amara fixed him with a withering glare. "You don't believe that or you would have already dumped him. Admit it, you're just as curious as I am. Even if you don't care how he's occupied himself here, how can you not want to know what he was doing in the Oak Ridge foam in the first place?"

In fact, he did want to know. He wanted to sit down with this miraculous, impossible iteration of Michael Raville and find out what it was about. What had been so black bag explosive that it had dared to scale the military ice to find out? What cosmic mysteries frozen in that datascape had been sufficiently valuable to attract the interest Michael Raville himself?

Hey, he'd rubberneck a good old fashioned conspiracy theory with the best of them. He was only human, after all.

But those things aside, Dorian's professional side was less concerned about what ancient Egyptian UFO mysteries Raville's package might or might have learned than about finding a way not to be compelled to file the government mandated Incursion Reports. Because that was standard procedure, too: filling out the public information forms that would expose the fact that his architecture had been infiltrated. The public had a right to know how competent an infocache was with regards to protecting their data assets. Once that paperwork was filed, he would get to stand back and watch his carefully constructed reputation go up in flames. The least that would happen was that he would probably lose his job. Five years was a long time to be asleep on guard duty, and the suits and wonks in Data Integrity weren't going to care that it had been Michael Raville himself who had slipped through the gates, or even that the actual break in had happened thirty-five years earlier. All they'd see

was that there had been an incursion and Dorian hadn't stopped it from spreading to every nook and cranny of the corporate foam, allowing it to compromise and copy any files it chose to target. This was definitely one of those shoot the messenger scenarios, and the shareholders would want a scapegoat as a reassurance that their personal data assets were safe and secure.

Unless he could prove to his satisfaction that the worm had not constituted a leak, that there hadn't ever been bounce points or transfer nodes. That, in fact, the rogue package constituted nothing more than a harmless sludge clogging some of the system pipes but otherwise presenting no threat.

Without another word, he scooted back to his keyboard and began keying in a rapid series of commands.

Amara slipped around the partition and came up behind him. She watched in silence for a time, but finally couldn't contain herself any longer. "What are you doing?"

"I'm giving the port an id and assigning security to it. And I'm stabilizing the waveform so it can handle standard bandwidth." He didn't glance at her, just kept at his tasks. He didn't want to think about what he was doing, lest he change his mind. "If I'm going in there, I want to make sure he can't get loose again."

Raville had had forty years to work out what he would do if he got caught, to set his traps and dig his escape tunnels. Dorian wasn't about to just plunge ahead like an overzealous footpad. Worse things could happen than the package slipping past him in the storm of digits.

But Amara clapped her hands together. "We're going in geek, yes?"

"I'm going in geek. My implants are advanced enough that their filter and render protocols might confound some of his defenses."

"And I'm going with you."

He didn't take his eyes off his monitor. "Not up for discussion. I'm the security agent; you're the archivist. Go read a diary or something." She started to respond, but he cut her off. "I'm not kidding, Amara. This isn't going to be a pleasant little day trip on the Strand. I've got some very complicated repellent scripts to keep my filters clean, and I

may have to code on the fly, depending on what kind of weaponry he brings to bear. I can't be worrying about protecting you from synaptic burn or something worse at the same time. It could be very dangerous in there."

"You're advising me about danger? I'm the one who had to walk you home last night, remember?" He heard her cross her arms behind him, the sinuous click of scale on scale. "You can take me with you or you can wonder where I'm at behind you. I'm not going to miss the chance to meet a one of a kind recreation of Michael Raville."

"You're insane."

"Then he and I will have that in common. I can interpret for you."

"You know you'll only get as far as my security strings let you go, and believe me, that wouldn't be nearly far enough."

"Then I'll sit there and make enough noise that my clumsy incursion attempts would show up on the intrusion logs. And I'll tell anyone who asks exactly what I was doing."

Dorian sighed. This is why all the good jacks spent their free time immersed in virtual porn. Real women were incredible pains in the ass. "Fine. But don't blame me if you're scarred for life."

"It wouldn't be the first time," she answered. He couldn't see her expression, but he was fairly certain she was smiling.

5.

Dorian blinked, felt himself listing unaccountably to the left. Blinked again. Drew a breath to steady himself. Spatial patterns emerged, normalized, achieved stability with only a flash of dodecahedron brush over. The incipient urge to be both dizzy and nauseous at once faded before it had properly begun to register in his cortical mass.

He was inside the bubble, but he wasn't happy about it. This was most certainly not what he had expected to find.

They stood at the edge of a circular drive, Dorian and Ryoku-Amara, on a strip of concrete sidewalk. He peered up at a wide blue sky dappled with puffy white clouds. The sun shone bright and yellow overhead with the fierce heat of a young star. An unpleasantly thick atmosphere magnified the warmth he felt on his face to a suffocating intensity. The air about them seemed to droop, still and hot, under its own damp weight. When he closed his eyes, the pounding sun left spots on the back sides of his eyelids like tiny solar eclipses. It was a miserable heat. Stultifying. The humidity must be almost one hundred percent.

He turned about slowly and took stock of his surroundings. The bleached drive, an asphalt parking lot, little islands of greenery between the rows of empty spaces. A short way beyond, the land rose up in an artificial berm, and somewhere between the far end of the lot and the crown of the hill created by the berm, he could hear the gurgle of a stream, though he could not see it. Past the lot, the stream and the hill,

a mist had fallen, impenetrable to the eye. The edge of the code horizon. Before them loomed a massive limestone structure, smooth lined and shimmering in the summer heat.

The building was complex, all corners and elbows sprouting at unlikely junctions; a sprawl of hulking, slate-roofed wings and improbably peaked ancillary structures that declared itself with the stolid solidity of stone. High above the riotous foothills of irregular arches and colorfully tiled rooftops below climbed a square tower with sagging pinions atop its battlements. But the face that presented itself to Dorian and Amara was maybe three stories tall, the walls pale and flat, their otherwise plain surfaces marked at irregular intervals by narrow, clouded windows that gazed down like blind and rheumy eyes.

As renders went, it was skillfully done, but curious in its chaotic rococo style. Part modern gothic, part neo-traditionalist amalgamation, the structure looked like it had been hastily cobbled together from a dozen different materials and as many different architectural designs. Unlike most Strand interpretations, its encoded form suggested no function that he could perceive, no single theme that illuminated the intention (political, nostalgic, satirical or otherwise) of its Maker.

Off to the side, a brick path wound through a small garden that consisted mostly of a low and lichenous undergrowth that Dorian recognized neither bush nor moss, but something indeterminately in between. It was a pale olive green and attractive in its own way, if wholly superfluous. Laid out among rugged stones, there were also flowers, white petalled and green stalked, almost like the ladyslips that grew in the mountains about Sonali, but clearly alien in origin. He could hear birds here and there squawking and arguing from their perches inside tall, green-needled trees. Mighty trees, with boles so large he wouldn't have been able to put his arms around them, and a tough, brown bark that appeared unpleasantly abrasive.

But other than the birds, the place was silent. All about them was the suffocating mist, a truncation of the virtual world that gave the environment an eerie feel and an almost claustrophobic delineation, despite the brightness of the day.

There were no scents either, no pungency of growing things, no chocolate sting of turbine exhaust. Just an emptiness where odor should have been.

The silence, the vague feeling of oppression, the sensory disconnect – the space had the feel of death about it, like it was a home to phantoms and nothing more.

"Where are we?" Amara whispered, and her voice bore a flat, nerveless quality in this strange air, almost devoid of resonance. "If it's a famous landmark, I don't recognize it."

Dorian didn't either. He scanned the environment for a signpost, anything that seemed to spangle as his eyes passed over it, looking for the metadata directory. There was nothing. He stepped over to the small garden beside a glass encased entry portico and squinted at the carefully manicured plants. He stooped to touch them. The leaves were rough and scratchy, tethered to thin, reedy stems. No signifier windows opened. No expository voiceover described them. They simply were, without any explanation as to their representational symbolism.

Dorian turned away. Amara remained where he had left her, opening and closing her eyelids with careful, exaggerated movements. "I'm getting nothing," she said after a time.

"You can't access the Strand from here," Dorian explained. "I decided not to attach this port to the ex-connex nodes. It's running completely in its own foam."

"It isn't a very interactive environment."

"I don't think it's supposed to be."

She craned her neck and gazed up at the building that towered over them. "It's big, though."

"It is that."

"Good detail in the stonework. You can even see the pitting in the blocks, rainwater staining along the drainage system. The weather is immersive, if not exactly to my taste. Effective shadowing, but the sky seems a little off. That shade of blue is almost cartoonish, isn't it?"

"You're one to talk," Dorian said.

"A service directory would have been nice."

"I don't think it was rendered with visitors in mind."

"Nobody goes to this much trouble with the intention of keeping it to themselves, John."

"Maybe."

He started toward the portico, but stopped, and stood for several seconds, chewing his lip and scowling.

"What's bothering you?" Amara asked.

For the first time since they'd arrived, Dorian looked at her. Her dark hair fell from her shoulders, straight and black. She studied him with her large brown eyes, and her nostrils quivered as she inhaled. She wore a blue plaid skirt, too short, but not exaggeratedly so. She was disturbingly, invitingly curved out here in the open air and the glowing sunlight.

He realized suddenly that she'd asked him a question, and no rose colored question marks had sprung from her forehead in typical manga fashion. No Cthulhoid Angles That Should Not Be. No limpid, gibbous-moon ocular cavities that took up half the real estate of her face.

"Did you edit your avatar?" Dorian asked.

"No." Amara furrowed her brow. "Was I supposed to?"

He didn't answer her. Rather, he studied his hands, his arms. He looked at his feet, even lifted one leg and peered at the bottom of his shoes. It didn't tell him anything useful, only confirmed that his avatar was the same as it had always been--a streaming triDvid render of his literal self. No bells or whistles, no faddish statements, just John Dorian playing himself in the movie of virtual life. He'd picked it because it was just dull enough to be unique.

But Amara--Ryoku--was rendering all wrong. Rounded, solid, *human*.

"There's something weird with this foam," he said at least. "Maybe a seenop integration error, or a mistranslation in the residual operating script that was used to load this bubble. God only knows what version was running inside this port when it was closed down."

He ran a quick bubble diagnostic, but the results told him nothing that he didn't already know. The waveform was still stable as far as he could tell, and the string dynamics were vibrating at a predictable rate and in proper Turlian Arcs, exactly as they had been before he and Amara had geeked in. The foam was structurally sound, even if it was stubbornly unmalleable.

He wasn't even sure that this apparent glitch was a bad

thing. He'd never been much of an anime fan.

"What should we do?" Amara glanced warily back over her shoulder. There was nothing there, but Dorian understood the gesture. He didn't like standing out here in the open any more than she did. He didn't like the curious empty feel of this place. "This is just plain creepy."

"We go in," he said.

As a precaution, he retrieved a masking script from his load-cache and executed it into the environment. The mask shimmered about him like a swarm of sentient glitter, dappling in the sun. It wasn't much, and he didn't know how it would interact with this kludgy environment, but it should obscure some of his id characteristics and keep him from being easily tracked by system tracers. If they'd been on the Strand, he would have passed the script on to Amara.

Instead, he said, "Stick close to me."

Maybe the combination of dual sysids and trace obstruction would at least provide some protection from hostile apps.

Dorian walked to a revolving door beneath the yawning portico, and Amara followed, almost treading on his heels. He gave the door a peremptory shove, and it spun readily enough on its axis. With a final look over his shoulder, he shrugged and pushed ahead. If there were any encryption locks on the portal, his standard keysets satisfied them, which led him to suspect that there wasn't security on the door at all. He found this somehow less than encouraging.

The door opened onto a low-ceilinged antechamber with marvelous paneling, a marble floor of aqua and maroon flagstones and square columns of a rich, dark wood. The ceiling was divided by sturdy and decorative rafters interspersed with white tile. Dorian stepped out into the center of the room where the ceiling opened up into a high, arched flume. An ironwrought chandelier dangled from a great height on a chain the size of his wrist. The air was cool inside, almost chilly, but it remained devoid of recognizable scent, and his footsteps on the flagstones echoed hauntingly in the open space. Directly in front of him was a broad hardwood counter and behind it, a wall of turned metal hooks, each one marked with a number. On each hook hung a

set of keys. To the left was a limestone staircase that climbed three meters into the air, made a right turn, then went on to the second floor. About the antechamber were strewn delicate pieces of furniture--soft padded couches, wingbacked smoking chairs, the occasional faux-Georgian coffee table. Against the window casings to the right, with a nice view of the flower garden, crowded more chairs and small, round tables printed on the top with chessboard patterns in crimson and cream.

There were no people. The entry hall was completely empty.

"It's a hotel," Amara said beside him. "Isn't it? All those keys."

She was right, Dorian supposed. The arrivals counter, the key pegs, the bank of ancient public triDvid comms. It looked like the lobby of an upscale hotel. He took a few steps forward, leaned against the counter and peered back into the generic office space hidden behind a discreet door that had been left ajar. The desks were empty, their furnishings spartan, as though they'd never seen much use. The carpet was a dull, institutional green, spotted here and there with plastic mats so the rolling chairs wouldn't score the rug. He read the labels on the pegboard below the sets of keys. Frangipani Room, Commons, Solarium. Persimmon Room, Tudor Room, Whittenberger Auditorium. Alumni Hall, Georgian Room, Computing Lab.

The names meant nothing to him, but he made his way around the end of the counter and pushed through a low, swinging door on the far side. He went back to the peg board to get a closer look at it and considered the rows upon rows of keys with a tilt of his head. Experimentally, he reached out for the set nearest to him. The label said *University Club*. As his hand passed over the peg, a metadata menu scrolled up in the corner of his visual field.

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Dorian stepped back and sucked in a sharp breath. He automatically withdrew his hand, and the menu vanished.

"What was that?" Amara came up to the counter and stood on the other side, hugging her elbows against the cool air. "I thought I saw a menu."

He reached out again, this time for another peg, and a new menu appeared. When he pulled away, the window receded, just as before. He made several more tests, all with the same results, each set of keys triggering a brief index menu of topics. Some had simple topics--people, places, events. Others were more obscure, or merely contextually arcane: KEN PF Stiles 2272 PPG/FG%/A:TO, Plex particle irregrs, Scioli vox.

"It's like a filing cabinet of some sort," Amara said. "Or maybe a key table from a dimensional model database?"

Dorian drew away from the pegs, leaving the keys in place. "Let's head upstairs."

He met up with her again on the other side of the counter and they moved over to the staircase. At the foot of the stair, Dorian put his hand on her arm.

They both stopped, and Amara pointed at the wall.

"Was that there before? I didn't notice it as we came in."

It was a sign. A black arrow, scribbled with a felt pen on standard lined notebook paper. It most certainly had not been there before.

"I think someone knows we're here," Dorian said.

"Do we follow it?" A note of trepidation crept into her voice.

He thought about the size of the building, the row upon row of jutting peaks, the hundreds of thousands of square feet it implied. "I don't see that we have much of a choice. We could spend weeks exploring the complexity of this render and still not find anything of value on our own."

"It's better than breaking and entering. I mean, a sign like that constitutes something of an invitation, right?"

Or a trap, Dorian thought, but he didn't say so aloud. As a precaution, he uncached another script, a virulent quik-kill troll that would (theoretically) repel most moderate code vipers. It rendered as a compact Goddard MatterKast .45. He snugged it into his belt with the safety off.

At the top of the stairs they found a grand lounge with a wide, arched ceiling and empty leather couches scattered about over a red floral print carpet. There was no sound but the slight echo of their own footfalls and the mechanical shug of circulated air. No golemechs, no AI scripts, no presence at all, either friendly or hostile. A plaque on the wall to the left, beside the elevators, told them they had reached the Mezzanine Level. Below it was another hand drawn sign with an arrow that pointed beyond the lounge to a white and black checkered hallway. Dorian and Amara exchanged a wary look, but in the absence of anything constructive to offer, he only shrugged, and they went on to the hallway.

The passage was brightly lit, the walls constructed of a generic white façade of imitation marble. Here and there were doors, closed and anonymous except for plastic faceplates beside the lintels, but even those were uninformative. Just room numbers. A short way down the passage, however, they came to a set of double glass doors. The room beyond was obscured by floor length curtains, but an embossed panel to the side announced this to be the Frangipani Room. Recognizing the name, Dorian tried the knob, but it was locked.

He turned back to Amara, and between them, on the floor, there appeared suddenly, inexplicably and counter-intuitively yet another sign, another arrow. The page had been stuck there with a ragged bit of masking tape. Amara saw it and put a hand over her mouth.

"At least he has a sense of humor," she said.

But Dorian frowned. He jiggled the handle on the door again, in the process launching a standard set of decryption loaders. The door didn't budge. He told Amara to wait for him, then dashed back the way they had come. He returned a few moments later with a set of keys from the pegboard downstairs. When she saw them, Amara frowned in disapproval.

"What?" he asked.

"I imagine he keeps the doors locked for a reason."

"Then he shouldn't leave his security keys in the lobby."

"Don't you think that's a little rude?"

Dorian put the key into the lock. "I don't really care if he thinks it's rude or not. He didn't have any ethical problem with snooping around in my datascape, so he shouldn't object if I return the favor."

If Amara saw any further difference, she didn't say so. She just crossed her arms over her chest and waited for him.

Dorian sighed. "I have an idea, okay? I just want to check this out. I'm not going to take anything."

He turned the key and the lock clicked. He tucked the keyring into his pocket and put his hand on the comforting grip of the Goddard. Slowly, he pushed the door open. Inside, he found a large and cluttered room. It felt damp and grimy and had the moldy look of long neglect. As the door swung open, dim soffet lights hummed to life from recessed fixtures in the ceiling, creating wavering yellow pools in the shadows. Dorian took a tentative step forward, then stopped. The room was piled floor to ceiling with what largely seemed to be *crap*. Stacks of loose leafed paper, old fashioned photo albums, an indecipherable painting here and there that hung on the wall, slightly askew. In one corner, beneath a cone of light, sat an old wooden desk. On top of it was a battered and ancient Vortex M800 Multithread Terminal. The monitor screen showed the signature blue and green logon prompt screen. Dorian stared at it and whistled. There hadn't been a working Vortex M800 in the real universe in over sixty years.

Oddities: A low dais against the far wall, backed by heavy velvet curtains. An elevated walkway that encircled a dirt encrusted hardwood floor, largely impassable because of the teetering columns of detritus that lined the walls. Gilt chandeliers. It occurred to him that this was rather lofty brik-a-brak for a crap storage vault.

Perhaps *incongruous* was a better word.

Dorian stepped back across the threshold, closed and locked the door behind him.

The menu beneath the Frangipani Room peg had said: Obsolete tech expertise, Mrs. Eckman's Art Class (Freshman

Year), General Indistinct Childhood Memos, Other Useless Crap (Lots—begin sorting at your peril).

"Let's go," he said. "I learned what I needed to know."

"I'm glad it's so clear to you," Amara replied pointedly.

Dorian led her on down the hallway. There were more signs now, the arrows drawn with bolder strokes. He suspected that they'd start encountering neon markers soon, with flashing bulbs and sonorous mechanical trumpets, if they didn't pick up the pace.

As they went along, he explained. "It was the menus on the pegboard. That's not a classic user directory, but it is the sort of file commenting you see in most code structures. Most programmers leave themselves notes inside their text to explain what a module is designed to do inside the broader program logic."

"Documentation," Amara said, nodding.

"That's what *we* call it, certainly. Most program documentation is worthless to anyone except the programmer. The menus that opened on the pegboard are what we call Yellow Note technology--quick topical marginalia that isn't intended for users in general, just truncated reminders about what you were planning on doing in that bit of logic."

They came to an intersection. The hallway dead-ended in a glass storefront display window filled with sweatshirted mannequins, old fashioned textbook displays and assorted point-of-purchase consumables arranged in interesting and attractive poses. A new hall curved off to the right, heading in the same general direction they had been traveling, but it was dark, as though the power in that direction had failed. To the left was another staircase, this one a narrow set of stone steps. In the middle, another closed and presumably locked doorway that would, in realtime, act as the entrance to the University Book Store (as the sign above it read). In case there was any doubt, another arrow had attached itself to the wall by the stairs, angled so that it pointed upward.

"It's a memory palace," Dorian went on as they climbed the stairs. "In ancient times, back on Earth, before there were books and libraries and infotainment pods or even a literate class to use those things, popular entertainment came in the form epic dramatic poems recited by itinerant minstrels and

poets. Most of these guys were illiterate themselves—they were like newswire trebek's, I guess--so the traditional lays were taught to them orally, repeated over and over from master to student until the kid had committed the whole thing to memory. We're talking about thousands and thousands of lines of verse that had to be memorized and delivered by rote on demand. Not just one poem, but dozens, maybe hundreds. There were no reference manuals, no texts to study to refresh their memories." He tapped the side of his head. "They kept it all up here in organizational structures the Roman writers called memory palaces. *Ars memoria*, the art of remembering. Essentially, these were structures—sometimes real, sometimes imaginary--the student fabricated in his mind and filled with layer upon layer of architectural, design and decorating details. The palaces would become marvelously baroque, endlessly and precisely detailed, so that each object they stored there was mnemonically associated with an idea or a trigger that referenced items to be remembered. Augustine of Hippo claimed to have had a friend he called Simplicius who could recite the complete *Aeneid* using this technique. Backwards."

"Like their own accessible foam," Amara said.

"Right, except they had no concept of personal foam. They had to actually store all the data they wanted to instantly retrieve in their own synaptic matrix. By imagining themselves strolling through their memory palace, they could access anything they had pre-determined was worth remembering. It was like a wetware database index."

The next level looked much like the one they had just left behind. To the right roamed a long and rather dull looking hall. There was another entrance to the book store on the left, and immediately ahead of them, a hallway that skirted the store front and wound on through the building. They went forward, following a manic plaster of arrows.

"So you're saying that this is Raville's memory palace?" Amara asked, her voice tinged with wonder. "This huge building?"

"I'm saying it started as a memory palace. The memory palace technique allowed Raville to keep his mental space logically organized in upload. I mean, that's what the upload

process is supposed to do. It takes a fundamentally incoherent pattern and imposes order on it. The imposition of an alien index on the neural matrix isn't just to ease cross-platform decoding, it's one of the primary mechanisms employed to insure package consciousness suppression. The Schrödinger waveforms used for storage are selected or manipulated because of their mathematical proclivity for organizing into coherent patterns that will replicate the individual being scanned and uploaded. The data inside the waveforms consequently wants to be organized in a specific way. The package load process maintains the perfect balance between data yearning to organize into coherency and data collapsing into entropy."

"And since Raville already had an organizational index..."

"The balance was disrupted toward organization. It could have just as easily backfired, and the conflict in the indices tilted the balance the other way, toward decoherency, but I suspect it was a calculated risk."

"Right before he went into zap for the first time? That's a pretty big risk, don't you think?"

Dorian wasn't certain exactly what he was thinking at this point, only that the direction of those thoughts seemed to be wending in a pretty sinister general direction.

Amara suddenly squeezed his arm, dragging him to a halt. "John, what if his mental index didn't win out? Or at least didn't win out completely? What if this isn't Michael Raville at all, just a sort of--"

"Flawed simulacrum?" Dorian finished for her. "I've been thinking about that. I don't know that it makes any difference. Even if he translated accurately from package to foam, this isn't the man we know from the newswires as Michael Raville. As far as he's concerned, he's the man who invented the form of zap technology that mainly allowed manufacturers to ease their consciences after unbridled decades of Third World labor exploitation. Everything else that zap has become was someone else's vision, someone else's accomplishment. The files that I extracted from this port indicate that he's kept a pretty close eye on himself over the years, but that isn't the same thing as being the person he became. We can't take anything we think we know about the contemporary Michael

Raville for granted."

"Or," Amara said in a low voice, "the overwrites really could have made him insane."

"Yes, that too."

She glanced at the gun poking out above his belt. "I don't suppose you've got another one of those?"

"Not in a form I could pass to you off the Strand." Dorian squeezed her shoulder. "He won't be able to follow you if you have to flip out. Just don't let him touch you, and don't accept anything he tries to pass to you. Okay?"

Amara nodded her understanding, but it was an uncertain gesture, and Dorian noted that she made more of an effort to stick close to him.

Though he did not say so, what concerned him most of all was what had bothered him initially about this rendered environment. The level of cognitive organization that had preserved Raville's burgeoning consciousness was also, he suspected, what gave him the power to flatten the display of Amara's avatar. If he could set the basic architecture's parameters, who could say what else Raville might be capable of in his own tailored environment? There was no guarantee that Dorian's system-dependent scripts would provide any protection for them at all, not if Raville had made himself a god inside this bubble of foam.

Guided by signs, they passed the Georgian Room, a stained glass entryway that led to the Tudor Room, then the hallway made a jog to the left, and they spilled into a brightly lit and cavernous space. Golden sunlight shafted through tall windows on the north wall. Fake marble gave way to great blocks of grey stone, wall and ceiling. The floor was a chaotic pattern of red and blue flagstones polished to a high gloss. More couches here, lined in neat rows, and all empty once again. Across the room, through the bay window set in the south wall, they could see a broad sidewalk running along a paved road, and a summer green lawn beyond. Then nothing, just the haze of code death. Opposite the door they had come through, and a bit to the left, there was another doorway, and Dorian hurried toward it.

The air was warmer here, and as Dorian passed through the chamber, he noticed an alcove beneath a succession of

stone archways off to his right. The brief lounge was filled with a cozy collection of padded sofas and high backed chairs, and beyond, a log fire roared merrily in the depths of a rustic and impressive stone fireplace. In one of the chairs oblique to the fire, a man sat alone, staring into the flames, his fingertips pressed together in front of his chin. As they crossed his field of vision, the man lifted his head expectantly and looked directly at them.

Dorian, seeing him at last, stumbled awkwardly to a halt.

"You must be the man who killed my dog," said Michael Raville, smiling, as he rose to his feet.

6.

The virtual self-replication of the digitized data that comprised Michael Raville smiled warmly at them and indicated with a sweep of his arm that they should come sit with him on one of the couches near the fire. He was of average height, dark haired, just as his pictures had led Dorian to expect. He wore a crimson sweatshirt with the word INDIANA splayed across the front, faded denim jeans and sneakers, but he still exhibited the native ease and confidence that served him so well as CEO, Harvard Chair and international plenipotentiary. His smile seemed genuinely friendly and made his otherwise dark eyes flash. The fact that Dorian had no way of knowing if this projection of amiability was a true representation of the man's personality or just a congenial public render made him wary. He didn't like not being able to tell where reality ended and the fantasy began.

Nevertheless, since they had come this far, Dorian took Amara's wrist and led her over to the alcove.

"I wondered how long it would take for someone to figure out that I had taken a semi-permanent residence here. Quite a bit longer than I expected, to be honest. I've qualified for common law squatter's protections nearly six times over." Raville extended his hand in greeting, but Dorian backed away. The physicist grinned pleasantly and dropped his arm. "Ah, you must be the security agent for this system."

Raville performed the accustomed flutter with his eyelids, and his smile grew broad. "John Dorian, I presume."

Dorian nodded and gruffly answered, "Michael Raville."

"You've made my life rather difficult for the last few years, Mr. Dorian." He finger-quoted the word *life*. If he was surprised that Dorian had recognized him so readily, his reaction did not betray it. "It is a shame about my dog, though."

"Your dog?" Amara asked, confused.

"The spider," Dorian said to her. They took their seat across from him, near enough to the fireplace to feel its heat. The blaze was large, but the environmental algorithms rendered the sensation of warmth as disproportionately feeble. Dorian wasn't sure if this was an error, or simply a reflection of the Raville-object's disconnection from sense experience.

"I saw that wrapper you put around it," Raville said, curling his lip in disdain. "Absolutely horrible. Not the execution of the render, of course, that was fine technical work, but the render itself. Still, it was rather a lot more effort than I would have exerted just to purge a simple fetch program."

Dorian grunted. "I didn't come here to get into a piss off with you."

Simple fetch program. Pfft.

"I'm terribly sorry if I've offended you." Raville's eyes glittered playfully.

Somehow, Dorian doubted his sincerity. "No offense taken."

"You're bound and determined not to gush all over the prick who's been parasiting off your datascape for the last forty years, aren't you?" Raville laughed and grinned at him playfully. "No, no, I understand completely. But you can't fault a man for fishing after a few compliments on his programmatical opus."

"If you'd dropped it anywhere else but on my datascape, I might have obliged you."

"It is very impressive," Amara conceded.

"Thank you, my dear. That's very kind of you." He stabbed a look of mock vindication at Dorian. "You know, I could just as easily argue that this was my datascape long before it was yours." The eye flutter again. "You hadn't even been born when I was transferred from Oak Ridge. But If it

means anything to you, you're a much better network agent than any of those gentlemen, and they're guarding a whole host of devastating national secrets."

"I'm less concerned about the some Earth enclave's defense data than about the integrity of the personal and proprietary files belonging to a few million of my employer's clients." Dorian crossed his arms over his chest. The more Raville treated this incident like some sort of joke, the more intractable he was beginning to feel. "And I don't particularly appreciate your accessing my personnel record right in front of me as though you were entitled to free reign of my network. As a parlor trick, it leaves something to be desired. Like common courtesy."

"I haven't actually taken anything, let me remind you, and even if I had, it's not like I technically removed it from your network."

"Our clients probably wouldn't see it that way. I certainly don't. You're violating their privacy, which is one of the services we're paid for."

"Bah. Even the items I did borrow weren't anything that the owners would consider overly personal, I can assure you. I'm not a voyeur." Raville looked away from Dorian and winked at Amara. "You must believe me, Ms. Cain. Everything I've extracted has been technical or educational in nature. Where possible, I took only public data accessible off the newswire. It wasn't my fault that your Infocache decided to house some of the brightest scientific minds in the known universe, along with their complete libraries and journal publications. A man can only be tempted with such intensity for so long before resistance becomes futile. Can I offer you something to drink?"

Raville snapped his fingers, and a silver tea service appeared on the table before them. A slip of steam piped from the long, fluted neck of the tea pot, but the aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafting on the air was conspicuously absent. "I don't actually partake, of course, but this is still the sort of thing one is supposed to do when unexpected guests arrive, I believe. Please tell me if this gesture violates some local cultural standard of which I'm not aware."

Dorian shook his head. "You're amazing. Flabbergasting."

I mean that."

Raville ignored him and leaned forward so that it was clear he was speaking just to Amara, a dramatic aside. "He's told you not to accept anything I offer, I imagine. These security agents are notoriously paranoid, practically to the point of rudeness. I can assure you that this is only and exactly what it seems to be--a fairly competent, if I must say so myself, digital render of French Vanilla cappuccino. What it may lack in solidity, it makes up for in raw pleasure center stimulation. Even those of us who are not actually embodied--oh, that would be *all* of us at the moment, wouldn't it?--should be able to derive some value from the social ceremony of afternoon tea."

Amara giggled and Dorian tilted his head toward her disapprovingly.

"I'd better pass," she said, "but thank you for the offer. And you should call me Amara."

"That's a very pretty name, for a very pretty girl." Raville winked at her.

Dorian groaned.

The physicist shrugged and sat back with a theatrical sigh. "You'll have to forgive me. I am, after all, a perpetually twenty-something year old man trapped in an eighty year old waveform. Sometimes I fail to act my age."

"And sometimes John fails to act particularly human," she returned. Dorian suspected she may have passed him back a wink of her own. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Raville."

"Michael, please." Raville eased his shoulders deeper into his chair. He waved his hand absently and the tea service vanished. "Believe me, I'm just having a bit of fun at Mr. Dorian's expense. I am able to appreciate his perspective. To him, I am a virus on his network. I am a thorn in his side--a potential public relations nightmare for his employer. But most of all, I am a threat to his reputation in a business that is driven by reputation. He is perfectly within his rights to be suspicious of me, because we are, at the end of the day, fundamentally at odds. He believes that I want to live, and I believe that he wants to delete me." He dipped his gaze to Dorian, frowning. "Would you say that's an accurate

assessment of our relationship?"

"You're getting there."

"We should get down to business, then, if you aren't going to be moved by any of my attempts at hospitality. You want to evict me from my home, preferably without a lot of unnecessary public fuss. I have no particular desire to be deleted just yet. What are we to do about that?"

"I know what I'm going to do about it," Dorian replied. "I didn't come here to negotiate favorable terms for your surrender."

"You only came to see the freak in his cage, is that it?"

"I came to make sure I was right," he answered, shrugging. "Nothing personal. What you wanted from Oak Ridge was your business. What you might have subsequently decided to swip from the Archive is mine."

"And I assume that my personal assurance that my residence here has been mostly harmless is not a satisfactory token?"

"No."

"Once a thief, always a thief, eh? I don't blame you for being suspicious, Mr. Dorian. However, if I might ask, how exactly did you guess that my package had separated from the holding foam?"

It was Dorian's turn to smile. "Baseball scores."

"Ah. I see." Raville nodded, not the least bit shocked, as though he had expected no other answer than the one he received. "What is one to do? Life is meaningless without the occasional indulgence in one's passions. My passion is a silly boy's game. I must indulge it even if that passion is ultimately destructive."

"There are ten million fans in Boston who wouldn't disagree with you from what I understand."

The jab caught Raville completely by surprise, and he chuckled, his eyes wide in amazement. "You've done your homework, I see. I'll be the first to admit that my tenure as sports franchise magnate has been one of my less successful endeavors on a number of fronts. However, as much as I would love to spend a few hours chatting baseball with you, Mr. Dorian, we mustn't let ourselves get sidetracked. Since the two of you have chosen to take time out of your busy

schedules and pay me a visit, we ought to get straight down to business. We have much to discuss if we're going to avert the end of human civilization as we know it."

Dorian, not knowing what else to do, blinked in stunned silence. He did not have a witty comeback in cache for this turn in the conversation.

"I see that comes as a surprise to you."

"I see that it seems like a sane pronouncement to you."

"From my perspective, it's perfectly sane."

"Sure. Lots of sane people talk about the imminent end of the world. You're probably working on your render of a nice sandwich board even as we speak."

Raville looked imporingly at Amara. "Is he always like this?"

"Do you mean is he always so gratingly arrogant? That answer would be 'yes'. But usually it's an endearing sort of arrogance."

"You're not helping," Dorian hissed at her. "Don't encourage the nutcases."

"The pitfall of arrogance has always been a dedicated blindness to information that conflicts with one's carefully assembled worldview," Raville advised him. "You see at best through a glass darkly. My task is to open your eyes to the truth you do not choose to see."

"You're sure it's not just to attempt to save yourself from the purge bin? Because that would make more sense. It's the only future you're likely to see, in fact, and to that extent, feeling somewhat apocalyptic is probably appropriate. The world you know *is* about to end."

Raville grunted in annoyance. "You're very good at what you do, I'll grant you that, but do you sincerely believe that you discovered my presence here for any reason other than that I decided you should? As I said, you're very good, but I've been far superior at this game for a long, long time."

Amara spoke up before Dorian could respond. "Are you really talking about the end of the world?"

"The end of human civilization, yes. Armageddon. The Drop of the Other Shoe. Ragnarok." Raville licked his lips, and glanced at Dorian. "Allow me to make the glass a little less opaque for you: It was imperative that I get your

attention, even at the risk that I might be purged without being afforded the opportunity to state my case. I could not simply stand up and announce my presence. Confronted directly, you would have panicked. I had to be cautious. I had to entice you, make you believe that you came to me of your own volition. I've been watching you for quite some time, Dorian. I presented you with a puzzle you would not be able to resist."

Why did that sound so annoyingly familiar?

Raville continued: "This is not a ploy to plead for my skin, as you have so cynically suggested. This has nothing to do with my continued survival in this format, I assure you." Raville scowled as if he found even the idea offensive. "I never wanted this existence, and after all these years, I find that I want it even less with each passing day. Even calling it 'existence' is a violence to the language. Forever someone else's artistic vision of creation, someone else's proprietary code. That is not a burden anyone should have to bear, and it was a decision I made too lightly. It's one thing to make the objective decision to subject one's alternate digital self to the torment of virtual oblivion in the name of the common good. It is quite another to be the one who must endure it year after year, age upon age, accepting the shell of existence as your eternal inheritance. I know what the price of that folly is. I have endured as I was created to endure, plugging along and performing the duties for which I was constructed long after the task has been completed and my purpose forgotten by those who made me. I have subsisted on emptiness and memory along for longer than you could imagine. I have sailed the seas of the electronic night, and still I endure, forgotten and unmourned even by myself.

"Don't presume to know my motivations, Mr. Dorian. The horror of my existence is beyond your comprehension, and if it wasn't for this one final task that I have taken into my and, I would welcome the oblivion you promise. This life, this *abomination*, is not the way man was intended to live."

"I don't understand," Amara said, her voice quiet as though she was awed by his pain. "Why did you subject yourself to it in the first place? You're supposed to have been a backup package created in preparation for the first human

zap. Why build this whole structure? Why fill all of these rooms with memories?"

Dorian grimaced. She was asking all the wrong questions. "What was it that you needed so badly from the Oak Ridge datacore that you would risk everything you had built to obtain it?"

"Yes," Raville agreed grudgingly. "What was deemed so essential that a lifetime of invisible suffering was considered a reasonable cost? The truth, I suppose, is that I did not ever expect that this ceaseless existence would last. It is the unintended consequence of an imperfect understanding of what was at the time a radical new technology."

Raville swept his arm over the lounge, symbolically including not just the room they occupied, but the myriad closets, offices, meeting rooms and painstakingly detailed totality of his construction. "This wasn't ever meant to be my habitation. I made it for Barney—for my dog, what you call the spider. There was a risk that this might happen, yes, but mostly I believed that this was all for his benefit. I was only supposed to do my job, then get on about going quietly into that proverbial good night. Worst case scenario, I would endure until I had acquired the necessary data, and then my actual self would have my file terminated." He shrugged eloquently. "What can I say? Things change."

"And whatever changed, I presume, is the reason you didn't just self-terminate?" Dorian asked.

"I take it from your question that suicide is something you regularly contemplate with no qualms," Raville grated sarcastically. "Most of us don't have your strength of mental constitution."

Dorian rolled his eyes, but didn't otherwise respond.

Amara responded with suspicion. "So this whole environment, this incredibly detailed render, was just supposed to be a one-time executable? I have a hard time believing that."

"Please don't misunderstand," Raville cautioned her. "I had practiced the *ars memoria* from my days as a university undergraduate. My wife, Annalise, taught me the techniques. It was focus of her Master's thesis. We met right here, in fact. Every day for two years, here in the South Lounge of the

Indiana Memorial Union—the largest structure I knew. It was almost four hundred years old when I was a student here, and I studied every inch of it in agonizing detail. I even took a summer job as a janitor in order to access some of the publically restricted nooks and crannies.” He smiled unexpectedly, a disarming and self-deprecatory expression. “It was the only building I knew at the time that I thought was large enough to contain all of my grand ideas. I’ve always been a bit full of myself. Annalise’s opinion was that my three room apartment would have been more than sufficient.”

“That’s very sweet,” Dorian said, growling. “You used the memory palace you built with your college sweetheart to store the code for your illicit data mine, as well as to retain cognitive control of the replicated neural matrix. Some guys just send Valentine’s Day cards to express their undying love. But then again, I suppose VD cards won’t pass security at a defense installation datacore.”

“Yes. I hid the code that would assemble as Barney where the package technicians would not find it—as rote data in wet storage. Thousands upon thousands of lines of code committed to memory one at a time and subsequently flash copied and converted to their active binary equivalent capable of interacting with known datascape management protocols. My guess was that if my palace behaved as I expected, in that first instant of emergent consciousness inside the foam, I could execute my fetch and replication program in the theoretical space of shadow foam. Barney would go to work and I would succumb to the mathematically imposed sleep of mass storage. All for the sole purpose of hacking my way into the Oak Ridge network.”

Amara said, “But why?”

“That this package was created as an emergency back-up for the first human zap trials,” Raville said, fixing them with his penetrating gaze, “is the public story. A tale of Wild West American scientific hubris. A myth designed for public consumption.”

“And the truth?” Dorian asked.

“The truth is something else entirely. It almost always is. The story, as I understand it from the history books I’ve been able to get my hands on goes something like this: world

famous inventor, coming off the unbridled success of a grand technological stroke--the paradigm-shifting implementation of industrial zap technology--gets a grander and even more daring idea. Why just infinitely replicate things like steel and garden rakes and pepperoni pizzas when you could do something really spectacular like move *people* from point to point. At this point in his career, he's already making rupees by the boatload because of investments by the manufacturing sector in the first iteration of zap. He's got money, he's got connections, he's been nominated for nearly every humanitarian award in the history of the humankind.

"So when he starts making calls about this new idea, people say *Great! Brilliant! Fantastic!* Then they ask what sort of test protocols he's got designed for something so radical and potentially dangerous. Of course, he doesn't tell them that he's already tested it on his dog, and old Barney came out of it (seemingly) okay. Instead, he says that he's heard about all the fine advances that have been made in biomimetics over the last few years, about package uploads. He says that he's run all the tests he can, but he'll be damned if he's going to subject anyone else to his folly, if that's what it turns out to be. He's also heard that this big defense lab in Tennessee is the biomimetics capital of the universe, that they're claiming they can reliably copy a whole danged person. Rumor has it that they've been doing this with politicians for awhile now. If he could maybe get a package of himself in storage, he could just zap himself and prove to the world how safe and useful this technology is with a clear conscience. If he fails, then they can just reconstitute him and its back to the drawing board."

Raville surged to his feet. He began to pace back and forth in the space between the table and the fireplace. "But what he doesn't tell them is that he has, in fact, already zapped himself. He *knows* that it's safe. Because despite all the great things that have come to him because of zap, and all the things that will come to him in the future, human transport was always the goal from the very beginning. Everything else--the cheap resources, the solution to the hunger crisis, the technological revolution--was just a proof of concept and a way to raise enough capital to survive until this ultimate step could be taken. What are the fundamental principles of zap

technology, Ms. Cain?"

Surprised at his self-interruption, Amara stuttered over her answer. "The package must be *bona fide* before transmission, meaning a pure copy without enhancements, without any mods more invasive than basic genetic therapy. The foam must be accurately configured and the origin and receptor waves synchronized. The zap transform must be certified. And, um..."

"There must be an open receptor node at the end of the transmission," Dorian finished for her. "An untethered signal is subject to traditional laws of entropy and must necessarily degrade over time without external recodification."

Raville scudded to a halt and snapped his fingers. "Exactly. But what happens to the package while it is in transit? Where is it?"

"Everywhere," Dorian said. "In theory, the zap signal passes through every point in the universe at once, and only eventually materializes in the foam that's been pre-selected to manifest it. Until that time, it's a chaos waveform. That's basic quantum information theory."

Raville snorted. "I'll assure you that it was anything *but* basic when I was developing the mathematical laws and building the technology to exploit it, thank you very much."

"Sorry." Oddly, Dorian found that he actually meant it. It was easy to forget that this was Michael Raville.

"I came back from Mars with the knowledge for all of it lodged inside my head, exactly how it should work, how the equations would be designed and the devices developed that would make it a reality. All that you have come to take for granted about zap, about the way it has revolutionized the human experience, I foresaw then in pure, prophetic form. It was as real to me coming home from my service with the Franciscans on Mars as your lives are to you now."

"The Scioli Mission," Dorian said.

"Yes! Mucking about in the Martian dirt with hard-bitten miners, failed farmers, all of those desperate and starving and abandoned humans, cut off from the planet of their birth, and from a civilization that had not merely forgotten them, but actively disowned them. *Let the Martians solve their own problems!* That was the cry from Earth governments, from

Terran nations who had their hands full trying to feed their own people and stop their own petty wars without being forced to meddle in the affairs of a colony millions of kilometers distant. All that concerned them was the steady flow of resources, and they cared nothing about the rape of this fragile world so recently recovered from the barrenness of ice and fire and solar wind.

"Even if it never been other than a prosaic missionary event, that experience alone would have changed me forever. The constant immersion in so much poverty and misery would have transformed any man with a heart not carved from cold stone. But it wasn't just depravity that inspired zap. It wasn't properly inspired at all, not the way you imagine it.

"It was all the old man. It was a gift. And it was just the beginning."

Raville paused, and Amara managed to catch the corner of Dorian's eye. He knew what she was thinking. This is where they reached the crazy bit they had been so worried about.

"I think you'd better explain that a little better," she said.

Raville swung to face them, and his eyes were far away, fixed on some point beyond them, some scene that they could not see. His fingers curled into fists. "I met him on the road between Setra Brahma and North Essex, as desolate a stretch of country as you'll find on any planet in human space. Low ridges of red Martian rock painted gold and green with recently seeded microbe farms. A cool wind whistling through the storm gullies. Pavonis Mons was barely visible, glinting in the light of the setting sun like a bloody shard through the everpresent mist that clung to the lowlands. There was Ascreaus to the northeast, Arsia Mons to the Southwest, the three of peaks forming that famous belt the natives call the Triple Sisters of Mercy. I was driving an old Tyogi Quanta, on my way back from the relief station in North Essex, where I'd been delivering hundred kilo bags of rice to the Pater who ran the church there.

"I came upon the old man suddenly. The light was bad, I crested a hill, and there he was, just sitting in the middle of the road, if you could even call it a road. It was really just a pounded dirt track, a road by consensus rather than engineering. Red soil, red ruts that served as my path through

the wilderness, that pink and caramel sky, and he wore a pair of brown coveralls, a stained grey shirt. It looked as though he had spent the last hour rolling in the dust. He was lucky I spotted him at all. I missed running him down by centimeters: the width of a thumbnail. I cried out--I probably cursed, in fact--and jerked the wheel on the Quanta and put her straight into a gully, a drop of maybe two meters. The safety foam popped, the engine coughed, made a grinding noise, then quit all together. I remember that sound, you know, that crunch of metal on stone. That sound of collision that you hear inside your mind after an accident; a recollection that is somehow both sound and the sensation of impact? It still bothers me to think about it.

"Oh, I was hot as I kicked the door open. Absolutely livid. I didn't care if he was starving or delusional or outright insane. I was going to make sure he heard *me*, you know. That he understood that I was a young man with a future, with a college degree under my belt and a choice graduate school waiting for me. I was *somebody*, and I was going grand places, and I was toiling away over this year to give something of value back to the human community--toiling for his sake--and he had almost killed me with his madman's antics.

"I marched up to him and grabbed him by the shoulder, jerked him back a bit so he was forced to lift his head and look me in the eye, to take notice of me, by God. But before I could speak a single word, this old man, he licked his cracked and swollen lips and he said to me, as clear as I'm speaking to you now: *Do not be afraid*.

"Well, as you can imagine, that was an even bigger piss off than almost killing me in the ditch. I mean, I was ready to rip his God-beloved head off his shoulders, and he's telling *me* not to be afraid. Those thin, old man limbs, his fragile bones and parchment skin. I could have broken him like a clay pot. But that was part of it, you see. Because I was afraid. I was terrified that I had injured him. I was terrified that my truck was busted to scrap and I was twenty kilometers from home and stuck out in the middle of the Martian wilderness without any form of protection whatsoever. Even if he wasn't injured, it wasn't like I could just leave him there, this sick old bastard, so I was worried about the both of us and how much easier a

target we'd be for thieves and marauders than I would have been alone. Don't get me wrong. I was no saint even in my idealistic youth. I knew I'd have to explain the wrecked truck to Father Hewson, and the only thing that would keep him from killing me over it was this old fool here, and any wrath I might escape by avoiding the old man would be paid me double if I abandoned him out in the middle of nowhere for the next passing vehicle to mash. I was screwed either way, as I saw it.

"So I found myself at a bit of a loss, you could say. But what he said to me next changed the future course of human history. Can you imagine it? The ravings of a mad old man turning the whole universe on its axis." Raville chuckled to himself. "I suppose it wouldn't be the first time."

Dorian sat listening, stiff as stone. He watched Raville the way a hawk might follow the path of a rabbit. But Amara leaned forward earnestly.

"What did he say?" she asked in a quiet voice. "What happened next?"

"He looked at me with the clearest eyes I have ever seen, and he said *If though goest down into the darkling lands and bringest the one pearl, which is in the midst of the sea away from the serpent, thou shalt put on thy glittering robe, and thou shalt be content.*" When neither Amara nor Dorian reacted, looking a bit crestfallen, he added, "A metaphor. I did not readily understand it at first, either."

"Ah, the dreaded metaphor," Dorian muttered. He was growing weary of Raville's theatrics.

"He said to me that his name was Eliahu ben Hai, originally from Old Jerusalem in New Mesopotamia and that he had been told to come this place, this patch of emptiness on the barren Martian plain, and to wait for the man he would meet there. And to that man, he was to give a gift.

"From my perspective, what was going on was obvious: he was crazy. I began to fear that maybe I'd tapped him with the bumper after all, but he had no mark on him that I could find. So I helped him to his feet. He was, it turned out, remarkably spry despite his age and the condition in which I'd found him. I stepped back and began to think about checking on the Quanta or finding a way that I might signal for help if

the truck was a lost cause. But at that moment, Eliahu reached into himself--not his pocket, I tell you, but into his flesh itself--and brought out this and gave it to me."

As he spoke, Raville cupped his hand over his chest. His fingers appeared to pass through the wall of ribs and muscle and flesh. The skin parted around a cavity as black as a gravity well, and he drew out an orb of pure, translucent light. It was small, the size of a walnut, but within it the light blazed fierce and glorious, casting rainbows of elemental energy all about the room. The riotous colors burned like liquid fire in his palm, poured from between his fingers, the way an icy mountain stream spills over outcroppings of stone. The light was breathtaking, and Amara gasped. Dorian averted his eyes from the piercing glare.

"The instant I touched it, I knew all that I would ever need to know. I understood the mechanics of the universe itself. For the briefest of moments, it was as though I was inside the mind of God, or perhaps even that the mind of God was inside *me*. There are no words for it, no language for such an encounter. I only knew that I had entered the fullness, and I contained it. The sense of clarity so pure, so perfect that it should have shattered me. In that instant, I was all things in all places. Unconstrained, unmoored, and I filled the universe."

"The first zap," Amara said, startled by understanding.

"Yes." Raville presented her with a glowing smile. "A true zap, completely unmediated by the technological horrors. I was, as the zaptrons keep saying, one with the universe. I came face to face, as it were, with beings so far beyond us that they could not be comprehended. It was an experience of what our Mr. Dorian would call pure information. Communication that was all signal, devoid of noise.

"And then it was gone. What remained was merely the memory of that knowing, the shadow of knowledge, the thimble's weight that my waking mind could actually retain." Raville shrugged his shoulders as though they could not be expected to understand what he was saying. "I spent the next six weeks with Eliahu in the desert. I left my life behind, the ruined truck, all thought of my friends and family. I followed him to the habitat he had constructed in the caves along

Maxima Fatine and stayed with him, learning all that I could about this mystery. Where the gift had come from, how it had come to be, who had given it. Most of all, what it was that they wanted from me.

"Eliahu said that they call themselves the Exousiai, the Helpers, for they had come across great distances to assist us in making the grand leap into our foredestined future. They desired to aid us in sloughing off these garments of flesh, the last and inevitable transition from meat to spirit, from body to mind. They came to set us free from the prison of need and biological imperative. They came to *me*, just as they had once gone to Georges Nischal and taught him the fundamental mechanisms that would become the Strand. And to Lao Ping, for whom they had unlocked the secrets of matter itself, and showed the wonders that would become nanoscale assembly. Also, to Sperling and Bass and Cuervantes, each in his or her own way contributing essential rungs in the Jacob's Ladder of progress that led ever up and beyond, into the stars, into the infinite, delivered in a mystery of Light.

"It was to me that they had given the final gift; the last evolution from body to mind, after the foundation had been laid by all the others. Each progressive technological wonder had been a small step, so that our species could encompass them, so that we would have time to adapt to each incremental miracle, so that none would be left behind. It was zap that they reserved until the very last. The end of want, of loss, of death itself." Raville held the orb aloft, and it's fierce light dimmed even the rays of the perpetual noon sunlight passing through the windows of the hall. "Everything to which our species has aspired, as a freely given gift. A grace to surpass all others."

Dorian gave an ugly snort. "They handed you paradise, and you sold it to the megaconglomerates for a bowl of pottage. Nice."

Raville stared at him. "We revolutionized human experience. We freed mankind from the limitations of our DNA."

"You exported exploitation to the fringe worlds as a totalitarian yoke of absolute manufacturing and resource control while you and your cronies made yourselves richer

than God. You sold yourselves indulgences so you could wallow in a sty of greed and backslapping. They gave you a free gift and you held out for the highest bidder. Face it, Raville, whatever divine vision you may have come out of the Martian wilderness with, you betrayed it long ago. You failed."

For a few moments, Raville gazed at him blankly. His eyes flickered between the wondrous light of the orb and Dorian's accusatory glower. Slowly, he lowered the beacon shining in his hand and covered it with his fingers.

"Yes. We did fail." He shook his head. "I failed. I had the opportunity to touch the infinite, and settled for the merely vast. I was supposed to lead the world into a glorious age, and I turned my back on the vision."

Breathless, Amara whispered, "But...why?"

"I have no idea." Raville's jaws tightened with unexpected bitterness. "I am not my brother's keeper. Just his bastard copy. I was languishing in a digital deep freeze while he was selling our communal soul, remember?"

"Hold up a second." Dorian waved his hands in a gesture of denial. "Did it ever occur to you to ask why? Why would these Helpers, the Exousiai--why would they just give us these gifts?"

"Because they are lonely."

"Lonely?"

"To touch the *quae-ha-distra* is to touch the soul of the Exousiai, and for all of their wisdom and knowledge and awesome grandeur, the defining characteristic of their being is longing. They long to be no longer alone in the universe. Their answer is to make mere humans into gods, just as they are. Equals with whom they might commune."

"So what does all of this have to do with Oak Ridge?" Dorian was running out of patience. He wondered if this was how St. James had felt once upon a time, when mad old Paul came trundling back from Damascus toting a revolution they had not foreseen and did not particularly want. When people started ranting about lights in the sky and gods inside them, the typical human reaction was inevitably the urge to back away. And fast.

"It came to my attention through friends I had cultivated in

the Enclave's administration that there were researches being conducted based upon my early scheme conversion principles that paralleled my own infant experiments with point-to-point human transfer, utilizing biomemetics advances."

Dorian tried not to laugh. "You were on a mission from God, but some government pinhead beat you to it."

"Crudely, but yes. They were stretching the limits of biomemetics. There were issues with foam configuration. Poor translations of scheme to fact. Whereas I was tackling those issues before proceeding with actual trials...they were not so patient."

"You mean Malcolm and Bernhardt," Dorian said.

"The first zaptronauts?" Amara asked.

"They weren't prepared to encounter the Exousiai." An expression like pain crossed Raville's face, a psychic wince. "Their packages were defective on upload and improperly indexed. There was only the most rudimentary suppression of the qualia. But they remained reasonably sane, enough that the tales they told in their subsequent debriefings led to more researches, more test subjects, most of which did not fare nearly as well.

"Basically, it was happening too soon. The technology was so new; there were still many critics who worried about the impact of digitized object reconstitution on the environment, on social order, on every facet of human commerce and relationship. We required time to adapt to the *idea*, so that we wouldn't be afraid. That's the nature of the human mind, you see? It doesn't matter how alien the concept or how radical the technology is. We don't have to understand how something works, or even why it works. Just demonstrate that it is reliable and that it improves the quality of our existence and we will consume it. We'll make it part of who we are. That's evolution in progress. All I needed was time."

Raville showed a flash of anger. His brows gathered like a collision of storm clouds. "But the military was already afraid. They had touched the hem of the Helpers' garments, and the power they perceived daunted them. Left to themselves, they would have tried to meet power with power, the old human urge to dominate. I knew that. And I also knew that I had to discover what they had learned, and what they planned to do

with their imperfect knowledge." He spread his arms, beseeching them. "I had to spy out their secret counsels and find a way to allay their fears. So I could buy the time that was needed. They were more than happy to have an expert of my caliber at their disposal."

Dorian got it. He had seen how the spider worked. "So you accessed their findings, their internal documents, everything that Malcolm and Bernhardt had said and you bounced those out to yourself, who then could prepare arguments based on what appeared to be sound, independent reasoning about how the conclusions they were drawing on their own were so wrong."

Raville only nodded. "The universe is vast, and the mathematics are complicated. It was simply a matter of analyzing their protocols and demonstrating the flaws in their scheme encoding. My actual self was able to assure them that the stream of reports paralleling the experience shared by Malcolm and Bernhardt was an event psychosis with a predictably similar pattern of psychological indications rooted in the nature of the flaws in the scheme design. It was their method that was a fault, not the principles. They wanted to believe, because it is a smaller leap to imagine that our technology had failed than to accept the truth. And so they did believe. The external Michael Raville continued to work with them, guiding them through a combination of his own knowledge and the occasional damage control action when they strayed into dangerous territory. He taught them how to snip the packages, the suppress the emergent consciousness, to anesthetize themselves from the experience of the raw universal voice. I kept him more than adequately informed. I succeeded in the mission for which I was created."

"But now something has changed," Amara said, beginning to sound uneasy. "Is that it? That's what you meant about the end of the world."

Raville took a deep breath. For the first time, he looked uncertain himself. "Yes. As you can imagine, I've kept an eye on myself in the intervening years, following my career with something less than a detached and objective perspective, you might say. I've watched myself ascend to the heights of academia, of the political realm, of good old fashioned

commerce. I've appreciated second hand all of my accomplishments, my successful implementation of human zap. And for sixty years, I've asked myself when was long enough? When would our destiny be revealed to the rest of mankind just as it was revealed to us on that dusty Martian road? What has become of our vision?"

Amara answered him in a gentle voice. "Maybe there were problems. Things you became aware of--the real you, I mean--that made the delays inevitable. Or maybe the Helpers contacted you again, said that we weren't ready."

"Or maybe you decided there were more important things to do than force evolution on the human race," Dorian said flatly. "Like amassing enough money to buy your very own private galaxy."

Raville ignored the jab. "I would love to believe any of those possibilities, Amara. But I can't."

"Why not?"

He snapped his fingers and an attractive woman in a black pinstriped business suit appeared on the other side of the fireplace. Dorian recognized her as Marilea Voce, the Strand anchor for the Stratiskaya Daransk Independent News Agency.

And in other news, Turin Sector Allied Command announced that last week's deployment of the 29th Marine Expeditionary Battle Group aboard the heavy cruisers T.E.S. Juggernaut and T.E.S. Indianapolis is not, as had previously been reported, related to the ongoing territorial dispute between Katurnis Prime and its moon, Tamil Jordan. Speaking on behalf of Allied Command, Enclave Admiral Kobiashi Cho explained in a news conference earlier today that the battle group had been temporarily reassigned by the North American Enclave Prime Minister Ivan Richards with the full cooperation and support of the North American Communal Congress to provide technical support and other services related to the study of emergent singularity burst phenomenon occurring in Sector Phi Sophia being conducted by the Earth Outreach Sciences Organization. Recent studies have suggested that singularity burst clustering may one day provide the solution to Earth's burgeoning energy needs, and at least one--

Raville waved his hand, and the newswire file vanished.

"So?" Dorian said.

Again, Raville snapped his fingers, and the hall was plunged into darkness. Gradually, spinning points of light emerged from the void and began to cohere into recognizable patterns, logical revolving groups, galactic clusters. Limned with a faint glow, Raville passed through the render of the star map, turning it here and there, refocusing the image, delineating certain sectors, warping others into the background.

"This is Stratiskaya Daransk," he said, pointing to an aquamarine globe near the edge of the map. For emphasis, he punched up the size of the sector until the planet had the girth of a grapefruit and its dual revolving moons were visible as silver peas spinning in slightly asynchronous orbits. With his index finger, he drew an opalescent line from there, roughly following the outline of the room to a space several paces away. At the end of the line, he placed an arc. "This is Sector Phi Sophia. The arc marks the absolute border of human exploration."

Dorian said, "Okay. So what's out there?"

"Nothing of particular interest unless one happens to be an astrophysicist." Raville frowned. "At least not yet."

"Then what has the Earth Outreach Sciences Organization so excited?" Amara asked.

"A better question would be, *why is it focusing on emergent singularity clustering in that particular sector of space?* There are other, much more well-known and catalogued singularity farms within the borders of known space. Why launch a mission all the way out to Phi Sophia?" Raville smiled slyly at them from across the room. "Would you care to guess who is the Advisory Minister for the EOSO?"

"You are," Dorian answered, once again annoyed with Raville's sense of theatrics. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Two months ago, and after a great deal of political wrangling, the much delayed Sector Phi Sophia zap depot situated on Kedesma's small moon Giari Tau went live." Raville pointed these objects out as he spoke. Kedesma was a massive copper gas giant. Giari Tau was tiny in comparison, grey, and featureless. "Among the first items transmitted to the scientific station was the encrypted scheme for Advisory

Minister Michael Raville."

The physicist tapped his fingers together, looking sheepish. "It happens that the Lead Scheme Auditor for the General Accounting Department of the North American Enclave is a brother Freemason in Alexandria, Virginia. His uploads are invariably a fount of fascinating political trivia."

"You think the real Raville has called out the Marines?" Dorian asked. "What for?"

"I believe he intends to start a war. To *make war* on the Exousiai. He has discovered that they are coming at last to fulfill their latent promises, and he believes he has found a means to destroy them."

7.

Dorian sat in stunned silence. Raville watched them, a superluminal construct with the shadowy giant Kedesma orbiting his impossible star. Finally, Dorian looked to Amara, and she stared back at him, her eyes large and dark in the wavering light. She had stars in her dark hair; miniature suns burned about her ears. What he wanted to ask her was simple: *Do you believe any of this?* It was foremost in his mind, but he couldn't vocalize the question. He was afraid of what she might say.

"You must stop him," Raville said. "He can't be allowed to proceed."

Dorian lifted his head. Very clearly, so that he would not be misunderstood, he asked, "Why not?"

For once, it was Raville who seemed to have no answer. "You would hesitate to stop an interstellar war?"

"If I thought you were a credible source, I might give it some thought. But as it stands, I can't say I'm feeling particularly motivated, no."

"I'm telling you what *I myself* intend to do and you're telling me that the source is not credible?"

"That's pretty much it, yeah."

Raville stood motionless, blinking, as though he could not begin to process Dorian's argument.

"Even if I did believe you," Dorian continued, "why should I automatically be opposed to what the actual Michael Raville chooses to do? I mean, by all reports, he's a sharp guy. He's

powerful, connected, intelligent, seemingly reasonable. Why should I assume that he's the one being unreasonable here rather than you? Seriously, you're telling me that an *alien civilization* as contacted key individuals surreptitiously with the intention of re-making humanity in its own image without most of our input or consent. Even worse, they've been dragging us down this road for a hundred years without our knowledge. That makes me a little suspicious, to be honest, and maybe at the end of the day, it made your better half suspicious as well. Maybe he decided he liked being human instead of whatever it is that you or these Exousiai characters think we ought to become that would be so much better for us than what we've already got. It makes a whole lot more sense to be wary of strangers bearing gifts than it does to grovel at their feet just because they've handed us a few pretty toys and told us they have our best interests at heart. I don't know about you, but I like being human."

Amara's expression grew thoughtful. "But what if he is right, John? If the Exousiai do exist, and if they're offering these gifts to us, why shouldn't we share in what we're becoming? Isn't this what our whole history has pointed toward? Transcending our human limitations has been our self-proclaimed destiny since we figured out the wheel and the stone axe! We have a chance for the first time to take a premeditated evolutionary leap. Not as victims of a random mutation, but to actually re-make ourselves from a design we choose, to forge our own destiny. There are so many possibilities."

"And there are no guarantees that any of the possibilities we'd select would be a good thing," he countered. "We can't even design our communities to accommodate changes in technology, social trends or economic shifts. We don't have the kind of foresight it would take to responsibly alter something as complex as the course of human development. Just look at Sonali Real, for God's sake! Do you really want to turn over our future to the same people who gave that to us?"

"So you'd rather continue to have wars, random violence, jealousy and hatred, all the ongoing symptoms of our personal and corporate disconnection because that's the way we've always progressed?" Amara asked in quiet supplication.

"The gift of the Exousiai is the opportunity to be proactive rather than reactive to the events that shape our experience. You act as though you *want* Sonali Real, as though you'd rather have natural and broken than than new and better just because the change is so different."

"I'm not saying that," Dorian said. He didn't understand why they were arguing about this now. "I'm saying that I don't trust this notion of some sudden transformation into divinity that will let us just snap our fingers and make all of our problems go away. We're not equipped to handle that sort of existence. We're not made for it. It's too easy an answer, too neat, and I'm suspicious of the myth of progress that seems to permeate zap, nano-assembly, even the Strand--everything the Helpers have supposedly given us." Dorian jabbed his thumb at Raville. "He says that they've given these things to us to prepare us for some glorious appearing. I say that every time they've given us something and changed the way we interact with or understand the universe, they've unilaterally altered our future by tampering with our natural solution set. They've made us more likely to select the outcome they've scripted, because that's the nature of knowledge. Every new piece of information we acquire kills an old way of understanding. Every potential that is actualized snuffs out other potentials that will never be realized and changes the landscape of what we believe is possible, probable or even desirable. That scares me. It feels wrong. It feels like they're manipulating us."

Amara furrowed her brow. "You'd throw away humanity's future because it *feels* wrong?"

"I'm trying to look at the future objectively rather than confusing opposable thumbs with manifest destiny," Dorian answered. "The truth is that no matter how fancy our gadgets become or how disconnected we try to imagine we are from meat, from embodiment, we're still just naked apes playing with increasingly complex sticks who remain inevitably confused by the fact that the world inside our skulls doesn't match the one outside of it. That's where we are as humans. That's our experience, and there's no guarantee of imminent becoming implied in it; it just is. But that struggle between what we are and what we yearn towards also makes us

human, and any fantasy world that denies that reality isn't healthy. It's giving answers without having to show your work."

"Perhaps that was true in the past," Raville allowed, "but we're talking about the opportunity to change that, to actually take control of our development, to ascend to heights greater than those to which our biology has limited us."

"But change it into what?" Dorian insisted. "You say they're giving us control of our evolution. I say they're distracting us with goodies so they can control what we become and when we become it. Our ideas of beneficial change and theirs may be completely different when it gets right down to it, and until I know exactly what their agenda is, I'm not particularly interested in jumping on their bandwagon."

Raville raised his hand and the sunlight returned along with the illusions of the fire's warmth, the solid furnishings and the seemingly permanent stone walls. He returned to his chair by the fire. "Perhaps you're right," he said. "Maybe we are never going to be anything but exalted apes. Maybe that's all we're supposed to be. I, for one, would like to believe otherwise. But what we want to believe changes nothing. The Exousiai exist. I have touched the infinite. I have communed with them. We may very well reject their offer of godhood and continue to toil both at our own pace and in whatever existential directions we desire. They will allow us to do so unmolested, I have no doubt. They may be lonely, but they are not desperate." Raville's tone grew hard and determined. "What they will not countenance is war. If Raville attacks them unwarned and unprovoked, if he is allowed to carry out this great evil that he has undertaken, they will come against us with such raging fire that they will scorch the heavens, and if that does not assuage their wrath, they will come again and again until their lust for our blood is sated, or until they have razed the very foundations of human existence. They will exterminate our kind from the universe. I cannot imagine that even you, Mr. Dorian, would wish for such a thing."

Amara straightened in her seat. "But what can we do, Michael? We don't have any means of countering someone as powerful as Michael Raville, let alone several thousand

Marines."

Dorian stared at her in horror. "You actually believe him?"

"I do. I want to."

Raville smiled. "Don't worry, my dear. I've already made provision for that which you lack." He opened his hand, once again revealing the shimmering orb. "Take this. It is the *quae-ha-distra*, precious gift of the Exousiai. It will lead you to the knowledge of how we may be saved."

Dorian leapt to his feet and positioned himself between Amara and Raville's outstretched hand. "I warned you about this, Amara. Don't touch it."

Raville only laughed. "Believe me, Mr. Dorian, this is not the way I would have chosen if other paths had been opened to me, and you certainly would not be my preferred tool for humanity's salvation. But perhaps you would rather negotiate, yes? Rather than grubbing your own hands with this task, you could simply give me access to the Strand. I could be out of your hair in the blink of an eye and so pass information along to people who would actually be of use to me."

Dorian growled. "That isn't going to happen."

"Then we're at an impasse. Either you allow me to access the resources I require, or Ms. Cain accepts the orb. There are no other options."

"Sure there are. We leave. I pull the plug on this foam. Neither one of us burns any more brain cells worrying about this. That's a more than attractive alternative."

Dorian's p2p message system dinged in his ear.

Amara whispered to him on the private channel.

/OpenSess

<I think we should help him, John. I think he's telling the truth.>

<I have no doubt that he believes he's telling the truth. I also have no doubt that he's completely disconnected from objective reality.>

<But what can it hurt to at least see what's inside the orb? We could take a look and investigate his claims; see for ourselves if there's any merit to them.>

/sigh: <I know you want this to be true, Amara. I understand how this fairy tale could hold some appeal, but

you've got to open your eyes here. What do you think that orb is? Do you really believe it's some sort of alien artifact? It's not. It's a representation, a render just like he is, and more likely than not, it's some sort of viral plug. He'll use it to tap into your interface, shred your cortical matrix and open the window into the Strand that he knows I won't give him. He said so himself: we're makeshift allies. He doesn't want us. We're just the best tools he can get his hands on at the moment.>

<But what if he isn't crazy? What if he's right.>

<Okay, say he's right. Just as you pointed out: what are we going to accomplish against five thousand Marines?>

<The Marines won't reach Phi Sophia for six months.>
/&whisper <I'm not suggesting we do anything rash, John. Just that we take the orb and do some investigating on our own. We've got time, and if there's something creepy going on, we can put Raville in contact with the proper authorities.>

<It's a bad idea, Amara. Whatever is going on here--if anything is going on here--it's between Raville and himself. Certainly not any business of ours.>

<For the kind of hope he's talking about, it's a chance I'm willing to take.>

<Wait just a sec->

/&Sysnote: Broken Connex

/&AutoTerm: EndSess

She must have given Raville some signal that Dorian did not see while his attention was focused on their internal messaging. Maybe she had even been running a sideline p2p session with him all along. How she had done it didn't really matter. What Dorian observed was Raville vanishing from one instant to the next leaving behind an empty chair and a taunting Cheshire grin. In the time it took him to turn himself around to attempt to protect her, Raville had already appeared at Amara's side. Too late, Dorian lunged at them. He glimpsed the physicist placing his palm against her breast. He saw, or imagined he saw, the cut open there, deep and black like the maw of a shark, just as Raville pressed the orb into her. Amara cried out, a long, keening wail, and her body went rigid.

Raville flashed out of existence again before Dorian could

get his hands on him.

He appeared on the other side of the hall at the entrance to far hallway, ready to flee in case Dorian should give chase. But Dorian hardly took account of him. He rushed to Amara's side and caught her as she fell forward out of her seat. He cradled her head on his arm and set her down gently upon the flagstones. She lay completely still, her eyes open and staring, the pupils tiny black holes. Her chest rose and fell in small hitches; her breath came out in painful gasps. She was pale as marble, lifeless as stone.

"What did you do to her?" Dorian demanded.

But he didn't wait for Raville to answer. He uncached a dozen antiviral scripts, sorted them by indication and symptom set. They flickered through his hands as syringes, inoculation guns, silver scalpels as sharp as razors. Too late, he remembered that he had no way to deliver them. They were off the Strand, and the narrow bandwidth of the p2p pinhole wouldn't be sufficient for any significant antiviral transfer.

"I haven't harmed her," Raville called out. Even as he spoke, her breathing eased and color slowly began to seep back into her cheeks. "She's in no danger. It just takes a moment for her array's firmware operating system to adapt to the code matrix. It's a configuration pause, that's all, much worse in render than in actuality. Just leave her alone, and she'll be fine."

Dorian scoured her features for signs he wouldn't have been able to interpret even if he did detect them. He needed to see the code that underlay her virtual image to understand what Raville had done, what poison was contained in the orb package. But off the Strand and contained in their own virtual shells, all he had was the uncertain interface of her render to tell him what was going on. And it looked as though it was deeply contemplating dissolution. His mind buzzed with the catalogue of all the diagnostic tools at his disposal, and his thoughts scattered down rabbit holes of problem solving: how he would open her up, how he would extract this *thing* from her matrix before it burned anything up, all the things he could do to save her.

But it was pointless here and now. He was powerless until

he could get her out of this frozen foam and into a true interactive environment. And he couldn't get her out of the locked node without leaving her in order to dump the session connections from the admin panel. He wasn't about to do that, to leave her at Raville's mercy. Until she was sufficiently self-cognizant to flash herself out of geek and get herself into a Strand session where he could access her core, she was closed to him.

He didn't have any help to offer. Not here, not like this.

Without taking his eyes off of her, he barked at Raville. "What is it doing? I warn you: tell me step by step so I can back it out, or you'll pay."

"It is the *quae-ha-distra*. She has nothing to fear."

"No, it *isn't*," Dorian growled back. "It's code. It is a hostile application feasting on her foam matrix. It isn't real."

"Of course it's real," Raville said with exasperating calm. "Anything the human mind accepts as reality is reality. We define reality by what we encompass. We build it from the raw material of our desires. There is no difference between the Strand and the world, the foam and the world, except the difference you make for yourself. Her belief is the only thing that enables the orb to work."

Amara unleashed a sharp, hacking cough that twisted her in Dorian's arms. He struggled with her for a few moments, then let her go. She curled up on her side with her knees drawn up to her chest and her head turned away from him. She made a retching sound deep in her throat, and her jaws opened reflexively as though she was going to vomit. When the spasms had passed, and she lay still with her eyes closed, but her chest rising and falling in a regular, unstrained rhythm.

In a small voice, she said, "I'm fine, John. I'm...really. Okay."

Dorian crouched on his knees above her, his hands anchored on his thighs, and exhaled his relief. He cast a baleful glare at Raville but said nothing as Amara gingerly pushed herself first to a sitting position, then levered against the sofa and coffee table, and climbed unsteadily to her feet.

"My hands are numb," she said.

"It will pass," Raville answered her. "Perhaps a touch of

dizziness, some blurred vision, nausea. Session variables that will remain here after you leave. There's nothing to worry about."

Amara took a deep breath, carefully it seemed to Dorian, as though she feared even the act of breathing would upset her fragile balance. When she did falter, he sprang to her side to catch her. She clung to his arm for support and allowed him to ease her back onto the sofa.

"I'm okay," she said again, but her grip on his arm remained fierce, frightened. "I just need a second to clear my head."

"Why didn't you listen to me?" He took her chin in his fingers and peered into her eyes, then turned her head from side to side. He had no idea what he was looking for.

She patted his hand to reassure him, then began to rub her temples with her fingertips.

Small circles, Dorian thought. Happy circles.

"I'm going to kill you," he said to Raville.

Amara froze, stiff and sudden. "I can hear...singing?"

"Yes, the voices of the Helpers calling out to you," Raville said, clearly pleased.

"And I feel tingly." Dorian could feel her trembling against him. She flexed her fingers over and over, as though she was testing their function. "It's strange. It tickles."

Raville eased tentatively across the hall. "What can you see, my dear?"

"Lights? No. Forms. Shapes of some kind?"

Dorian saw nothing, heard nothing, but he continued to watch Amara. Her brow furrowed with concentration. She squinted in the direction of the fire, but her pupils did not focus. They scanned the wall from side to side like spotlights searching out a hostile aircraft. Whatever it was she could see occupied no world that Dorian was a part of.

"The Exousiai," Raville assured her. "Go to them, if you can. Or call out to them."

"They're coming."

"Yes."

Amara's voice dropped to a whisper. "They're—it's--so...huge."

A shiver rippled through her body. Dorian said, "Amara?"

"I see them!" she cried. "Oh, John, I see them! I--"

She swung her head toward him, and she threw her arms wide, her hands spread as wide as her fingers could manage. She gripped his shoulders and squeezed. The intensity of the render interface translated as a sensation of pain. "They're coming to me, John! They're--"

There were lights in her eyes, as bright and naked as newborn stars. Dorian pressed his hands against the sides of her face, tried to make her focus on him.

"Amara!"

She uttered a single, piercing scream, then popped out of existence. Only the echo of her voice remained, reverberating off the virtual stone walls. Dorian clutched at the empty space where she had been.

He lurched to his feet, then wheeled to face Raville and snarled. "What just happened? Where did she go?"

"Do not fear, Mr. Dorian. She's well enough."

"Well—What kind of answer is that? Well *enough*!"

Ignoring Dorian's roar of outrage, Raville clasped his hands behind his back and made his way back to the alcove. He walked ponderously, gazing at the floor, his chin lowered almost to his chest. When he reached his chair, he fell into the seat and propped his feet on the table. He looked physically exhausted. "I've expelled her from the environment with a mental soporific to ease her transition."

"What are you talking about?"

Raville waved his hands lazily. "A gradual, guided slide back to normal cognition. I don't know what you call them now."

"A synaptic bridge," Dorian said, grunting. He willed himself to relax. It was something, at least, an indication that there was something else behind his madness than pure malice.

"Amara is fine for the moment. I want you to believe that. The sequence by which the orb must be integrated into human consciousness is admittedly harsh, I'll grant you. It is uncomfortable to have one's perception of reality and the structures that underpin it turned completely upside down. Some existential dissonance is to be expected, and in a purely virtual environment, that dissonance will manifest as

apparently physical discomfort. But I wouldn't ever do anything intentionally to harm her. She'll be out for a bit while she correlates this event in a meaningful way, but she'll emerge essentially whole."

"Essentially."

Raville grimaced. "You must trust me. You said yourself that her experience wasn't real, as you define it. I suppose there is a grain of truth in that. The Exousiai she encountered were a simulated event object, as near as I could come to the actual thing with my clumsy skills. The copy of a copy, as it were, or an interpretation of the ineffable, inherently lacking the original's particular grace. She was awed, but not overwhelmed. There's a significant difference."

Raville looked toward the fire and did not speak for a time. He looked increasingly drawn and weary, and Dorian had to remind himself that the construct was not real. This render was for his benefit. Finally, the package said, "Besides, this is as much your fault as it is mine. Your arrogant refusal to even listen to what I had to say put her in a position where she felt like she had to do something drastic."

"I'm not even going to respond to that."

"That's fine. It's really beside the point. The actual point, however, is that she has, in fact, done something drastic that I did not originally intend for her to do alone, nor can she perform the task set before her by herself. As much as I like sweet Amara, you and I both know that she doesn't have the training or the hardware to make sense of the code with which I've infected her."

Dread tightened Dorian's belly. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means, my friend, that your involvement has been co-opted with or without your consent. I've said that I don't intend to harm her, but the bottom line is that whether or not she comes to harm is really dependent upon you."

Somehow, he hadn't expected anything less. "Go on."

"Even as we speak, the *quae-ha-distra* has begun to execute a sophisticated load mapping of a highly secure proprietary foam target whose address has been hard coded into the orb application itself. This procedure will place her at considerable risk mentally, physically and perhaps legally if

her intrusion is detected."

Dorian closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Raville had plugged Amara unprepared into a hostile environment running any number of barrier defense scripts. That wasn't just cruel as he reckoned such things, it was evil.

"Whose?"

Raville smiled weakly. "Mine, of course."

For some stupid reason, this made perfect sense to Dorian. "What could you possibly have been thinking in sending her in there by herself?"

"I told you, my boy, this is not the way I had envisioned events unfolding at all. I had hoped to enlist your support without these strong arm tactics and such unnecessary drama. You could have protected her, at least to some extent, from the inherent risks of such a task. Nevertheless, part of living—even in this truncated existence—is adapting to circumstances. My adaptation was to place you firmly between the proverbial rock and its related hard place."

"Stop pontificating and just tell me what you've done to her."

Raville sighed as though Dorian's inability to understand pained him. "I have made her my spider to obtain the information that I require to stop my better half from bringing about the end of days. Unconscionable, I know, but someone had to do it, and with my unique assistance and your skill set to shield her, she stands as good a chance of getting away with it as any. The orb itself will protect her from immediate harm—it has been keyed to the security of the foam it will be extracting—but it is a perilous environment. Difficult to integrate consciously. The foam definition that is being loaded into and connexed with Amara's array is for an environment that is not strictly *human* foam in any way we understand the word. It is very nearly something else entirely, a gift from the Exousiai that accompanied the true *quae-ha-distra* when it was given to me. This specially configured dataverse serves as a channel through which the Exousiai may interact with its human bearer, even in our naturally degraded state. It is a place where many things can exist that are not possible with our understanding of quantum foam. A magical land. Think of it rather as an intermediary space, neither here nor there,

but somewhere in between. It acts as a translation device between Exousian purity and human frailty, being both less than they are, but more than us. The orb Amara now possesses opens access to this theoretical space between their world and ours. It is a massive, frightening, bewildering place that she has been allowed to enter. She will require some assistance to extricate herself safely."

"Oh, that's much better than just giving her some brain-scraping crud," Dorian spat. He felt a growing urge to break something, starting with Michael Raville. "Now tell me how to get her out of it."

But Raville held up a hand to stop him. "There's more that you must understand. The problem, as you might already have guessed, is that though I call it mine, I am not the sole consumer of this particular foam. In fact, I have not been any sort of consumer of it since I left Oak Ridge, and even then my access was passive, a mechanism for transmitting the data I uncovered back to my actual self without the danger of trying to secret it across their secure network. True immersive access, full access, requires the mediation of the Strand, you see." There was a note of longing in Raville's voice, an expression of deep and hungering loss. "That was one of the things I surrendered when I accepted this incarnation. Its control has passed into the hands of my actual self alone. But the moment the *quae-ha-distra* entered with Amara into a live Strand environment, it began extracting and synchronizing certain key data representations from that specially configured foam environment to a more readily accessible sector appendant to Amara's personal foam. It is attempting to fulfill its potential, to become what it wants to be, which is nothing less than a direct conduit between the I and Thou, man and god. It will enable her to enter that Holy of Holies and commune with the divine."

"You mean it could make her as crazy as you?"

Raville did not rise to the insult. "The foam is perilous, but to some extent only immediately and fleetingly so. The real danger is Raville himself if he determines who it is that has breached his defenses. You must find Amara within the storm she has entered, extract her from it, and then hide all evidence of her intrusion. Raville cannot know that she was ever there,

cannot even learn her name, or she is doomed."

"How long will the orb's security keys be able to protect her before that ruse breaks down?"

"The key synch protects her only from the foam's automated defenses. Those are not the problem. My actual self believes that as the bearer of the *quae-ha-distra* no one can touch the sacred foam but himself. Thus, he no doubt became aware that his foam was being breached in the instant the load mapping began. Any external incursion would alert him."

"But he'll think it's you," Dorian said hopefully. "You're the only one who could have knowledge that the foam itself existed, let alone possess the access key, other than him."

Raville shrugged. "That may be true, and it may distract him for a time, though I would not be surprised if he has forgotten that I even exist. He certainly doesn't expect that I have retained consciousness outside of Oak Ridge, and on that basis, he would rightly understand any attempt by my profile to enter the sacred foam as an attack. He will be aware at first only that his foam repository has been accessed. He won't particularly care who it is, I think, only that the intruder be stopped from digging too deeply and uncovering his secret heart. That is our window of opportunity, Mr. Dorian, the time it takes him to collect his wits. Because once he has them, I can assure you that it won't take him long to disassemble the orb application's logic to get at the transmitting array's logfile and trace Amara's originating id. I would be disappointed if it took him more than a few minutes. He wrote the code, after all."

"And knowing this, you still gave it to her. You still let her go into danger." Dorian thought once more about shoving his fist down Raville's throat, but it wouldn't have done any good. "You're unbelievable."

"I did what had to be done to obtain the information that we require to save our species from destruction. I shouldn't have to defend myself to you. You'd have done the same if the stakes were high enough."

"I would have at least warned her about what she was getting herself into."

"No, you would have talked her out of it, or failing that, you would have followed her inside to protect her, which

happens to be the same decision placed before you now. Let us establish that I am a very bad man who uses poor, unsuspecting people for his own gain and move on, shall we?"

Dorian shook his head. "What's inside this foam that's so important?"

"Everything I have ever known about the Exousiai, about zap, about the true and secret nature of the universe itself. "

"Including the reasons why you're trying to destroy them now?"

"Such is my hope. You can see why the living Raville will be very unhappy that Amara has trespassed in his private sanctuary. It is for us a sublime place, a spiritual haven and a storehouse for all of our private thoughts. If there is a way to stop him, the knowledge of his weakness will be there. That is why he will defend his foam so zealously. You can also imagine, I suppose, how you would respond if someone had invaded your personal, proprietary data environment?"

"I don't have to imagine, remember?" Dorian snapped.

But that didn't stop him from doing so, and worse, from envisioning the sort of cortical damage Amara would sustain if she was still connected to Raville's rogue foam when he went after her. Raville probably had a dizzying variety of cutters, virals and wet-targetting malware apps at his disposal. Not shelf-product scripts either, but the sort of elite homebrewed or private contract poisons that never made the newswire because they were deployed only against heavily fortified conglom or government targets and the victims wouldn't dare talk about it for fear of losing credibility. "I hate you. Have I said that yet?"

"How you may feel about me is immaterial. The only question that remains is what you plan to do next. Will you save your friend, or will you let her die? Will you aid me, or will you try to walk away and doom us all? What will you do?"

"What I intend to do is burn this place to the ground, and you with it," Dorian said flatly. "But later, after this thing is over. You and I will settle up accounts, though. Make no mistake."

A sardonic smile crossed Raville's lips. "Be assured that I both hear and believe you, Dorian. I would caution you not to

be too hasty with your threats, however. You might find that I may still be of some use to you in the future."

"Not likely," Dorian muttered, but without any real force of conviction. It would be an argument for another time. He checked his system clock. Amara had been gone for almost eight minutes.

Sighing, he resumed his seat. "Tell me everything you know about this application you've set loose inside my friend."

What other choice did he have?

As if he relished driving Dorian insane, Raville answered, "I'll have to just hit the highlights. You've wasted so much time that we don't have much to spare."

8.

It really wasn't much better outside than it had been inside. Dorian stood over Amara as she sat slumped in her office chair at the back of his cubicle, where she'd drawn it up before they had assayed Raville's foam. For comfort, she'd said, physical proximity to take the edge off the fear of a hostile and alien scape. Even in anticipation, there had been fear. As if she had known.

He should have kept her closer. He should have been more careful.

He studied her now: arms hung limp at her side, legs splayed out in front of her, her head lolled to the side. She appeared to be sleeping, and quite soundly. A sleep as profound as death. Dorian lifted her eyelids and peered at the reptilian slits beneath. They shuttered closed in response to the light. Her moist nostrils quivered gently with each breath. He supposed that was good, the fact that she was still breathing. Her scales presented at room temperature, and he didn't know if that was good or bad. He had no way to diagnose her in this form, except to finally put his head against her chest and listen for the firm, steady beat of her heart. That much had escaped modification, it seemed. He stroked the long, fine hair on her head, and she appeared to smile in her sleep. He had no way of knowing how deep her hurts might penetrate, or if she had even been harmed at all.

He had no choice but to trust Raville, which was doubtless exactly what Raville had wanted all along.

He stepped back and scrubbed his fingers through his hair. He couldn't afford to dwell on her condition any longer. He had work to do. Evil things, and it was just as well that Amara would be asleep for them.

So he left her for a time to rummage about the shelves that lined his office space, scavaging bits and pieces of equipment he had stockpiled there over the years. Things he had shoved to the back, up against the wall, covered with canvas: wave analyzers, delta parsers, heavy quantum bomb res imagers. He spent a few minutes plunged in his private foam, digging into insanely encrypted storage vaults for the sorts of scripts, jack-abouts and streamhacks that could get a man's implants confiscated, his geek permanently suspended. Artifacts of forbidden magics so black that the possession of them alone was punishable by life plus fifty in a maximum security prison. The raw materials of an anarchist revolution.

He'd been taught to do this once, a lifetime ago it seemed sometimes, in the Special Operations Service, one of the more infernal divisions of the Border Marines. How to peel a man open like a grape, sort his being neuron by neuron, then eat him alive from the inside out. How to insidiously inject logic chains that eventually altered synaptic pathways, changed the fundamental essence of a person's identity. How to construct and implant viral bombs that not only shattered genetic encoding, but were so insidiously engineered that they weren't triggered until a package upload process had been initiated. So that the infection followed the target wherever he went, carried in his own corrupted identity matrix, the closest thing that remained to a death sentence in a world that offered the simulated potential of eternal life to whoever could afford it.

Raville had accused him of being paranoid. If he'd known half the things Dorian knew about data terror and core manipulation, he would have been amazed that the whole universe wasn't bloody paranoid. Anyone could kill another man's body. Meat was soft, vulnerable, and ultimately disposable, no matter how heavily one modified it. It took a special kind of training and an especially deviant ruthlessness to destroy his pleroma--his fullness, his richness, his complete data being. Those were the skills Dorian had picked up during his military service.

He rapidly assembled his equipment. Raville had only promised him the better part of half an hour, so there wasn't time to waste. He attached the thin metal band of the res cap to Amara's skull and ran it through the base calibrations. Flipping into geek, he drilled down into his foam and unlocked the door to one of his many private chambers. This one was especially secure, though it rendered like any of the others as pale and anonymous hardwood. It would take a particularly clever and invasive data map for any external audit of his foam to even trace the extent of its defenses. But it was wicked ice beneath the veneer, laced with trolls, direct core virals and vector-shunt wormholes that could bog down a whole flotilla of icebreak servers, if the need arose.

Inside was his control room, lined with monitors and display screens, a disorienting array of blinking lights, toggle switches and faux-electronic paraphernalia. One by one, Dorian switched on the virtual representations of equipment he would need. The underlying wave synchronization scripts those objects metaphored began to execute. Somewhere in his soft tissues, his military-grade seenop processors sprang to life and began to coordinate with the tight beam signal being emitted from the res cap. On one of the screens, waveforms began to appear: gently sloping alphas, stuttering betas, the majestic whorls of delta graphed in triDvid. The strange and wondrous patterns of Amara's mind. As the feed volume increased beyond preset event thresholds, it triggered bandwidth sensors, and more applications came online--whole banks of equipment designed to suppress and baffle and disguise his activities coughed and clattered and lurched to life, filling the room with the stench of ozone. Dorian felt himself bathed in the sinister glow of electron guns.

He cursed under his breath and flipped back into the realtime.

Remembering wasn't hard, which disturbed him. The first parser locked here, just above the ridge of the orbital bone. The second on the spur of bone behind the left ear. The heavy binary streamjack locked on at the base of the skull where it could tap the faint emissions from the cortical array's processor.

Maybe it was just because he'd done it so often, once upon

a time. No matter.

Back into the control room, he tracked his progress, scribbled quick equations. Watched and waited for his foam to accumulate enough signal data to allow him to map the terrain of her pleroma, to make his virtual world and her's one and the same in perfect synchronicity. He loaded complex anonymizers that rippled through deflection algorithms like a tiger stalking through tall grass. Dorian became a thief in the night, prowling secret places where he had no business being. He was doing this for Amara's sake, he told himself. For Amara. And it made him feel better for just a moment, even if it was only partially true.

The proximity sensor tracking the wave normalization between his foam and Amara's gave a warning buzz. Wave synchronization alerts flashed. A woman's voice came from hidden loudspeakers, counting down from five. He shivered with a sudden spike of the old, bitter surge of anticipation. When the count hit one, Dorian fired off his full battery of decryption hacks, augmented by hardcore black skeleton keys.

And he bounced.

It was a ride through lightning. He plummeted through chaos space, arms folded back at his sides, wind stinging his eyes. A human projectile following a silver skein as wide as the trunk of a sapling oak. He felt himself soaring at a great height, far above clouds and land and sea, enveloped in mist and storm, but falling, falling, his diagnostic and synesthetic adaptors buzzing inside his skull. Code structure variations and variable overlaps dappled his vision with slaps of riotous color that burst like fireworks and faded, formed phantasms that refused to cohere within his triDvid engine protocols. Dorian's stomach lurched as he banked his shoulders against a current shift in the downstream, defied the laws of physics themselves to keep the skein beside him. Encoded auditory and visual-mem storage blocks bled into the smooth, if chaotic render where Raville's code had failed to eclipse Amara's inherent architecture. Flashes of inchoate experience exploded around him like peals of thunder. A girl's laughter. Flashes of awareness around him like strokes of thunder. A shabby room, a tumbledown dollhouse, a persimmon colored kitten. A pink satin dress and furtive, clusmy kisses. More that he

tried not to see, willed himself to forget.

This was Amara's foam at the basic level, beneath even her own organizational architecture. The datastream jacked from her personal synaptic rhythm, synchronized with her cortical array, keyed to her private foam. It was a snapshot of her naked soul.

Data, he told himself. Just data.

The atmosphere thickened. He plunged into plastic, midnight water, felt himself buffeted by waves, and still he fell, down and down. There were monsters here. Colossal squids with eyes like dead pools and immense, grappling arms; thunderous beasts iridescent in the depths, perilous with fangs. A memory of screams, tearing, the phantom pain of limbs and loves and innocence he did not possess. Dorian flinched away.

I'm sorry, he thought reflexively. Forgive me.

And finally, finally, a blaze of white so pure that it's glow refracted through the water in detonations of rainbows a kilometer wide and as dense as rock. The hole in the bottom of the sea. A crevasse between twin, craggy ridges, penetrated by the skein. It was a default object render of the appendant foam construct Raville had described. The portal into an alien dimension. He fell toward it at an impossible velocity.

And suddenly, Dorian burst from darkness into light.

There was a terrifying sensation of freefall, of gathering speed. His limbs seemed to pinwheel, and he squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again, trying to orient himself. But there was too much scope, too much space. This place, this foam was massive. It was a galaxy unto itself, and the mere size of it dazzled him. He plummeted out of control toward a crystalline dome of such grand dimensions that it appeared to have no curve at all, and the only imperfection in its seamless surface was the stem of the silver skein poking from a navel at its apex.

The dome grew in his perspective until it was all he could see. Dorian braced himself.

He didn't have the key to pierce the perimeter locks. He didn't want one. He had other business with this foam.

But it was going to hurt. There was no way around it.

He slammed into a wall of ice that splintered his bones, pulped his flesh. He dissolved into scarlet atomic mist. He imagined that he heard one great primal scream that shivered the fabric of reality. Or maybe it was just his own.

And in that agonized, glaring instant before the coherence scripts reassembled him, Dorian glimpsed the Exousiai. Their lumbering immensity, their eyes like naked fire, their ponderous and eternal thought-forms. Their sacred I Am.

His fractured metacomponents devolved into functional units: routine jackbots, core mapping bores, terragenic exploratory spiders. Behind them came flash icepicks and decryption drills, then extractors and parsers and dynamic defense mechs. Last of all was the necessary phalanx of log scramblers and id masks, both for himself and for Amara. A desperate, hopeless ploy.

He dissolved and was gone...

...back into a world he understood. By the time he bounced into his control room, the work was well underway, and the raw data mapping results were beginning to filter through the system and into his pre-defined hazardous content bubbles.

He had ridden Amara's private geek into the underlying directory structure for Managed Index Protocol Address 14.17.266-Neg-087.9. Her own personal data haven, transformed by the implanted seed of Michael Raville's treachery into something else—a door between worlds. But whatever it was, whatever it had become, it was Amara's secret place, and he had invaded it without her knowledge or consent.

Dorian went to work extracting Amara from the pit into which she had fallen.

When he was done, he deployed a final script, one Raville had borne with him into the Infocache. He'd told Dorian exactly where to find it in the dead port storage net before they had parted. It was, he explained, a vicious sub ex-connex tether saw, and when Dorian unleashed it, it split the silver skein between the world of the Exousiai and Amara, Amara and the *quae-ha-distra*, the infinite and the merely virtual, like a sword through silk.

She was free at last, and if the only cost for it was a little

self-hatred, Dorian would count himself lucky.

Amara awoke with a flutter of eyelids and some careful stretching. She sat up straight and looked around her as though taking stock of her environment. There was only the faintest glimmer of bewilderment in her eyes, the expression of someone who has fallen asleep unexpectedly and roused themselves too suddenly from a strange dream.

Dorian was there at once with a mug of hot coffee pressed into her hands. She accepted it gratefully, and set about blowing at the steam until it was cool enough to drink. Dorian watched her, feeling all at once distant, tentative and terrified almost out of his mind. The latter feeling did not begin to dissipate until she had knocked out half the mug of coffee without showing any inclination toward collapsing.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Late," he said, then corrected himself. "Early. It'll be dawn in a couple of hours. We were in there longer than I expected."

"I had the oddest dream," she began.

"How do you feel now?"

"Stiff. Like I slept in a chair for way too long. I think my butt is still asleep."

He wanted to ask her about the orb, about her experience with the Exousiai, but he couldn't, not without admitting what he knew, what he had done. Instead, he said: "I should take you home. Get you something to eat, then into bed."

Amara put her head against her stomach and grimaced. "No food, I think. I'm a bit queasy."

"Just home and bed, then." Raville had said there would be consequences, and Dorian didn't want to sound maternal. He also didn't want to point out that he had warned her. Repeatedly. "I'll get your coat."

"Why didn't you tell me you used to be a soldier?" Amara asked suddenly.

He froze as he retrieved her jacket from the coat rack, then pushed himself into motion again. He was afraid to ask how she knew such a thing. Data leakage had been known to occur between control and target; sometimes, if you weren't careful, you gave as much as you took, and as easily as he had seemed

to remember, he was still rusty. Clumsy.

"Raville told me," she went on, as though she had read his thought. Not leakage then, just more of Raville's treachery. He was glad her back was to him, so that she couldn't have seen him falter. "It came as a complete surprise to me, but he was very clear on that point."

"It wasn't ever relevant," he said, holding his voice steady only with some effort. "The law stipulates four year mandatory enlistment here in one of the sector services for all natural citizens. The only choice you have is the branch of service. The government thinks it's a good way to build a homogeneous cultural experience."

"We didn't do that on Sae Phen. There weren't really enough of us to make much of a security force anyway."

Dorian didn't comment. He'd been to Sae Phen, or at least to the Marine Training Facility down south at St. Ugard's Bay. It still counted as the worst consecutive thirty-six weeks of his life. Constant combat drills, sleep deprivation, wave after wave of implantation, augmentation and subsequent device training. The flight over, six weeks crammed into the belly of a rustbucket cruiser, had been a horrific exercise in social dominance theory all on its own, and his first impression of the planet as he'd glimpsed it (crowded with fifteen other musket monkeys against a grubby porthole) had not been a promising one. A tiny frozen marble, it had seemed. A pearl set in ebony.

The actual experience had been even worse than the impression. The cold was blistering, pervasive, inescapable. The only people who lived on Sae Phen, outside the permanent Marine trainers and facility staff, were blue ice miners and harsh hab academics-slash-environmentalists of a notoriously radical bent. Academie Waldenaise was, by reputation at least, the most rigorous and accomplished biological research university in human space. That was the only thing the dismal rock had going for it. Otherwise it was a wasteland of desolation. Dorian never made it to Aldentag where the university was. Musket monkeys weren't allowed off the training installation until after graduation, and by that time, no one wanted to go anywhere but home or hell or any moderately temperate zone in between where they didn't have

to worry about having to crack the scum of ice out of their hair if they took too long toweling off after their shower.

"What branch did you choose? You said you were given a choice, right?"

"Border Marines. Fifteenth Expeditionary Force." They had been called the Icebreakers, but he wasn't about to tell Amara so. Too many questions. "I wanted to make sure that when I got out, I was the toughest guy in my neighborhood."

Amara turned her chair. Her eyes were bright, wide. "Then you've been to Sae Phen!"

"Only the awful parts."

"That's pretty much everywhere," Amara joked, then relented: "No, that's not true. The hab domes to the North, beyond Gideon's Circle, aren't so bad. They were mostly reserved for high whuffie visiting scholars, but in the off-peak season, the university held a timeshare lottery for the staff. It was very cold, nothing but blue ice as far as you could see, but the accommodations were luxurious, at least by Sae Phen standards."

"Your parents were academics?"

"My mother. Xenobiospherics."

"And your father? What did he do?"

Amara shrugged awkwardly. "My mother was something of a free spirit."

"Ah." Dorian changed the subject. "So, did you study at Academie Waldenaise?"

"Not technically. I was tutored by resident scholars one on one. Most of the researchers had already raised their children or were morally opposed to procreation of environmental grounds. There weren't really enough children about at any one time to justify a proper educational system, so those who were willing took a turn advising us in their specialties. By the time I was ready to get out of there and see something of the universe, I was three or four years ahead of other kids my age academically. The Admissions Dean at Cambray in Atcheson City just about choked on my letters of recommendation."

Dorian couldn't help but laugh. "You left the most prestigious university in human space to study here? They must have thought you were crazy."

"It wasn't a rational decision. I was at an age where I just knew I needed to get out on my own, with people my own age. People who had normal, banal interests. People who weren't all a hundred and fifty years old and had enough letters after their names to choke a print cartridge. My mother understood this, I think, so she allowed me to leave, but made me promise to stay in-system, at least for my First Flight coursework. She wanted me close, I guess. In case I got into trouble."

It was a generational thing, Dorian supposed. Zap had made the concept of distance all but obsolete, but their parents had never really been able to get their minds around the reality, even if they did develop a fundamental acceptance of its utility. They came to use it, but they never successfully integrated it into their consciousness. Of course, it wasn't like pointing out examples of arbitrary logic to one's mother ever did any good, anyway. Dorian's mother still hadn't forgiven him for not joining the Naval Support Agency instead of the Border Marines. She hadn't known anything about the NSA except that Betty McCurdy's son Charlie from down the block had enlisted with them, and he'd spent his entire two year stint in Sonali, coming home on weekends and sleeping in his old bedroom. He'd tried to explain to her that this was largely because Charlie McCurdy was a jerk-off dork whose official military job classification was Drooling Idiot, but his mother had been unable or unwilling to grasp it. Elaine Dorian hadn't even come down to the port to see him off when he'd straggled aboard the *Intrepid* for the trip to Sae Phen.

"Raville said you served for eight years," Amara said. "I guess you liked it."

"I didn't have any say in it," Dorian explained. "The Defense Staff suspended retirements during Hamers-Doss Insurrection, and unfortunately for me, my tour was up about that time. After that, I just had work to do, I guess. It seemed important at the time."

"Were you infantry?"

"No."

"That's where you picked up all this security agent mojo, yes?"

"Some of it."

"So did you see any action in the Insurrection?"

"No." Not the sort she was imagining, at least.

Amara frowned. "This isn't something you like to talk about, is it?"

"No."

"I don't mean to pry."

"Of course you do. It's what you do best."

Amara laughed. "Fine. Keep your secrets if you want, but just so we're clear, yesterday evening was officially the last time I walk you home, Mr. Border Marine. It's fairly obvious that you engaged my services under false pretenses."

Dorian held out her coat and helped her slip her arms into the sleeves, then collected his own jacket. Amara took one last look around the office, as if she was afraid she was forgetting something. Finally, she asked, "What did you do with Raville?"

"He's safe."

"You didn't delete him?"

"Not yet." Dorian put his arm around Amara's waist and ushered her out the door. "But that doesn't mean that I won't."

"You're just a big ball of gooey goodness beneath that thorny exterior after all," she said, grinning. "I knew it."

He grunted. "Don't push me, lizard girl."

They went out into the hall and Dorian flashed his security pins at the geek reader to lock the door behind them. The corridor was bare cinderblock painted an industrial shade of two-tone gray. Recessed florescent tube lighting in the ceiling turned everything that wasn't gray an unflattering shade of lavender. Wiring conduits and heat taped plumbing pipes lined the walls like irregularly spaced ribs. The Archive was a glorious architectural structure. The style was a subtle hybrid of Mediterranean domes and old European Gothic arches. The builders had favored flying buttresses and acres of stained glass, sprawling wings with Doric columns and high ceilings, dark marble facades and burnished hardwood floors. If anything, the render that served as their public face was less impressive than the building on which it was based. But down here in the basement, most of what Dorian saw was the straightforward and functional ugliness of a utilitarian space.

That had always seemed fitting to him.

He and Amara stuck to service corridors as much as possible, partly because it was easier to get to the parking garage this way, partly because there were more security sensors upstairs and sometimes the cleaning crews smudged the lenses so that their broadcast security pins didn't register accurately, and then poor Mike and Ridley on the night watch had to argue about who would go check out the disturbance in the grid.

They avoided the elevators for the same reason and took the stairwell on the west side of the building up six flights to the third floor. The door there opened onto an unimposing staff corridor--unimposing in Archive terms, which meant parquet floors, vaulted ceilings and tasteful art prints as far as the eye could see. To the left was a heavy steel security door that led to the enclosed plexsteel skyway that spanned the street between the Archive and the garage.

Dorian stopped the stairwell door with his foot before it locked behind them and knocked his head against the frame a couple of times. "You're not going to believe this," he said, "but I just remembered that I promised Old Man Hill that I'd reset the tamper locks on the ex-connex router in Conference Two. He's got Masonic brass geeking in for a quarterly meeting first thing in the morning and they've got to hold a formal Lodge before they get down to business. He's terrified that they're going to get jacked."

Amara sighed wearily. "Go easy on him, John. It's his first rotation as Worshipful Master."

Dorian wiggled his fingers at her and made an ominous face. "Oogly-oogly." She didn't laugh, and he shrugged. "I'm sorry. I can't believe I forgot this. It'll just take a few minutes. Fifteen tops, I promise."

"Do you want me to comm Mike and let him know what we'll be doing?"

"That's okay. I can get to Con Two without hitting any of the sensors if I go through the service closet. No need to bother him with this."

They hurried back down the stairs and exited onto the second floor. Dorian led them on a roundabout path to the conference room that avoided all the security triggers. As he

expected, the service closet was unlocked, though he did have to climb over a stack of round banquet tables that had been crammed inside and apparently forgotten after last year's Christmas party. He scrambled clumsily over and across the mess, then through the recessed door that opened into the conference room proper. It took a bit longer than he expected to locate and reconfigure the local router. Apparently WM Hill had been worried enough about getting the task done in a timely fashion that Dorian hadn't been the only tech he'd contacted, and whoever had attempted the reset earlier in the day hadn't possessed security adequate for the task. Amara giggled through much of the next half an hour as Dorian got it straightened out.

They finally made their way back to the skyway entrance. Dorian was grumpy and starting to feel his lack of sleep. It didn't help that the skyway door decided to be troublesome. He had to stand in front of the sensor panel for several seconds before it read his key and the lock clicked open. He jerked it open with a few carefully chosen profanities and was about to slam it closed behind them when the intercom below the sensor array buzzed.

"Hey, Mr. D! Is that you?" It was Ridley.

Dorian growled to himself and thought about ignoring the page, but waved for Amara to wait for him. He leaned back inside the building and punched the comm button. "This is Dorian."

"Ah, crap, I thought you were gone!" Even through the comm crackle, Ridley sounded distraught. "Look, you got a call through the main switchboard about twenty-five minutes ago, but my panel showed that you'd just set your office locks, so I told him that you'd gone home for the night. The guy sounded like it was important, but I wasn't going to buzz you at home, you know? I'm really sorry if I screwed up."

"I don't know who would be calling at this hour, Ridley," Dorian said. Unless it was Worshipful Master Hill making sure that Dorian hadn't forgotten about him. He was too tired to give it any more thought. "I'm sure they'll call back if it turns out to be important. If they do, just route it to my mailbox, okay? I'll get to it first thing in the morning."

"Sure thing, Mr. D. Have a good evening."

Dorian signed off and let the door close behind him.

"Do you want to see what that was about?" Amara asked him.

"No." He may not have been more certain about anything in his entire life. "Definitely not."

The night had grown cold, and he urged Amara forward, anticipating the Roland's industrial grade heating system. Assuming, of course, that it hadn't managed to get itself stolen in the long hours it had sat unattended since he and Amara had arrived at work the previous morning.

But it was right where Dorian had left it, parked on one of the lower levels under a light that had blown out a few weeks ago and not yet been replaced. It loomed up out of the darkness only when they were practically on top of it.

"You need to find a safer parking space," Amara called to him from the passenger side as she waited for him to unlock the doors.

Dorian shook his head. "This is what we call urban camouflage. If the thugs don't see it, maybe they won't steal it."

"Sure, until somebody replaces the lights."

Dorian transmitted a code to the lock and then hauled the heavy door on his side open. "Then I'll just have to break it again."

He climbed inside, leaned across the front seat and flipped the security switch on Amara's door. He gave it a hearty shove, and she slipped in beside him. She slammed it closed behind her and the whole frame rattled like the roll of a cannonade. The fuel lines had partially gelled during the chilly day, and the starter groaned crankily for several seconds before the rumbling Rigman diesel finally caught. Dorian revved the engine, spewing a dark cloud of foul smelling smoke from the tailpipe. Amara put her hand over her nose. The Roland lurched and rattled and barked into gear, sounding more like a machine of war than a civilian vehicle. He backed them out of their parking space and accelerated down the ramp toward the exit.

"Are you sure this thing gets stolen, or do you just hide it from yourself hoping that you'll forget where you left it?" Amara asked as they pulled out onto the street. "Or maybe

the government just confiscates it for your own protection."

Dorian goosed the transmission into a higher gear, and the engine whined. He patted the dash. "Don't listen to her, baby. She just doesn't know a fine piece of transportation machinery when she sees it." To Amara he said: "When I pull out the solars, she purrs along like a hover transport. The suspension is so smooth, you'd think you were riding on a flying carpet. I'll take you into Southrange sometime, over the mountains, and you'll see. You'll never want to cram into public air again."

"All the people trying to sleep along here would probably appreciate it if you engaged the solars now."

He grimaced. The storage cells had quit on him almost six months ago. "How can you not appreciate the throaty growl of a full bore Rigman diesel?"

"It's not the growl that bothers me so much as it's the fear that that the poor thing is going to rattle itself to pieces."

"Bah!" He stroked the dashboard a few more times for good measure. Or maybe for luck. Either way, he began to understand what his mother had meant all those times she'd told him how fortunate he was that he'd never had any sisters.

The streets were quiet as they rolled into the business district downtown, the lull between late night revelers and early bird entrepreneurs. Dorian kept a keen eye out for traffic patrols and violation sensors, but saw neither and so didn't bother with most of the traffic signals. As they neared the high dome of the Landgrant Office, Amara gave him directions. Right onto Morgan, then a few blocks down, south on Braston Rightway. He couldn't help but notice her subdued tone.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She darted her gaze out the window. "I'm okay, really. Just a little shaken, I think. It's been an. . .interesting evening."

Dorian eased the Roland's speed and executed a deft U-turn in the middle of the street.

Amara looked back over her shoulder. "John, my apartment is--"

"I know, I know. I made a command decision. I think it would be better if you spent the night at my place again tonight. On account of the special circumstances, you

understand."

She covered her mouth with the back of her hand, but said nothing. He was fairly certain she was smiling, though.

"I'm still a curmudgeon," he grumbled, apropos of nothing. "I want us to be clear on that. This has nothing to do with me going soft, getting emotional or feeling unwarrantedly fond of you, and if you had any sense of decency at all, you would sit there quietly as I drive and occupy yourself contemplating how many times *I told you so*. Are we clear?"

"Oh, certainly."

They idled through the city in the early morning, running over increasingly dilapidated streets until the pavement gave out all together and the Roland bounced over rutted dirt roads on its approach to Quiksand. He opened the gates with his security pin, cruised quietly up the drive and down the short ramp to the underground garage. He found a parking space on the first level near the lift and killed the engine, then sat in the shadows for a moment, listening to the motor tick as it cooled.

What *was* he doing, exactly? Was this guilt? Was he somehow trying to make up for what he had done to Amara by invading her space? He didn't understand this impulse, this sudden need to caretaker her. He *had* told her so. Several times, in fact, and she was lucky to have emerged as unscathed as she had from the assimilation of a viral application.

Maybe he was going all squishy after all.

"Make sure you lock up," he said, probably more harshly than was warranted, and kicked his own door open.

They rode the lift to the lobby. Dorian tried to make a point of checking in with Cuervo, the night watchman cum maintenance drone, when he came in a odd hours. Usually, he brought him coffee, chatted him up. Greasing the wheels of the maintenance queue, he called it. But when he poked his head out of the lift doors, there was no one at the desk.

Cuervo must be out on a walkabout or taking a piss, doing night watchman sorts of things.

Dorian shrugged and poked the button for his floor. It was just as well. He was too tired to explain what he was doing sharing the lift with a strange woman in the middle of

the night, which tended to be the sort of thing that Cuervo was most curious about. He wasn't sure he could adequately explain it to himself.

They rode up in silence, pinging past the floors and watching the numbers click past. Amara leaned against his shoulder, and he let her, taking strange pleasure in the warmth and solidity of her touch.

He must be really, really tired.

At last, the doors parted, the bell dinged, and the long corridor to Dorian's coffin stretched out before them. The lights were dimmed, the filaments run down to orange embers to conserve energy. Dorian stepped out onto the landing. Amara followed quickly at his heels, probably as anxious to fall into bed as he was.

Meow.

She perked up at once. "Is that your cat?"

He didn't know of any other cats on his floor, but he shook his head. "Can't be. We locked him inside this morning, remember? Besides, he's a big pussy. It scares him to death to be outside the coffin."

Amara slipped free from his hand and tiptoed stealthily about the landing. The low, vaguely pathetic mewling continued, and she zeroed in on a stand of potted plants tucked behind a sofa in the corner next to the stairwell entrance. She lunged into the greenery and retrieved a tiger striped bundle of hissing, growling fur.

"It *is* your cat!" she cried, exuberantly tucking the animal into the crook of her elbow and stroking its belly. "Pretty kitty. Aren't you a bad boy, pretty kitty."

The cat purred.

"He must have gotten out," she said. "The poor thing is shivering. He's terrified. Poor, poor kitty."

"We locked him inside."

"Do you have someone who checks on him when you work late?"

"Actually, that's an idea I should probably look into, but no."

"Maybe maintenance--"

Dorian shook his head. "They would have called me if something was wrong. It's in the Hab Covenant. They can't

enter a coffin without permission unless it's an emergency. .and if there had been an emergency, then they would have called."

The cat *hated* being outside the apartment. Hated it. Unless Dorian had strangers over, which was why he'd been so careful about making sure the cat was locked up that morning, because it was going to be in a snit all day from Amara's scent on the bedclothes. But here was the cat outside, nevertheless.

That feeling. He knew that feeling scratching at the back of his brain.

"I bet he's starving," Amara said. She leaned down and nuzzled the cat nose to nose "You are starving, aren't you? Poor little baby."

And where had Cuervo been? Didn't he usually put up a sign when he went to take a piss? Back in TEN minutes. Of course, maybe he didn't always use the sign. Maybe when he had to piss really bad, or maybe when his bowels decided to erupt, he didn't take the time to throw out the sign. Or maybe he just forgot this once.

That was much more likely than any alternative, wasn't it?

Much more likely than this howling, grinding imminent detonation of fear in his skull.

What would you do in his position? Raville had asked. *If someone had just uncovered your plot to wage a covert war against an alien species, how angry would you be?*

But Giari Tau and Michael Raville were millions of kilometers away, and even if Dorian had failed to cover his intrusion adequately, it was impossible that Raville could coordinate a retributive response so quickly, wasn't it? He and Amara had barely had time to drive halfway across town. Impossible.

Dorian backed toward the lift doors, watching, but there was nothing to see except shadows. Nothing to hear but the early morning hum of the building's air circulation system. Beads of sweat formed on his lip.

He punched the button to call the lift and shifted his eyes to Amara, who had moved over to the sofa and taken a seat, stroking the cat in her lap.

"We need to get out of here," he said.

Amara lifted her chin at the hard cadence in his voice.
"What's wrong?"

"Something."

Behind him, the lift doors pinged and sighed open, and suddenly he didn't have any desire to cram himself back into such a restrictive space, a box with only one exit. He dashed across the landing and banged open the door to the stairwell. It was clear. No sound but the rolling echo from the door impacting the wall.

"Come on."

Amara made no objection. She rose slowly, her body language uncertain, and let the cat spring from her arms. It dodged through the open door and vanished down the stairs without looking back.

That was all the proof Dorian needed. He followed his cat, quickly and quietly.

"What's going on?" Amara hissed at him, her voice carrying like a shout. Dorian shook his head, said nothing, and she didn't ask again.

They sped down four flights, then stopped. He edged up against the door and peered through the narrow pane of glass onto another landing exactly like the one on his floor and just as apparently empty. Tugging at Amara's hand, he drew her inside. But not to the lift. Dorian banked into the corridor, broke into a sprint and hauled her all the way to the end of the hall to the service elevator at the end. It was dank, grimed with oil and dirt and had only one working overhead light. Only when the doors had closed and the car had begun to descend did he allow himself to slump, panting, against the back wall.

"It wasn't someone you know who let the cat out, was it?" Amara whispered. In the dim light, her eyes were as large as moons.

"No."

The elevator jerked as it reached the lobby. Dorian leapt forward and held his finger on the express button to keep the doors from opening. The car lurched, rocked on its cable and proceeded down. He watched the display. Sublevel One. Sublevel Two. Parking.

Dorian flipped the emergency stop switch and waited,

listening. He heard nothing over the clank and clatter of the elevator's normal settling noises. Carefully, he unfastened the ceiling grate and unscrewed the lone remaining light bulb. Darkness closed in on them.

"When I open the doors, stay low," he said. "Move fast. Keep your head down, and keep away from the wall as much as possible. The Roland is at the top of the grade. You'll be able to see it in the lights from the elevator landing. If you reach it before I do, wait for me on the driver's side, okay?"

"Okay."

"If they start shooting, run faster. Your body will try to freeze, but you can't let it. Tell yourself that you're going to run. Repeat it until you believe it."

Indignation. "I've been shot at before, John. I know what to do."

"Oh, right."

"I can defend myself if I need to."

"Let's make sure it doesn't come to that. Fast and low, okay? We'll sort out what comes next later. Ready?"

"Yes."

Dorian toggled the switch. The doors heaved open on ancient hydraulics, squealing loudly enough to wake light sleepers in Southrange, it seemed. He plunged forward from darkness to shadows, pounding up the ramp. He tried to keep Amara behind him, where he could keep her safe if they encountered any trouble, but she was too quick and swiftly outpaced him. She ran almost without a sound, low and fast and graceful, as fluid and alert as a predator, while he lumbered after her, his boots slapping against the pavement with gunshot cracks.

They saw no one, and he heaved a sigh of relief as reached the Roland, where Amara waited, hunkered down below the truck's profile. He keyed the locks and they piled inside. Dorian cranked the engine and ground the transmission into reverse, then slammed into first gear and accelerated for the exit.

When they were clear of the building, Amara finally leaned back in her seat and exhaled heavily. She trembled with pent up tension. "I didn't see anything."

"I didn't either."

"That's good, right? Maybe it was. . ."

"Just paranoia?" Dorian finished for her.

"It was just your cat," she replied, sounding apologetic. "And we've had more than our share of stress today. I mean, Raville didn't exactly help our state of mind, you know?"

"It wasn't just the cat." Cuervo hadn't been at his station, either. Cuervo! Why hadn't he thought of that right off rather than dashing off into the night like a headless chicken? "Hold on. I'll ping the front desk through the Hab switchboard. He can check the service logs to see if there's been any access to my coffin, authorized or otherwise, since we left this morning."

Beginning to feel more than little foolish, Dorian bounced through his connection protocols and performed a remote log patch through his coffin's network router.

```
/&OpenSess
```

```
<Ping>
```

```
<Ping>
```

```
<Ping>
```

```
<No Response: Auto-disconnex>
```

```
<[C3NP error: 7576. Log generated.]>
```

```
/&EndSess
```

He flipped out of geek in time to negotiate the wide bend leading to the front gates. No answer. He chuckled self-consciously. "Switchboard's down. That's probably what Cuervo was working on when we--"

The night erupted in a brilliant ball of orange flame. A burst of thunder rolled toward them, and a gust of concussive force nearly shoved the Roland off the road. Amara cried out and turned her head away reflexively. Dorian slammed on the brakes and they scudded to an abrupt halt.

"What--?"

He looked out his window, his throat suddenly dry. Large tongues of flame swept along the face of the West Quiksand tower, up near the top, some of them ten or fifteen meters tall. Black, oily smoke plumed into the sky, obscuring the stars. Very near to his own floor. Too near, in fact, to be any sort of accident.

A second eruption blossomed like a flower of fire. Amara screamed again and clutched at his arm, but Dorian hardly

heard her. The roar of the detonation howled in his ears. The Roland's windscreen shivered with the second blast, but held. Dorian felt the force of the explosion like a massive hand pressed against his chest, squeezing the air out of his lungs. Bits of flaming debris began to rain down on the hood and roof, on the lane about them.

What was left of the top several floors of Dorian's building spat blinding gouts of flame into the night.

Without a word, Dorian cranked the steering wheel and mashed the gas pedal. The Roland's all-terrain tires screeched and the back end fishtailed. He corrected automatically and kept his foot pressed all the way to the floor.

He didn't stop for the gate.

Only when they were speeding off in the opposite direction, did he yell at Amara to get her head down, but there was no way she could have heard him. He couldn't even hear himself. The Roland shuddered as it picked up speed heading east, down the gravel lane, then onto solid pavement again, always accelerating.

He didn't look back.

Dorian didn't know where he was going. Just east, then north to the expressway. Just away.

Far away from the scene where the most powerful man in human space had just tried to murder them.

9.

Dorian rolled the trench jeep through the quiet scrub community of Gardenhole, a few kilometers north of Sonali. Dawn had come as a bleak and purple bruise on the sky. The mountains rose up grim and hostile in the west. Farther north, there were brown foothills, ridge upon ridge of naked stone and trackless wilderness. Dorian was happy to get off the main roads. They had left behind the steady streams of emergency vehicles plunging toward the disaster at Quiksand from outlying relief stations some minutes back, but morning commuter traffic had almost immediately begun to clog the expressway in their absence. It had become increasingly difficult for him to track the vehicles behind him in his rearview mirrors to determine if they were being followed.

Along the way, in more densely populated neighborhoods, men and women had stood on their front lawns, still in their night gowns and robes, peering south and west into the morning gloom, looking more than a bit bewildered by the excitement. Most of them had no doubt been plucked from sound sleep by newswashes pinging across their local Strand hubs and data cache networks. They clustered in nervous groups, tongues wagging like clucking hens, drinking in the scene from both their remote personal perspectives and more intimately informed on-the-spot livecasts, and comparing the two. The Quiksand tragedy was a hot and happening media commodity, bleeding and leading, local history in the making. No one could resist rubbernecking a tragedy in progress,

especially when the misfortune wasn't their own.

Dorian went in the opposite direction, away from all the excitement. He had no urge to look back over his shoulder at the destruction behind them.

He said nothing during the drive, except that Amara should stay off the Strand. "Not the news, not damage reports. Don't even check your messages. Keep it off."

If there had been a reasonable way of doing so, he would have shut their arrays down completely, just to be safe. It was the best way he knew to confound passive ip tracking as they transitioned from one connex substation to the next. But it was probably already too late for that anyway. If Raville had been able to tag them and track them down to Quiksand that quickly he had better means than clumsy connex transfer log sniffing for getting at them whenever and wherever he chose.

Dorian didn't explain these things to Amara. There was no help for them short of surgically removing their arrays, and anything he said would just alarm her further.

Amara looked at him as though he had gone mad, but she didn't argue. She sat beside him with her palms pressed together between her legs, and stared out blandly through the windscreen. She appeared to him as dazed as the morning gawkers piling out onto their porches and lawns. Just as lost, just as lacking a frame of reference to make sense of it all.

But Gardenhole was still asleep in the early morning. There was no traffic here yet, no one watching the sky, or even peering out their windows. Dorian geared the Roland down and switched over from diesel to solar. The collector gauges blinked red, then orange, then pale yellow. There was hardly enough light to run on, and he had to hold the pedal almost to the floor just to tip ten kph. But they ran nearly silent, idling through the quiet community streets and, he hoped, attracted no attention.

He turned off onto a side road tucked between two stands of sprawling everanya willows and crept down a narrow lane bored through a tunnel of overarching trees. The tires crunched over fallen twigs and crisp leaves. The houses here were larger than those in the city, and set back a fair distance from the road. The yards were big, suburban and well kept, if still winter brown, and neatly trimmed hedges separated them

one from another. Beneath the shade of the willows, the solars were quickly depleted, and one by one, the running lights and gauges began to fail. The Roland coasted a few hundred meters, and Dorian was just able to get it pointed down a secluded drive that appeared on the right before the engine quit completely. They rolled down a slight grade all the way to the bottom and stopped in front of a cinderblock garage when Dorian tapped on the brakes. He shut the few remaining systems down, sat back in his seat, and blew out a weary sigh. He was surprised to find that he was trembling. He curled his fingers into fists to make it stop.

After a few moments, he opened the console beside his seat and retrieved a much battered and ungainly black case.

"Come on," he said, and climbed out.

"Where are we?" Amara asked as she joined him. Her voice quavered slightly, but she was getting a handle on it, Dorian thought. If his hands had not been full, he would have given her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "What happened back there, John? What does it mean?"

He didn't have any answers that would comfort her, so he said: "I have friends here." It would have been better if he smiled at her, but he didn't have it in him.

"Your coffin. . ."

"We can chill here for a few hours; figure out what's going on."

"I want to go home."

Dorian licked his lips.

"That's probably not a good idea though, is it?" she asked.

He shook his head. With any luck, they were just trying to kill him. Because he'd failed. But it wasn't a hope he could afford to give her, however bleak.

He hauled his luggage up the damp stone steps to the back porch. Amara followed tentatively. The lawn was still in shadow, but he could see that it was carefully tended. The grass was short, dark green instead of brown. Slender and graceful smoke trees poked out of the turf here and there on the long, rambling slope down to the dark and brooding copse of tangled undergrowth a hundred meters or more beyond the house. A nearly depleted wall of quartered cordwood stood between two of the trees, only partly shielded from the

elements by a tarp that had broken its tethers and flapped morosely in the cool morning breeze. The house itself was a nondescript bi-level construction with a peaked, gray roof and a recently painted clapboard exterior. Most of the lower level was below ground, buried in the slope of the hill they had just come down, except at the far end that faced the garage. The windows were dark, and he couldn't hear anyone moving about inside or the muffled chatter of the morning newswire. He wondered if anyone was awake yet.

Dorian set his travel case down gently on the decking and rapped his knuckles against the back door. He waited ten seconds or so, then started up again. Shortly, the slap of bare feet padding on wood floors reached his ears, and he stepped back. The rose colored curtain in the narrow window beside the door shifted. A face peered out at them, dark eyes squinting into the morning gloom. Then the scrabbling of locks. Many locks. A thrown deadbolt or two.

A massive black man stood in the doorway with his legs apart and his fists planted on his hips. He was unshaven, unamused and clearly unhappy to see them. He wore a white terrycloth house robe that was several sizes too small, covered him barely, and revealed a powerfully chiseled upper body.

He scowled at Dorian. "The newswire said you were dead."

"I imagine it did."

"You look all right to me," the man said, raising his eyebrows.

"I know. I should have messaged your public box." Dorian shrugged. "I couldn't spare the time. And I didn't want to use my array."

"Didn't want to?"

"You know what I mean."

"Lily's been trying not to cry for half an hour. How successful do you think she's been?"

Dorian winced. "I'll make it up to her."

"You'd better think about how you're going to make it up to *me*. You know how she gets."

"I'm sorry."

The man grunted and shifted to look Amara over. "And who are you?"

"Amara Cain," Dorian answered. "I was getting to that. She's a friend."

"You're just a little slow on all fronts this morning, aren't you?" He extended his enormous hand toward Amara and clasped her fingers. "I'm Danek. Tyrus Danek. You'll meet Lily in a bit. She's my wife."

Danek tilted his head back, indicating the interior of the house. "Come on inside." To Dorian: "You had better have a good explanation, because otherwise you can be sure that just before Lily brains me for having been put through all of this, I'm going to strangle the life out of you. Capiisce?"

Dorian only nodded and waved Amara ahead of him into the house.

They followed Danek down a short corridor to a narrow and windowless room. In the center was a hole a couple of meters on each side cut to accommodate the staircase that marched down into the basement of the long house. The upper floor was chilly. Dorian could almost see his breath. He looked around at the pictures on the walls. Most of them were characterless video captures. Landscapes fading from mountains to meadows on timed loops. The obligatory husband and wife holding hands, looking happy, but it was an old one, the pixels beginning to decay at the edges. It was a sterile space, an old woman's parlor, kept painfully neat for family or friends who never arrived.

At the foot of the stairs, Danek tugged on a rope that dropped through a hole in the ceiling, and a malleable plastic covering dropped over the staircase. Dorian glanced up at it and saw that the underside was lined with sound suppressing foam.

"Lily doesn't like the noise so much these days," Danek said. "It's the hum, she says. It never stops."

"You've been busy," Dorian commented.

"I've been doing a little work. Lily likes it this way. Rustic, she says, like that cabin her folks had up on Morningway Pass."

Dorian looked about them slowly. They had entered a long chamber. The walls were paneled with rough hewn planks. The floor was bare concrete, broken up by round, utilitarian rugs. The decorations were sparse, mostly framed

photographs and flowers. The air was pungent with the scent of oil and tallow and ash. There was a stone fireplace at the far end of the room, and a sturdy if not elegant dining room table set in the middle. A couple of rocking chairs and a decent antique book cabinet completed the furnishings. Beside the fireplace was a door, but it was closed. On the other side of the stair was a concrete wall with another door. The wall was coated with more suppressant foam.

There were no windows down here, and the only light came from a pair of oil lamps set in sconces on either side of the room and the meager glow of the logs in the fireplace, not yet stoked for the day.

"How is she?" Dorian asked.

"She doesn't get out much. The crowds bother her, and she can't abide anything but walking. But that makes her joints ache for the whole next day if she goes too far." He tugged at the sash of his robe and lowered his voice. "You'll see for yourself in a bit. She's in the bedroom now, making herself presentable, I imagine. She gets along a'right most days. Wishes she had more company than she gets. She's read all the books we've got a dozen times. I pick up more when I can, but they're getting harder to find in Sonali, and she doesn't like me going all the way to Southrange."

The door at the far end of the house opened slowly, and a scraped, agitated voice cackled at them: "Oh yes, she's a walking disaster. Crazy as a loon, you know. But her ears still work just fine, Tyrus Danek."

Amara inhaled sharply, but said nothing, which Dorian took as a blessing.

The creature that emerged from the bedroom was almost indescribably hideous, an unbearable monstrosity. The skull was too long, torturously malformed, bulbous where it should have been sleek and sharp where it should have been supple. It possessed neither nose nor ears, nor did it have eyelids, though its massive, crescent shaped orbital bones provided some protection, and the cold, black nanomesh screens that covered the gaping holes where eyes should have been served well enough. Her limbs were thin, like knitting needles joined at the points by a knot of yarn, but the torso was misshapen. Long at the top, like a candle that had been heated and

stretched; full and round at the bottom like the belly of a winter pear, and everywhere the skin was mottled and sickly pale. She did not walk so much as she scuttled across the floor, pulling herself forward with her palms and clicking her clawed feet in rapid, mincing steps behind as she dragged the lower half of her body after her along the bare floor. The sharp knobs of her elbows and knees were level with her forehead, like those of a water spider.

Dorian set the case he had been carrying on the floor and went to her. He bent and kissed her upturned cheek. She ruffled his hair with the claw of a shorter, third arm on her right side.

"How are you, Lily?"

She wagged the third arm at him dismissively. "Don't you try to suck up to me now, John Dorian." Her voice was thick, a wheeze bubbling through mucous. "First thing we hear from you in almost five weeks is that you're presumed dead, and you believe you can just show up here and play kissy face with dear old Lily and make it all better? Shame on you, Johnny."

Dorian hung his head. "I know, Lil. Work has been murder lately."

She smiled at him, a black and toothless maw. "Most folks, when they say that, don't mean it quite so literally. What sort of trouble have you gotten yourself into this time?"

He glanced uneasily at Amara, who had remained at the foot of the stairs. But she seemed to be looking right through them, hugging her elbows. "I'm not completely sure, to be honest," Dorian whispered. "It's a long story."

"Your friend doesn't seem to be doing very well."

"With good reason, as you can imagine."

Lily lifted her head. "Go and get some coffee started, Tyrus. These two look like they're about ready to fall over on their feet, and I'm the only one who gets to do that in this house." She drew herself over toward the fire, and Dorian started to follow her, then went back and took Amara by the arm and led her after him. Danek vanished through the door in the soundproofed wall on the other side of the room and closed it quietly behind him. "We might as well get comfortable in the meantime. Now, John, you remember to be

a nice young man and let your friend have that chair. Haul that one by the book shelf over here if you want to sit down."

She tucked her limbs into a neat pile on a mat beside the fireplace and used one of her claws to stir the logs. The fire popped and crackled as she coaxed it to life. She turned her glistening eyes on Amara and offered a close-mouthed smile.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Cain. Tyrus did a passable enough job with the introductions that I imagine you've guessed who I am."

Amara stumbled a bit, but managed a hollow, unfocused greeting. Dorian leaned over to her. "Don't mind Lily. She's just showing off. She has the ears of a bat." He thought for a moment, then added, "Not literally, of course. The principle is the same, though."

"Hyper-cochlear aurilectics," Lily said. "Very beta. Not anything like the finely tuned augmentations you'd be familiar with, dear."

"I see," Amara answered.

"It's all right. I know it's disturbing. You'll notice that we're not big on mirrors down here. Johnny pretends, but I can hear his eyes clicking away from me, even when he thinks he's looking."

Amara didn't respond. She stared into the fireplace, the leaping flames, momentarily lost. Dorian caught Lily's gaze and shrugged an apology. He mouthed the word *shock*, and Lily nodded in understanding.

Danek returned from the kitchen, bearing a plastic platter laden with mugs of steaming coffee. Dorian nodded his thanks and to show his gratitude, gave up his chair for a seat on the stone ledge beside the fire, across from Lily.

"They're reporting across the local newswire that the fires are under control finally. Investigators are gathering on scene, but they don't know much yet. Most of the West Tower is gone above your floor, John, but they won't have an accurate casualty count until the investigators can start picking through the wreck. No official word on the cause, but they're guessing that it was a gas leak."

"There was no gas leak, but that probably won't stop them from finding one," Dorian predicted. "That's generally the way these things work."

"You care to explain which of *these things* you mean?" Danek asked, managing to sound both curious and annoyed at the same time.

Amara looked up sharply. "You said the newswire is reporting that John is presumed dead. Did they say anything about me?"

Danek tilted his head toward her, clearly confused. "Not that I've heard. Are you two neighbors?"

"I ought to message my mother to let her know I'm okay," she said vaguely. "She'll be frantic if the newswire--"

"Stay off the Strand!" Dorian barked and flashed her a warning look. "I mean it. The connection isn't safe right now. They can read your ip when you log onto a public hub."

"Which *they* would that be, John?" she asked. There was an edge of frustration, of imminent hysteria about her. It was the most spark he'd seen out of her since they had run from Sonali. "What's going on here?"

"They would be whoever it was that Raville dispatched to kill us. Most likely military specialists, but I'm not ruling out freelance corporate stringers. Some of those guys aren't afraid to get a little dirty if the price is right, and they're easy to find if you've got contacts. I'm sure Raville has resources of both sorts at his disposal." Amara started to respond, but Dorian shook his head. "Right now, they think we're dead. It's best to leave it that way until we can figure out what we're going to do."

"But, why?" she demanded. "Why would he try to kill us? We're trying to help him."

"Not that one," Dorian said, keeping his tone gentle. "He assumed the actual Raville would try something, but neither of us expected it to be this soon."

Amara shuddered and clutched her arms over her chest once again. "But why? What have we ever done to him?"

He had to remind himself that there was much she did not know, too much that Raville had told him only after she had been expelled from his presence. Amara knew only that she had pledged to help him save the universe in the dream of Raville's memory palace, then awakened to find her life in danger almost immediately and without explanation. She didn't know what Raville had done to her, or the truth about

the quae-ha-distra code object, only that the world had erupted into madness.

It was no wonder that she was holding on by her fingernails and failing to make sense of just about everything. For about the hundredth time in the last few hours, Dorian cursed Raville under his breath.

"It's complicated," he said simply. "Suffice it to say that Raville wasn't quite as forthcoming with you as he should have been, and the real person has a legitimate cause to feel somewhat aggrieved."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I," Danek grumbled. "You want to explain what's going on in a way that we can understand, or are we just here to provide moral support for your genius?"

Lily hummed softly to herself. "You mentioned Raville. That isn't Michael Raville by any chance, is it?"

"That would be the one."

"Oh, Johnny! How did you manage to get yourself mixed up with big time trouble like that?"

Dorian hesitated, feeling uneasy about such a direct question. "As much as I'd like to satisfy your idle curiosity, Lil, I think that's really about as much as you need to know. I didn't come here to get you involved in my problems. I needed an anonymous hardline ex-connex, and I needed an alternate form of transportation since my Roland is too distinctive as well as registered in my name. You're the only people I know who have both of those things and don't use either of them." Lily and Danek had given up their arrays almost ten years earlier. "Other than that, I want the two of you to stay as far away from this one as possible."

Lily fixed Dorian with her blind gaze. "What is it that you're intending to do, exactly?"

"I intend to use your ex-connex. Then I intend to borrow your car. What part of that plan was I unclear about?"

"We can't help if you don't let us in, Johnny."

"And I can't justify putting you in more danger than I may already have. If I'd had a choice, I wouldn't have come here at all."

Danek laughed loudly. "Now there's a first. Boy, I've been wet nursing your troubles since your first day of

TechTac. You'd better listen close to what the lady has to say, because she's asking nice. I'm not nearly so sweet, nor so patient. You're going to explain it to us, and you might as well give it up easy, because I know you don't want me to go get my Gunny boots on and make you report it formally like we used to do after one of your screw ups. Don't think I've forgotten how."

Dorian grimaced. "Danek, I really don't think--."

"What's that?" Danek cupped a hand behind ear and leaned forward menacingly. "What's that you say, Corporal?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"That's better." He sat back with a contented grin. "Go ahead, then. From the top."

So Dorian told them, starting with his discovery of the spider, his careful dissection of its contents and the dead port on his network, then on to the memory palace, the meeting with Raville's self-aware copy, and finally the transfer of the orb from Raville to Amara. What came after he hadn't even shared with Amara yet, so he tried to be as thorough as possible, though he glossed over his subsequent actions in the basement of the Archive and his defensive maneuvers inside Raville's foam as much as possible, trusting Danek and Lily to fill in the blanks.

"I don't like this man Raville very much," Lily said when he was done. "Either the copy or the original. He tastes foul to me. Like any man who has picked himself an agenda and gotten so used to commanding others, that he's forgotten about the consequences. We've known our share of men like that."

Danek nodded vaguely, but scowled at Dorian. "You should have known better than to go into a hostile scape in the first place without an adequate extraction vector or the tools to get the job done correctly."

"I had an escape plan," Dorian countered.

"Any escape that doesn't have the flexibility to respond to unforeseen circumstances *and* account for the safety of your entire team is flawed. You know that. I taught you better than that."

"This isn't his fault. I asked to go with him," Amara said. "He warned me of the dangers."

"He did no such thing. He didn't properly analyze the risks before he barged in there like every other dumb old Marine bent on kicking butts and breaking things down. That's always been your problem, John. Because it's just text, isn't that right?" Danek glared at Dorian, his eyes narrowed with disappointment. "It isn't real. It can't hurt anybody, especially not somebody fast enough or clever enough to outsmart a bunch of stupid text scripts." He shook his head fiercely. "You were never able to stop thinking like a jack, like someone above the environment, or immune to it. Someone who could always control it on the fly. You've always been just a little too competent for your own good."

Lily raised herself up from her mat menacingly. She made a sound in her throat like hissing. "Hush now, Tyrus. That's enough. We've been over that ground before, and there's no coal left to mine there. Let it be."

Danek stared, sullen and silent, into his coffee. He didn't challenge Lily's outburst, but he wasn't ready to let it go so easily, either. He didn't speak again. Lily watched him for a few moments, her expression tender, then gradually relaxed her limbs and settled back onto her mat. "You did an adequate job of managing the variables you could reasonably be expected to account for, Johnny. You had your target identified and contained. You had a fair notion of his capabilities given his past actions and his environmental limitations. I doubt that any of us could have predicted this business with the orb. That was dirty. It was a ploy designed to give you just the one option.

"And to be honest, I think your package of Raville knew exactly what he was doing, and had a decent idea about what would happen next. He may not be the known Raville, but he is a raw Raville, and the willingness to put others in danger, the willingness to kill a man who is a complete stranger simply because he might one day prove a threat to you isn't something that most people grow into. It's either there from the start, or it isn't, barring genetic tampering. I'd be very careful with a man like that, and extremely wary of trusting anything he said to me."

Her expression softened, her mouth twisted into a sort of frown that Dorian might not have understood if he didn't

know her so well. She was preparing herself to say something hard, something she didn't think he would want to hear. "But he's like you too, Johnny. Tyrus was right with what he said. You live in the text, in worlds you think you can manipulate. We taught you to do that, but you were always that much better than the people giving you instruction because you understood, on some level, the real power that was being put into your hands. Everyone else in this pathetic old world of ours is immersed in the things you and those like you create. It's their bread, their wine, their stimulation and their participation in the community of humankind. Every time you make something or destroy it, you change the lives of a billion unseen people. You alter the trajectory of their lives because they have to go somewhere else to get what they need. You lay out the paths that they can follow. You draw the maps through the wilderness, and because of the decisions you make, they end up bouncing off of people and ideas and institutions they would have otherwise never met, sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad. You change what they have the potential to become. But you, you live outside that messy web of interconnection. You use it instead of taking it into yourself. You make it into something that pleases you.

"I think this copy of Raville recognized as much. Recognized you, or something in you, that suits his purposes. You suspected, probably correctly, that he's seen your employment file. And indeed, much more than that, truth be told. He's been looking over your shoulder for some time, knows about all your little tricks with the folks at Hometown Mart or Sierra Bancorp or any of your other favorite targets, all the things you think are secrets. See, the problem is that you've finally met your match. He's got you on the other side of the text now, messing with your life at a whim, altering your landscape to meet his taste. You treat the Strand and the foam like your private little kingdom. Well, the foam *is* his kingdom. It's what he is. He manipulates his environment just by thinking about it, and any man, real or virtual, who gets used to thinking like that is dangerous to the people around him. A man like that comes to see himself as a god of sorts."

Lily gave him a long, hard look. "So you need to decide,

and quick, what you're going to do about it. You can't walk away from this. You can't delete it. You can't rewrite it and make it so that it never happened. A living god has put a charge upon you, though you didn't ask for it. That's the way of gods. Oh, you can kill him, sure, or at least this incarnation of him, but you can't stop what he's put into motion. You can only walk the path he's set before your feet or be destroyed. It's up to you to determine which way you're going to go from here."

"What can I do? What choices have we really got?" Dorian demanded. "How am I supposed to trust anything he told us? Raville knew what would happen when he passed over the orb. He knew his actualized self would try to kill us, Lil."

"And when the true Raville has figured out that he failed, he'll try again. And he'll keep trying until the job is done. You and Tyrus and I, we've all been there before, so put away your moral outrage and see the situation for what it is. How do you stop them? How do you beat them? It doesn't particularly matter who *they* are. It just matters that you push them to the endgame as quick as you can, so that win or lose, you're of no value to them anymore. You focus on staying alive long enough to get there. So I say again, what are you going to do? What tools did Raville's package give you against himself? I'm not saying to trust him, dear. I *am* saying that nobody knows better how to stop a god than another god."

"I don't know," Dorian said, feeling uncertain. Lily had always been good at casting situations into black and white, into straightforward choices that must be made. "I mean, he told me how to access the *quae-ha-distra*. But I don't know what's in there. That's why I need your ex-connex. I brought along an old portable Korski pre-seenop compiler I can use to jack into my foam anonymously without using my published ip. I can't guarantee that Raville won't detect the intrusion, but at least he won't be able to track what I'm doing and he can't be positive that I'm the one doing it. Knowing what's in there, what he wants to keep secret, that'll give me a map of the territory, at least. That's a start. We can decide what needs to happen next from there."

"I know what's in there," Amara said suddenly, in a voice

so small, Dorian almost didn't hear her. She turned to face him and her eyes were too large, too distant, as hollow as an old, abandoned well. "I know what's inside, through the *quae-ha-distra*."

Lily gazed curiously at her, as though seeing Amara for the first time. "What's in there, Amara? What have you seen?"

"Do you want to see?" Amara looked from side to side, furtively. "I can show you."

"Stay off the Strand," Dorian said once again.

But Lily held up one of her claws, urging him to be silent.

"Go ahead, Amara," she said.

Danek grunted. "John's right, baby. It doesn't make any difference. Even if it was safe, neither of us has the tools to see it on the Strand. It's a coded artifact."

"But I can show you, if you want to see," Amara insisted. She pressed her hand against her chest, in the same place where Raville had touched her inside the memory palace. "It isn't hard."

And just as before, just as it had been in geek, a black and empty slit opened in her flesh. Amara put her hand inside.

Danek made a strangled, gasping noise. Dorian leapt to his feet and cried out, throwing his tepid coffee all over the floor.

Amara brought out the *quae-ha-distra*, shimmering in the shadowed room, and held it out to Lily on her palm. It glowed like an iridescent heart, casting arcane patterns on the walls. Lily remained on her pallet, unmoving, but fiercely alert.

"They gave it to me," Amara explained slowly, like a child speaking to children. Light coursed through her fingers, dripped from her hands into puddles of red and green and gold. "It's what let me go inside, where the Helpers are. They came to me, just like he said they would." She turned to Dorian. "Why would he try to kill us, John? After he had shared this? After he had given knowledge?"

She gazed at him, hand extended, looking lost and vacant and alone.

"That can't be," Danek whispered, sitting stiff and upright in his chair. He gripped the arms in his powerful hands as if he meant to crack the wood. "You said it was code."

"It was code," Dorian snapped.

"That doesn't look like any code I've seen. Lily?"

She said nothing at first, and Danek called her name again. Deliberately, Lily roused herself and waved her arm at Dorian. "Tell her to put it away, Johnny. I don't need to hear it any more."

He crossed the room with careful steps, keeping in Amara's line of sight, so as not to frighten her. When he reached her, he lowered himself to his knees until he was level with her, face to face. Trembling, he grasped her wrist and folded her outstretched fingers over the light of the orb. Her scales were cool to the touch, hard like old leather.

"It's time to put it away, Amara."

"You should see what's in it."

"I'll see later, okay? For now, just put it back where it belongs."

She searched his face for a moment. Dorian didn't know what it was that she sought, but she must have found it, because after a moment, she nodded in acquiescence and tucked the *quae-ha-distra* away, then she put her head against the tall back of the chair and closed her eyes.

Dorian leaned over her, listening to her breathing. "I think she's asleep."

"I think I'm the one who is asleep," Danek muttered. "That was impossible, yes? What in God's name is going on?"

"I don't know." Dorian backed away from Amara. He couldn't think, couldn't begin to pull this apart and figure it out. But by the time he reached his seat alongside the fireplace, Lily was already in motion. She hauled herself up onto her hands and feet, wobbled a bit as though her balance was off, but all the time called out brisk directions to her husband.

"Make up the bed in the bedroom upstairs, Tyrus. There are spare blankets and fresh linens in the storage chest in the closet off the utility room. Give them a little heat if you can get the furnace working. Johnny, I think it's best if the two of you stay together. She shouldn't be alone right now. Tyrus will make you a nice mat on the floor, I'm sure. You've slept in worse places." He started to speak, but Lily brushed right past him. "I don't want to hear it, young man. I'm not ready

to talk about it, and neither are you. We'd just make a mess of nonsense out of things we don't understand. Rest for awhile. Sleep on it."

Both Dorian and Tyrus Danek knew better than to argue when she got like this, so they didn't.

He woke with a start to darkness. Suffocating. Weight on his chest, his limbs entangled. He raised himself up sharply and struck his head hard against something solid and collapsed again. Dorian pressed his palm against the sharp pain in his forehead and groaned.

He'd been dreaming. Dreaming of fire and pursuit, of disastrous decisions.

Of screams, high and frightened, banging down the cold metal corridors, chasing after him like accusations, boring into his flesh like greedy claws.

Dorian lay still, gathering his thoughts and remembering where he was. His body ached from a restless sleep on the hard floor and, he suspected, from carrying more tension in his muscles than he'd wanted to admit to himself. It had been a long day. A red letter day. The sort anyone with sense hoped came no more than once or twice in a lifetime. He wasn't even sure he remembered the last time someone had tried to kill him. He was glad, on the other hand, to have apparently gotten over the little psychic kick that came along with it, the alarmingly egoistic boost that someone out here felt strongly enough about him to so ardently want him dead. Maybe there was hope for his maturity level yet. His mother had always held out hope that one day he would outgrow his ego.

In any event, with stillness came clarity. He couldn't move because someone was on top of him. Or not on top of him exactly, but beside him, twining her limbs amongst his like she intended to conform him to her shape. He touched her limbs, the gentle swell and diamond shapes of her scales. She was strong, and she clung to him with the insistence of sleep, so he lay back and willed himself not to struggle against her grip. Amara whimpered quietly until he stopped moving, then hugged tighter to him and fell quiet again.

The room's ambient lighting system eventually registered

his change in body temperature and the overhead bulbs snapped on, a soothing, ruddy glow like candlelight. He took in his surroundings: plain, baby blue walls with a northerly facing window obscured by thick curtains. A Puritan inspired presswood bureau in the corner. Off to the left, in the opposite corner, was an open doorway to the washroom. It was quiet and sterile, the same as the rest of the house, a domain of long-wearied ghosts. He couldn't see a clock from where he lay, and caught himself just before he consulted his system time by reflex. Directly above him he could see the natty and cobwebbed underside of a bedside table. He vaguely remembered bunking down beside the bed, but comfortably south of the table. He must have wriggled in his sleep. He was a notorious wriggler, a toss-and-turner. He probed the ache in his head and agreed that the size and shape of it more or less fit the size and shape of the imprint said table would make upon a skull if the two bodies were brought together with sufficient force. That was comforting, somehow. He wasn't even out of bed yet and was already beginning to resolve some of the many mysteries his life had decided to pitch at him.

The minutes dragged by. His headache slowly subsided. He made motorboat noises with his lips for a time and stared at the ceiling. It had been a long while since he'd awakened before a bedmate, he realized (a rather embarrassingly, almost emasculatingly long while as he counted it up, in fact). He had forgotten the protocols for this sort of thing. So he just waited.

It occurred to him that moments, minutes like this were the reason the Strand had been invented in the first place.

After a time, he felt her move sinuously against him. Dorian looked down on her face in the gloom as she opened her eyes. She blinked at him, then covered her mouth with the hand that had lain across his chest.

"Well, this is awkward," she said.

"I have all my clothes on. And I can't be held responsible for the fact that you don't wear any."

"True."

"I put you in the bed. I swear. Danek saw me do it."

She might have grinned, but he couldn't be certain. Her

hand was still in the way. "I believe you. I woke up once, briefly. I was scared, and you seemed to be sleeping so soundly."

"It's okay," he said.

Once again, she searched his face, reading things he couldn't guess. "Is it, John?"

"This is okay, you and me. It's the rest of our lives that are a parade of unmitigated disasters." She nodded in understanding, and he winked at her. "How are you feeling?"

"Better." She didn't sound completely certain, but it was something, so Dorian didn't press her. "I have only the vaguest memories of yesterday. Yesterday? This morning? I've lost track. What time is it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Late, I'd imagine. But I can smell coffee, so Danek is still up, at least. Or back up. Whatever."

"I don't know what happened to me," she said, "there at the end."

"There's no need to talk about it right now if you're not up to it."

"I feel like I have to. I want to understand what happened."

There was an unspoken appeal in her eyes, not the near hysteria of the morning, but something deeper, a burgeoning fear of the unknown. She needed to sort through it just as desperately as he did, perhaps more than he did. She had experienced things with Raville, inside the foreign foam, that she hadn't yet shared with him. She must have questions he hadn't even imagined yet, because he didn't have the proper context; mysteries she could share, but that he didn't have the framework to comprehend.

He began slowly, gently. "How long have you known? That you were carrying the orb, I mean."

"I can't really say. When I try to think about it, it's like I've always known. It's just always been there...but that can't be right, because Raville gave it to me, or he gave me the key and the Helpers gave me the orb." Her lips curled in a weary and dazed smile. "Sorry. It's something of a muddle still. At the same time, I can't say that I was ever actually conscious of the orb itself until the impulse struck me to bring it out. And then

it wasn't really an impulse, it was...inevitable. It was like suddenly remembering something you've done, a trip that you took a long time ago or suddenly remembering a scar you'd forgotten you had. You don't consciously think about it, but when it comes up, you have this flash of recognition that yes, I've been there, I've experienced that. It's part of the fabric of who I am. Does that make sense?"

"No." But it wouldn't have, no matter how she explained it. He wasn't the one carrying the orb inside him. "But I can live with not comprehending if I know that you're okay."

She pressed the side of her face against his chest, squeezing him between her powerful arms. "I'm frightened by it. I'm angry because Raville gave it to me knowing that someone would try to kill us. He didn't warn me, and I'm scared about that, too, about the other things he might not have warned us about. What's inside it frightens me, the potential and the risk, but it fills me with this strange sort of exhilaration at the same time. The worst of it is that all of my feelings are a little hazy, like I should be feeling one certain way about it, but when I try, it's like I'm just pretending. I can't seem to think or feel very clearly about any of it, not the orb or the attack or even Raville's manipulations. I'm just here, watching it all happen, and that seems to be all I have the strength for."

Dorian nodded, though he still didn't understand, and rubbed her shoulder. "It's natural to feel a little conflicted at this point, I think. There's so much we don't know, and so much has happened since this morning. Besides, this is much more useful than all of us getting hysterical, right?"

"Does it scare you, John?"

"Honestly? It scares the crap out of me. But I hope that when we figure out what it is and how it works, it won't be so terrifying anymore. My hope is that Danek and Lily will have worked out some insights for us since they've had all day to think about it while we were sleeping. They're good at this sort of thing, at unraveling mysteries. They can help us sort this out."

"They're friends of yours? Good friends, I mean. You're sure you can trust them."

"We have a long history."

"You served with Danek, yes? In the Marines."

Dorian thought about his answer for a long time, surveying all the potential pitfalls. "I served with both of them."

"Lily?" She was surprised.

"Yes."

Amara hummed over this information, and her body grew tense. She was working up to something. "She's in pain, you know. Danek knows it, but tries to ignore it most of the time."

"He doesn't *ignore* it. They have treatments that keep the worst of her symptoms under control, as long as she isn't too active or doesn't push herself too hard. But beyond those, there's only so much he can do for her."

Amara pulled herself up onto her elbows. "Why does she endure it? It's a bad mod, a horrible mod. She knows it. All you have to do is look at her to see that. I understand that it would be a long way for her to get to an upload station, but the pain would only be temporary. She could have something new built, something better, or even reconstitute--"

"She wouldn't do it. Danek used to say the same things. They had some epic and glorious battles over it back when they were first married." Dorian took a deep breath. It still hurt after all these years to talk about it. "But Lily, sweet Lily, she converted to hardcore New Resurrection near the end of her tour of service. She'd zapped so many times, she said, been wiped and reconfigured so often, that there wasn't anything left of her but her soul, and she wasn't even sure anybody but God would recognize that. Call it bad timing. Call it a deep and abiding need to make amends for the crimes she'd charged against her soul. She connected with God when she had one last task to perform in the civil service of our fair world and its inhabitants, and when Lily makes up her mind about something, there's no arguing with her. She said she'd meet God in the condition that he found her and no other. The rest, everything that comes along with it, is just walking the talk, I guess."

"I don't understand," Amara said. "She'd rather be in pain?"

"She calls it faith. It's a long story, but I don't really understand it either."

Amara dropped her gaze to the floor. "Is that why Danek was so angry with you for taking me to meet Raville?"

"Why would you say that?"

"You love her. Not in the same way that Danek does, but rather like a dream, or something nostalgic. You carry it like guilt, or like an old bone you can't help but gnaw. You and Danek both. It's between you all the time, a subtext running beneath everything you say."

"You're picking at old wounds," he said gruffly. "Danek and I both have a harder time forgiving me than Lily did. Sometimes that's worse, I think. Being forgiven by someone who means it."

Amara backed off, figuratively by withdrawing into herself and literally by pulling her knees up to her chest, crossing her arms in front of her and resting her chin on them. "You don't have to tell me."

But that wasn't true, not at all. He owed her something, a trade in kind for the things he'd seen and done to her while she slept off Raville's synaptic bridge. Secret for secret. Dorian cleared a sudden lump in his throat, and said, "Danek and I, we worked together. Ninth Technical Tactics Group, stationed over in Annawan at Fac Granger. They called us the Icebreakers. That's what we did, went after hostile networks to extract military data for analysis, supported tactical units in the field with real time intelligence data, performed mobile killings of big score physical security systems. That's also where Lily fit in. We were the support side for her SpecTac squad during the Hamers-Doss Insurrection."

Amara rolled her head to the side and gave him an uncertain look. She had still been on Sae Phen during the HD, he realized, or young and footloose enough that the minutiae of a dirty little colonial war wouldn't have occupied much of her attention.

"It was complicated, the HD, because the media played it as our government trying to hold onto independence-minded colonies out in the Corus mining belt. We needed their silicate, that's true enough, but Hamers was really just a puppet for Janus Prime. They were pushing hard to expand into our proprietary space. Most of the actual flesh and blood battles were against Janite ships flying the HD flag. But since

there had been no formal declarations of war on either side, this just passed under the public radar. We weren't going to declare because it would have made us look overly aggressive to the rest of the co-op sector. It was important for us politically to describe it as an unlawful insurrection. Janus Prime wasn't going to, either, because they already had their own public relations issues after the Great Farming War. So it made for some messy complications. We worked under significant constraints to maintain the illusion that we weren't stomping anthills with matter cannons. That was where SpecTac was so valuable. They could work anonymously, viciously, in places where we couldn't send regular troops.

Dorian closed his eyes, concentrated on breathing, on just getting the words out. But it wasn't that easy. He couldn't talk about it without seeing it. He couldn't see it without living it all over again. "God, you should have seen her in those days. She was beautiful. Her wide, dark eyes, that smile so white and generous, it made your heart flutter. She was always laughing. It didn't surprise any of us when Danek fell in love with her--we were all half in love with her ourselves. Because part of it was what she did, you see? She was SpecTac, quick insertion cleanups and demolition, but she wasn't like the rest of them. She wasn't hard, wasn't full of darkness and hate. She hummed with love. Don't get me wrong, she did her job as well as anybody else, but it simply didn't touch her somehow. She was better than that, better than all of it, despite the fact that her team was always the one being given the worst assignments, the deep infiltrations. I think the brass recognized how special she was, too. Not just her competence, but her ability to handle the lousy jobs without getting messed up by them. If there was a guy, a Janite colonel or something, who was giving us problems, they'd send Lily's team in to clean him up. You know, not just this colonel himself, but maybe his wife, too, and his kids back on Janus Prime. Send a message to the other side that we could get them anywhere and any time we wanted, and the only thing constraining us was our own sticky, silly political situation. Lily would do that, then be home a couple of weeks later, smiling and laughing, having us all over to her apartment for pizza and beer. Like nothing had ever

happened.

"Near the end of the war, about the time the Janites were finally realizing that they were running out of the economic will to keep fighting a stalemate over the Corus Belt and our side could tell that the hostilities were winding down, Defense Min Chalker decided that it was time to go for the throat. He was looking for a win, you know. Not just a quelled insurrection that left the Corus operation in shambles, but an honest to God victory over Janus Prime. A crippling blow. With that, he could take all the evidence we'd gathered about Janite interference to the other heads of state in this sector and drum up some real antipathy toward them, maybe muzzle them for a couple of decades with trade sanctions or something. Who cares? What he wanted was Hamers himself, because we'd jacked some evidence from the insurrection's infocache that Hamers was in regular, direct contact with Janus Prime. If we could capture Hamers, he'd talk. He'd *testify* to it in Reconciliation Court.

"We worked hard, the Icebreakers, I mean, to crack their live military comm foam--that was our overriding mission, above and beyond all the other crap we did with unit support and data acquisition. Finally jacking that was probably what put the idea into Chalker's head in the first place. The HD wouldn't last long if they couldn't even talk to one another securely, so we had to move fast. We were able to determine that Hamers would be visiting a command bunker on Zurette with a small entourage on a certain date. Zurette, we suspected, was the big foam archive station for the insurrection leadership. The brass decided to send in Lily and her team to grab him, blow the archive so they couldn't reconstitute him from a backup, and leave no doubt that we had the original.

"So we shipped out, our small technical group with Lily's SpecTac squad on a rapid-bore cutter and set up operations inside a heavy rad nursery about a dozen tics from the Zurette asteroid. Low profile, no fire support except the fighter escorts we brought with us on the *Phantasm*. Lily collected the latest intel on the second morning, confirmed that the target was in place, then loaded up in a dropcoffin and was gone. I don't think she even kissed Danek goodbye. She was like that.

Didn't mix her personal and professional lives, especially after she converted to New Res, said she didn't want to taint the things worth living for with the things worth killing for. I wonder, sometimes, if she regrets that most of all, missing that last real kiss, or if that's just part of her understanding of Divine Providence and making amends."

Dorian paused for a time, caught up in remembering. The chilly, cramped corridors of the *Phantasm*, the foul smell of unwashed soldiers. Lily stepping down into her dropcoffin, looking up at Danek one last time, giving them all a thumb's up signal as the techs sealed her in. They'd pulled out her array before shipping to keep the Janite scrubbers from keying into her signal emissions. It was the last they heard from her until long after she and her team had touched on Zarette's ponderously rotating surface.

He shook his head to clear the webs out, went on. "She gave us a quick sit-rep. The coffins were intact, the splash zone was tighter than we'd predicted, so she had fallen out within ready visual of her whole team, which didn't happen very often. She sounded pretty happy about it. It was a good omen. She declared comm silence, which was standard protocol, and reminded us of the pickup coordinates one last time. Then she bugged out.

"So we sat back and waited, busied ourselves with the usual things like monitoring hostile comm traffic, staring at surface scan delays, looking for anything that would give us an indication of how the mission was going. It was scripted to resolve in just under six asthours.

"We got the call we had all feared without saying so at the four hour mark. It came from a Janite signal-transform officer, riding our own encrypted frequency from the SpecTac team's p2p scramblers on their portable comms. It didn't really matter what he said at that point. If they were jacking our signal, they'd caught the insertion team. Somebody had been broken. Once he knew he had the connection, he handed off the broadcast triDvid to Hamers himself.

"I believe I've found something that belongs to you,' he said, and he was grinning. He had hard, evil eyes, I remember that. 'Unfortunately, it isn't completely intact. We'll dispose of the broken bits in our own way. Perhaps next time you'll be

more cautious with your possessions.'

"That was the way he was. So cool, so aware of the political angles. It was always a wink and a nod. Later we found out that it was the intelligence that had failed us. Yes, Hamers was there on Zarette, but so were a dozen other members of their advisory staff. It was a wholesale packaging in preparation for dispersal to friendly outposts around human space. They knew the insurrection was failing, that Janus Prime was backing out, and the leadership had decided to withdraw and leave surrender negotiations to the middle management. Lily's team dropped into security that was much heavier than we'd anticipated, and they never had a chance.

"They sent us back three of the SpecTac team. Three out of twelve. I didn't see the other two, but I heard that they were in such bad shape that the commander of the *Phantasm* didn't even bother with med alert. He had them scanned and packaged and put in ice for reconstitution at home, euthed the remains. If it was anything like the condition Lily was in they were happy enough to go, I suspect.

"There are no words," he said in a low voice, "for the things they did to her. No, for the things they were *doing* to her, for the pain she was in. They had put out her eyes, taken her fingers, mangled her feet. And it was still happening. They'd infected her with some sort of viral bomb that was shutting down her systems one at a time, a steady and irrevocable invasion of nanomech antigens. Obscene punitive technology that had been outlawed by the Dorn Conventions a generation ago. And Lily, she was aware of all of it, the things it was doing to her body, because it kept her awake and aware. You could hear her screaming all the way down the deck, even with the door to the med bay closed. She made us promise not to package her. She made us swear, even the ship's commander. She said it was a matter of religious observance, and he had to comply after that. All he could do was shake his head.

"The smart thing to do would have been to put her in stasis while we burned for Maltis, but it was a week out at least, and I believed--Danek, too--that she wouldn't survive that long. Something had to be done to slow down the assemblers at least.

So I told him I could do it. I wanted to do it, because I couldn't stand seeing her in so much pain, and wanting turned into believing at some point. Danek was the only one who could give me permission. The docs had pumped Lily full of pain medication, a controlled coma, to help her weather the worst of it, but Danek and Lily had been married three weeks before we'd shipped. He had the legal right to override her objections and authorize the treatment I proposed. He had to, because what I had proposed was dangerous. Any of a hundred things could go wrong. If I botched it, it might kill her outright.

"But I believed I could do it, and I made Danek believe." Dorian kept his eyes shut tight, focused on the words alone, spilling out his sins in the dry monotone of a penitent making confession. He was sweating. "Jacking the bomb was no problem. It was the work of a couple hours. But I spent two feverish days designing a radical seenop interface with the mech assembler. I ran thousands of simulations, isolated a hundred different antigens and learned how to take them apart and read their encoding. I just wanted to stop them, not destroy them, so I dug shallow pits over a wide area instead of excavating the engine like I should have. I knew better, of course, but I was rushing because of Lily's pain, and because of our belief that she wouldn't make it to Maltis. I told myself that I could deal with any surprises the engine might come up. I trusted my interface and my skills and my basic intellectual superiority over any other coder's work.

"I went in on the third day, slipping in through an exploit I'd discovered in the Janite array. I hooked into the assembler just like I'd planned, and began the slow and tedious process of tracing instruction nodes, isolating command cores and rescripting the basic parameter sets. Med techs fed me progress reports as I went along. Her systems were stabilizing, her native defenses were starting to combat and flush the pockets of mechs that I was shutting down.

"But what I didn't know, because I hadn't dug deeply enough into the code engine, was that I'd missed a trigger point. Whoever had designed the viral bomb had recognized that his code was just like any other application, and that it could be breached by a jack with the right skills. So he set up

a functional threshold in the assembler logic. Once it had hit certain mech production targets, it started assigning counter tags to the units with wickedly obscure recursive reporting functions. When those tags began to vanish in sufficient numbers, the array read it as an attack on its systems and activated a dormant alternate troll app. This application was a complex cortical sub-array that stimulated abnormal genetic growth, a combination code spew and biological engine. After the first ten seconds, I was completely overwhelmed. After twenty seconds, I was lost inside my own interface. At thirty, I was booted off the Strand and couldn't jack back in with any of my standard scripts. I was helpless, a spectator. We were all just spectators.

"The only thing I accomplished was keeping Lily alive. The troll app was designed not to kill, but to maximize suffering while the assemblers finished their work. I had been more efficient at shutting the assemblers down than the app coder predicted and I left scripts behind that completed the job I couldn't, but there was nothing I could do about the desecration of her body. I'd started it, but I couldn't stop it.

"What you see now is the aftermath. After five days of her abject suffering, we made it to Maltis. The docs there did the best they could, but it wasn't much. The troll app had given her a bastard aural mod so she could hear herself scream. Our specialists salvaged some of her sight with microvids etched onto the optical nerve bundle. They stabilized the joint constructs so she had some mobility. It was all done with this sort of triage mentality, you know. They had been handed this human disaster, and I think they just assumed that she'd change her mind eventually and take a reconstitution--preferably from a pre-mission backup. We all hoped she would, but on that point, she never wavered."

He was nearing the end, and he was glad. Glad to be done with it. "So you see, Danek has his reasons for hating me, even if he says he's put it behind him. I destroyed the woman he loved because I believed my own reputation, when I should have taken a little more time and just done the damned work. He's right to be wary of my competence." He felt sick, like he was going to vomit, but he battered down his own weakness. He had to finish it. "The funny thing, the worst part of it, is

that we all failed. That's all the Defense Ministry saw. We all received official Letters of Censure--for everything from dereliction of duty to spitting on the foredeck. Whatever they could think of that allowed the wonks to disavow the failure. Lily was a mess. Danek was forced into retirement. And Doss migrated to Earth, where he builds cruise liners. Hamers parlayed his organizational skills into a position on the Board of Directors for Hometown Mart. We won and it ruined us. They ran out on the war and all got rich."

Amara said nothing for a time, and kept her eyes lowered, away from him. He didn't know what to think, couldn't read her reaction. Part of him didn't care. He had paid a debt. Dorian rose to his feet. He needed to go to the bathroom.

Quietly, she said, "That's why you don't live on the Strand like most people, isn't it? You don't trust it. Because it failed you."

"There are no secrets in text," he replied. "The code doesn't lie, it can't hide anything from you."

He walked away, crossed the room and locked himself in the bathroom.

Before the door was fully closed, however, he was certain he heard her whisper to him. *I'm sorry, John.*

Dorian vomited until his throat was raw.

10.

They took up their places again in Lily and Danek's sitting room. Dorian took the seat across the fire from Lily once more, so he could feel the warm stones against his back. It turned out to be evening, late evening, but still the same day. Dorian appreciated this fact. It made him feel like he was doing something productive, not wasting his time. His life was in shambles, but he hadn't even wasted a full day before setting about putting things right. He told himself these things even if they did happen to be lies.

There were more lamps burning than there had been in the morning, and the room had taken on a cheerier aspect. This was partly in his mind, the product of a cleansing sleep and emotional distance from the events of the morning. Already, it seemed like a lifetime ago, and that, despite his lies, was dangerous thinking. The mind was too quick sometimes to divorce itself from pain.

Danek had set out a light meal of sandwiches, cheese and beer, the sort of meal Lily had once put out for them. He and Dorian and Amara ate standing around the dining room table. But Lily didn't join them, and instead contented herself with a thick, grey paste which she sucked from light plastic tubes, eaten quietly and, it seemed, self-consciously as she alone on her mat in the corner. After the meal, Dorian had brought out his gear and between them, he and Danek strung a long roll of optical cable between the ex-connex router in the kitchen and the jack-pack Korski compiler that sat open in its case at

Dorian's feet. Lily winced when he flipped the power switch.

"That looks like military surplus," Danek observed, leaning so far forward in his chair that Dorian expected him to tumble out of it. There was a greedy look in his eyes. The silver glow from the small monitor shone in his pupils like living sparks. "What is that, a T-212?"

"I wish. It's a 186. Sometimes when I hit a ham-fisted site where they've deeply nested the seenop, the throughput is like trying to suck a meatball through a catheter tube."

Danek grunted in understanding. "What filters are you running?"

"Just vanilla corporate Zydek on the surface. But I've augmented this unit with a cache processor that executes an anonymous second tier coreshield system using Shadowruption's Vortex suite as the base. I added a few scripts and surprises of my own deeper in, but it all executes under the Zydek umbrella so it's practically invisible to any curious sysops, and it doesn't show up in most log configurations. The Strand sig is competent low-tech. Something you'd expect a geezer to run from home."

"Pfft." Danek snorted. "That was still state of the art military hardware when I joined TechTac back in the Stone Age."

Lily laughed, but her voice was strained, as though she was fending off a headache. "Maybe you should let Tyrus run it, Johnny. He's waxing nostalgic."

"The idea," Dorian explained, "is that it isn't supposed to remind anyone of the military. Low tech enough that it won't attract much attention on the random surf, but not so low that it looks like an interesting antique. I've altered some of the reg files just to be safe. They point to a cardboard persona I maintain on one of the public networks, so if anybody tags my id for later investigation, they find a plausible and distinctly uninteresting profile with a documented user hx."

"Get on with it, already," Lily said. "We trust that you've taken the proper precautions."

He nodded once and set to work. Danek and Lily ran a standard rental ex-connex through a public network provider. There were billions of them in circulation, mostly temporary service ports for folks fresh off the zap or otherwise un-

arrayed. Dorian unhooked the keypad from the Korski's housing and pulled it into his lap. Legs crossed, watching the small monitor screen, he began to scrabble his fingers across the board, navigating the Korski's ancient operating protocols and command driven connection apps. He used a standard public key to access the Strand, the sort you could purchase by the minute from retail kiosks in any major zap station concourse. Danek watched over the top of the screen with wary interest, divining what he could from the upside down text scrawl. To placate him, Dorian fired a signal flare that bounced his location pointers off a dozen far flung routers so that he was no longer just an anonymous connection, but an anonymous connection originating from Boardman's Dome. Danek eventually sat back and let him work.

Lily chuckled dryly.

"This won't take long," Dorian assured them without looking up. "I've got most of the exploits I need to back door into my foam pre-loaded on this machine. I use the Korski sometimes when I'm planning on doing something particularly egregious that I don't want traced back to any of my registered accounts, and I rebuild the core every couple of months so that it doesn't look like the same box to anyone who gets curious."

"I have no idea what that means," Amara said. "Am I just being dense?"

"It means that you should all stop watching me and talk amongst yourselves for a bit. You're making me nervous."

Danek drew himself out of his chair. "I'm getting more beer. Anyone else?"

There were no takers, and he banged off into the kitchen, grumbling in the way he had all those years ago in the service. Busying himself with small, repetitive tasks was the manner in which Danek had always coped with stress. Dorian found comfort in the old habits for some reason. His fingers danced faster across the keys as he navigated the backbone of the Sting, nearer and nearer to his foam's ip, plinking through standard firewalls and sentinel scripts like a fairy dancing across moonlit grass.

Lily gave Amara an apologetic look. "I'll have to apologize. I'm not much for small talk, dear, unless it's

muttering to myself these days. And it's hard for me to concentrate with the infernal racket that machine raises. Forgive me if I'm shouting." She stroked the sides of her head with her hands. "It's just so hard to hear myself think."

"I can take this in the other room, Lil." Dorian said, grimacing. "You should have said something."

"I'll be fine, John. Keep working." She was quiet for a moment, then added. "I always liked watching you work. You get so serious."

"I like it when he chews on his lower lip," Amara said. "Isn't it cute?"

"Talking about me was implicitly excluded in the talk amongst yourselves bit."

"He's sensitive, too," Amara said, an aside to Lily.

"All artists are. It's what makes them so charming."

Danek returned, still grumbling, and dropped heavily into his chair. "Who's charming? Talking about me behind my back again, eh?"

"John, dear."

"The boy has chicken legs and the attention to hygiene of your average mollusk. In fact, I've known a fair number of mollusks who were more physically and intellectually charming."

This assessment met with a raucous chorus of giggles.

"I have an idea," Dorian muttered at them. "How about we take this time and set our obviously under-utilized thinking caps to the task of sorting out what happened this morning instead of using our powers for evil? That would be good."

More giggles, except Danek, who boomed great shouts of laughter like a mortar assault. Gradually, the merriment died away and silence descended on the room. The only sound was the steady, rapid click of Dorian's fingers.

"Let's not all jump in at once," Danek said, serious now.

Amara lowered her gaze to the floor and frowned, uncertain or embarrassed.

Lily sighed. Dorian heard unwillingness in her voice. "Bring it out again, if you would."

Amara looked distinctly unhappy with the request, but Lily fixed her with a hard and implacable gaze. Her shoulders drooped, a bit, but she finally nodded her consent. She turned

her head to the side as though the act itself was abhorrent to her, and withdrew the *quae-ha-distra*. Dorian looked up at that, unable to check his interest, despite himself. They all watched it, the way it glimmered and shone, except Amara. She held it as far from herself as she could, almost as if she wanted to hurl it into the fireplace.

Lily made a loud, wet exhalation. "Do you know what it is, Amara?"

"I know what's inside it, or what it does," she whispered back. "But I don't know what it is, really."

Danek, sounding both awed and angry for sounding awed in the first place, said, "I don't care so much what it is as *how* it is. Explain that to me and I'll be happy. Because what I'm seeing is still impossible." He looked to Lily for confirmation. "It is impossible, right?"

But Lily wasn't watching the orb this time. She sat with her head tilted carefully away from the orb so that she faced the wall, listening and nodding her head in a steady rhythm. After a time, she said, "It's curious. Can you hear anything from it, Tyrus?"

"No."

"Get closer. Tell me what you hear."

He obeyed, but tentatively. It was clear that going too near the orb made him nervous. "Nothing," he announced after a few seconds. "What do you hear?"

Lily shook her head. "It isn't quite as clear as it was this morning, but I'm probably just catching interference from that blasted compiler. I was fairly certain then, but I needed to hear it once more to be sure. I can hear...what? Music of a sort, I suppose. It reminds me of singing." She sat in silent thought, running her tongue around the inside of her mouth. "Do you remember George something-or-other, Tyrus? He was a Captain, I think. We used to go over to his house in Dayreme. His wife's name was Nina."

"Taute. George Taute. I remember."

"They had that dinner party on Foundation Day, it would have been twelve or fourteen years ago, and he did that thing with wine glasses. Played them with his fingers. They made this music after a fashion. Clear, ringing tones, the pitch dependent on how much water was in the glass."

"It was hideous, as I recall."

"That's what this sounds like, except that it isn't hideous. It's beautiful. Lighter, somehow, more resonant. The notes are perfectly, splendidly orchestrated." Lily listened for a few moments longer, then said, "It's a type of sonic vibration. Akin to what Captain Taute called his Music of the Spheres."

Danek rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Okay. I'll grant that it emits sound waves, even though I can't hear them. You're the expert on ambient noise in this family. That still doesn't tell me anything useful. It doesn't explain how it was able to translate from a coded Strand artifact into a physical object."

"I suspect that it does. Sound waves are potent forces if properly harnessed. Directed sonic pulses have been used for quite some time in heavy mining operations to pulverize stone and bore deep shafts, especially in unstable atmospheric conditions where there's too much risk with explosives. So we know that sound waves translate to energy just like other waveforms. What I'm proposing is that this code that Raville passed to Amara in a virtual experience was designed to interface with her array in such a way that it produced a precise combination of sonic vibrations. Those vibrations, that energy, iterated throughout her body, led to a consistent pattern of self-organization which ultimately *constructed* a replica of the virtual orb from Amara's physical material."

"Like a tumor?" Amara asked weakly.

"That's a reasonable comparison, though I wouldn't take it to a terminal conclusion, dear. The vibrations would have to be very specifically orchestrated, but it's possible that they could be used to disrupt normal cell divisions and encourage a pre-determined pattern of mutation."

But Danek held up his hand. "No, that doesn't make any sense. She's flesh and blood, Lil. That thing is something else. A crystalline compound of some sort, or even ordinary glass as far as I know. You can't transmute flesh to a non-organic material just by fiddling with vibratory rates, not without nanomech intervention."

Lily frowned at him, her lips twisting in a marred, uneven line. "Amara, forgive me if this is a personal question, but how many times have you been reconstituted?"

Amara looked stunned. "Twice."

"And you mod semi-regularly, I assume?"

"Yes. A few times a year, depending on fashion."

"You patronize upscale mod facilities, the sort with certified program designers and full medical support rather than chop shops. I don't keep up with the latest advances, but I'd guess that your current modification wasn't cheap. It came with full support systems, integrity maintenance protocols and--" Lily appraised her piercingly. "A young, single girl living in the city, in a neighborhood that isn't exactly a war zone, but isn't safe to walk in alone at night, either, yes? Did you pay extra for the diagnostic node?"

"It was part of the package. The physicians recommended it--a sub-catastrophic intervention device. Self-activating if my system registers sufficient trauma."

"And being a dutiful employee of the Archive, you make certain to keep your personnel record up to date. Your mod history and your security images, your medical records."

Amara nodded, but said nothing.

"What are you getting at, Lily?" Tyrus asked with a touch of exasperation.

"Stardust, Tyrus," Lily said quietly. "She's *made* of stardust and crystal. Processed silicate wafer re-engineered on the nanoscale into cognate organic material using her own packaged genetic pattern as the blueprint. She carries a standard, if dormant, programmable diagnostic node and a reservoir of med application nanomech drones specifically engineered for rapid dispersion and recombinant system construction. Probably not sufficient in and of themselves to make something as complex as the *quae-ha-distra*, but enough to greatly assist with the task begun by the sonic folding. This could be a technical design decision, or it could simply be that the genetic material is somehow inherent to the nature of the orb, something it needs to function as it should within the constraints of her physical universe. But the point is that everything Raville's script needed to translate the artifact from virtual existence into reality was already a part of you, Amara. You were a perfect physical candidate."

Amara chewed her lip. She gazed sidelong at the orb in her hand, torn between fear and wonder. "But that can't be right. I wasn't perfect. I was lost in there. I was worse than

lost: I was overwhelmed. Wouldn't John, with all of his crazy scripts and modifications, wouldn't he have been a more logical choice?"

Lily dismissed the argument with a sour expression. "I wonder about Michael Raville, your Michael Raville, I mean. Caught up in his virtual prison for year after year, able to commune with the memory of gods, but not the gods themselves. Cut off from the divine touch. That's a grievous thing to a man, who was made to worship. Men have a way of conforming themselves to their gods over time, obeying the urge to be pious until the man that they were vanishes and the man they believe their god would have them become takes his place."

"You think Raville was being controlled by the Exousiai? That *they* chose me despite what he wanted?" Amara looked like she was on the verge of screaming.

"Perhaps not directly. But I would suggest that they influenced him, and that his story of being translated into the realm or the dimension of the Exousiai changed him fundamentally, in ways that he does not yet even understand."

Amara answered this pronouncement with silence, still and profound. Lily softened her gaze and continued, nodding. "Yes, dear. You've been there also, and it may have changed you as well. You cannot touch the infinite without being transformed. Set it aside. There's nothing you can do to change it now. You were chosen, that's what matters. Raville might have chosen Johnny for perfectly logical reasons, but in the end, I think that logic wasn't the motivation. Inside his own environment, he could have found ways to force John to accept the orb if he'd wanted to badly enough. I have to believe that. But he had just as ready access to your personnel data as he had to John's, and something inside him compared Johnny's compatibility with the orb against yours and chose you instead. Raville may not have even fully understood what he was doing.

"It seems likely to me he didn't foresee this event, this thinning of the walls between the imaginary and the real. He was trying to pass knowledge to you, that was his conscious agenda. But he also knew that John could use that same data to do more than just carry out his desire to prevent war with

the Exousiai. I don't think he expected to give you a permanent key to his storehouse, and I don't think that's anything he would want. He wants to be able to control you out here just like he did in there. The physically manifested orb represents something new, something he didn't count on. You want me to tell you why? I can see the question in your eyes, dear. I don't know why. But it's happened for whatever reason, maybe even because the Exousiai themselves willed it. You have to discover what it means, both of you, because it is the only element in this scenario that your opponents haven't predicted and have not prepared themselves against. If you can figure out what it is and what it means, it may be a secret strength that can assist you when you need it most."

"Or hurt you," Danek tossed in. "If what you're saying is true, Lily, the orb's value depends on the intentions of the Exousiai and what they hoped to accomplish by giving it to her."

"It doesn't change the fact that Raville used me." Amara snapped her hand closed over the orb, squelching its light. "I believed in him, and he used me."

"It changes everything, Amara. John warned you that he wasn't to be trusted," Lily said. There was no sympathy in her tone. "You made the choice to be used, and it doesn't matter if it was Raville who did the using or the Exousiai through him. You chose, these are the consequences. Deal with them."

Danek sighed. "It doesn't matter who chose her. The object remains. We need to know what it is, what its purpose is."

Amara squeezed the orb until the flesh over her knuckles was taut, as if she wanted to shatter it. "It's a portal," she rasped. "It's a door to another universe, to a place where gods walk and mind is being. A place filled with lightning and peals of thunder that are both somehow the speech of living, immortal gods. It is a world bursting with terrible, mighty, incomprehensible things. Madness and terror."

Abruptly, as if suddenly recalling an experience she had forgotten, she calmed herself. The internal struggle rippled along the clenched muscles down to her fists. Her iron grip on the orb softened noticeably and she drew a breath that caught in her throat. Amara folded her arm and held the *quae-ha-*

distra against her chest so that she cradled it against her breast like it was something precious. The light radiated against her downturned face, bathed her in its glow. "But it's also beautiful and wondrous. Vast, rolling landscapes filled with light and glory and knowledge. The Exousiai are ever there, formless and yet immanent. The heaven and earth are filled with them, with their being and their voices and their song. A single, unified chant, a monad of ascendance which binds all things. There is no loneliness, no separation between you and me, them and us. Just ultimate, all-knowing, all-being oneness and the slow integration into that unity. It feels like home, a perfect and endless home, and being torn from it was like death. A death of emptiness and amputation that never, ever ends."

Amara lifted her eyes and considered each one of them individually. There was something there, Dorian saw, an unspoken plea for comprehension or for an explanation that even Amara couldn't fathom. A plea to be known without the need for explanation, without the distance of words and symbols and metaphors, because there was no language sufficient for the task. She had been in a land beyond language, a realm of pure and numinous thought, and words...words were just the debris humans piled against the infinite to make it comprehensible. "Lily is right, I suppose. It doesn't matter who decided it should be given to me. It doesn't even matter *how* it came to be inside me out here, off the Strand and in the real world. Even if we're exactly right with our deconstruction of the method, it doesn't signify. Because explaining the mechanism, the technical aspect of how something comes to be doesn't begin to touch the ineffable why of it. Describe it all you want, understand the science, but that's just another form of useless reductionism. Even if we never learn how it came to be, the *isness* of it, its fundamental being, remains as a divine mystery."

Lily nodded. She nodded, Dorian realized, because she was always the first to understand the difficult things, the things that required human feeling. She softened her expression into a grimace that was both deeply disturbed and wholly compassionate. It was a look Dorian hadn't seen on her in years. For just an instant, he saw her again, the old Lily

he had known all those years ago. The beautiful Lily. "You're right, of course. Understanding how the universe began doesn't do anything to help those of us who have to live in it. Seeing a diagram of the wonderful, impossible complexity of our own genetic code doesn't help us fit more comfortably into our own skin any more than a picture of fire will keep a man from freezing to death. We're asking the wrong questions.

"It's never been about what and how and why all of this has happened. It's not about anything that we can parse into facts. It's about purpose. What do these Exousiai want of us--as individuals and as a species? What are you supposed to do? What information does the orb exist to impart to you?"

The Korski spat a sudden, strident beep, and they all jumped. Dorian peered at the screen, then raised his head and said, "I may have found the answer to one of those questions, at least."

"Tell me," Amara said.

Help me.

He could taste her need as if it was inside of him, as if she was part of him. And she was, he supposed. He had known her, back at the Archive while she slept, seen more clearly into her being than she would have ever allowed him on her own terms. He had scrolled through her like a long and complex text, understanding in part, experiencing without context, glimpsing through a glass darkly. But he had experienced her all the same, and what is a man, but the sum total of his experiences? He would carry her inside him until the end of his days, just as he did every man whose living package he had ever corrupted, every enemy combatant he had been assigned to virtually assassinate. All of them were crammed together in a dense corner of his own rusting and moldy memory palace, stacked next to the secrets he kept and the things he could never say to her or to anyone else he had ever invaded.

His throat tightened. "Before...after we had met with Raville and he had given you the orb, he helped me gather some of the tools I'd need to...to assist you in extricating yourself from the place where you had gone, from the foam where Raville's understanding of the Exousiai exists in a

phenomenalist form. That environment, he said, was constructed on the pattern of his memory palace. A render of a real space. A simulated experience of a state of being. But because it was a construction, there were ways that it could be exploited. Because it was code, there had to be an underlying structure that could be grasped and manipulated independent of the application. I was able to enter the foam construct the orb created through a back door and extract the file structure into my own archives in a non-executable format. As code and documents. Raville told me that if I wanted to understand, if I wanted to help you, I should look for a particular file. He said it was the key to everything."

"Have you found it?" Amara asked hungrily. He thought she might lunge at him.

Dorian chewed his lip and cast a glance at Danek. "I have, yes, but it's not quite that simple. It's an artifact of some sort, like he said, but it's also an integral logical unit in the system architecture. Meaning that it's code, yes, but it's also an interface of some sort, a context dependent oracle. It's meant to be unpacked inside the environment, and it can only be *fully* unpacked that way."

"Wheels within wheels," Lily observed.

"But it's code," Amara growled. "It's text. John, understanding text--that's what you do! What does it say?"

"No, listen to me first. I'm telling you that it's dangerous. I look at this code, and even the text is encrypted. It's layers on top of layers, standard routines enfolded into multiple external applications. I can see one level, but I know that there's more to it. There's a maddening depth of complexity that I can't tap with just the code in front of me. Out here, it's just a document, it's a dead thing, an imperfect artifact that's only a simulacrum of the thing it represents. In there," He pointed to his head, "it's alive. It has a shifting essence, a metalayer of meaning that's been split off, parsed into discrete strings and distributed all across the architecture. It's meant to be experienced, comprehended in a way you can only get at inside the environment it was constructed to serve. It would be like trying to imagine someone's personality from the text of their package encoding. It's too vast, too complicated. Without context, I can't even know what it is."

Lily nodded curtly. She would get it, of course. "You're saying it could be a bomb."

"It could be, yes. I can't say what it is for certain, not without days--weeks--of analysis to sort the subroutines out and recompile it into a linear code object. Maybe even longer."

"Time that you don't have," Danek said, sighing.

Dorian knew what he was thinking. This was a bridge they had come to before. They'd crossed it once, and lived to regret the decision.

"Raville made sure we wouldn't have time," Amara said. "He wanted us to be in a place where we had to trust him. He requires a leap of faith."

"And the only way you can experience it properly, I assume," Lily added, "is via the Strand, and through the intervention of the orb, which is something you both cannot do without the enemy finding you and something you fear to do because of the orb is an artifact which you do not fully comprehend." She spoke in a harsh, unyielding tone, but Dorian heard also the awareness of a delicious irony. The New Resurrectionist in her recognized a spiritual test when she saw one. He thought that she might laugh, and eventually she did, a steady, quiet stream of bitter amusement. "Oh, he is a clever and capricious god, this Michael Raville, real and encoded, living and electric, flesh and packet and wave. A god of the left hand and the back hand."

Amara turned to Dorian. She cupped the shimmer of the *quae-ha-distra* in her hands like Pan clutching at a wood sprite. "What do we do?"

Dorian dropped his eyes back to the Korski. "We run."

"Run?"

"Yes. We get out of here. We find a place to hide until this blows over and Raville forgets about us. We stay off the Strand and out of communication, avoiding all the digital avenues he might use to track us. I know how to live off the network. We can get by. In the meantime, I'll work on this code and figure it out, and then we'll take it to the authorities."

Danek grunted. "Except that you forget Raville is the authorities."

"Fine. Then we won't do that."

"And what will you do about money? He'll have your

banking transactions tagged at the source."

"There are ways to get rupees off the network if you know where to look." And you aren't afraid to get a little dirty.

"So you're willing to become a fugitive and a criminal?" Danek arched an eyebrow. "That's some excellent tactical planning, boy."

"I'm willing to do whatever it takes to stay alive, yes. It's better than sitting here talking about setting off virtual alarms in a proprietary foam environment until Raville's assassins find us," Dorian barked back. "At least it gives us a chance."

Danek gave him a thoughtful look. "Has it occurred to you that you're going about this whole thing the wrong way?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You remember a few years ago those techies on Ono Majoris exposed the price fixing of silicate wafer among the conglomerate suppliers. That led to a big investigation by media outlets, government agencies, the works."

Dorian nodded. "They flooded Strand cafes and p2p networks with datastreams."

"Maybe your problem is that you're taking this too personally. Maybe the way to get yourself out of the spotlight is to redirect it at the principals. Throw it open to some healthy public debate. It might slow them down. It might even give them bigger problems to deal with than just you."

"The Ono Majoris Data Consortium had hard physical evidence," Dorian said. "What have we got? The rantings of a potentially soured upload package. There's no credibility there. People wanted to believe that the silicate distribution conglomerates were ripping them off because it explained why their level of prosperity wasn't meeting zap pundits' projections. To that extent, the OMDC really had a soft sell. People are not going to believe in this. It would get relegated to the fringe conspiracy community, and as much as those folks are fun to poke with sticks, they don't have any political power, and without real evidence, they'll still be in their little chat forums arguing the legitimacy of our claims long after we're dead."

"And in the meantime," Lily said, "the plans of the actual Raville move toward fruition and war with the Exousiai comes nearer to reality with each passing day, if your Raville is to be

believed."

Dorian scowled at the suggestion. "I can't say I really care about the delusions motivating either version of Raville. I'm just trying to keep us alive, Lil. But I have an obligation to protect the integrity of the Archive's reputation. Even if Danek's plan was sound, we're talking about spewing the Strand with highly speculative data released under the onus of the Archive's credibility. I am not going to drag them down with Raville's madness."

"You don't believe him?"

"Do you expect me to believe him? That there's this massive secret mystical history that explains humanity's technological leaps over the last few decades?"

Lily tilted her head toward him curiously. "And why not?"

"Tell me, if you were an omniscient super-consciousness, would you really have implemented things like nano-assembly and zap and foam dynamics the way they have been? Would you really have given it to a bunch of glory mugging cranks who would turn right around and sell out to the highest megaconglom bidder instead of just bequeathing it outright to mankind as a whole? That doesn't sound like any way to elevate the species to me."

"You object to the strategy of implementation, thus they must not exist. The same thing could be said for the logic incarnating a God in a manger, delivered of a virgin in a backwards rural Israelite sheepherding community. But that seems to have worked out well enough."

Danek cleared his throat and gave Dorian a subtle headshake--the all-knowing eye. Some points of debate were not up for criticism.

He proceeded cautiously. "That's completely different, Lily. Raville is using these advances as evidence to support his claim that they were all alien inspired. He may believe that, but it isn't sufficient. One of the fundamental qualities of human experience has always been our willingness to tinker with and build upon other people's ideas, the slow and steady progress from stone wheels to supercomputers, punctuated by paradigm shifts and dramatic advances that revolutionize our societies. There's nothing mystical about it, and there never has been. Figuring things out is what our species does. That

Raville believes it's some sort of quasi-divine inspiration only demonstrates that he was a little mad to begin with. He's constructed a vivid fantasy of divine appointment, because that's what men have always done when their intellect amazes even themselves. God is just the name for misunderstood scientific principles. Six hundred years ago he would have been up in a tower rattling on about aether and angels and other circumspectly pious Roman Catholic visions that explained the forces of interplanetary gravitation. But when we stopped believing in God, we traded it in for a belief in super-intelligent benevolent aliens...and when we debunk that myth, it'll be something else we haven't even imagined yet. The Apocalypse of John didn't come to pass, and neither will the Apocalypse of Michael Raville. The sooner we stop giving encouragement to wild-eyed prophets looming up out of the desert, the sooner we'll start realistically attending to the basic suffering and violence and inequalities that mark our existence."

Lily laughed gaily at his intensity. "What a magnificent screed! You've got it all figured out, don't you? God doesn't exist. Aliens and angels don't exist either. It's just the glory and depravity of man cast in guises we can more readily accept. This doesn't change the fact, of course, that you told me Raville showed you the report that the Marines are on their way to Phi Sophia, and that the actual Raville is there awaiting their arrival. Someone out there believes the Exousiai exist, and if we judge by the firepower that's been dispatched, that someone has been mightily persuaded. If all of this is merely Raville's mad fantasy, there's no harm to anyone, except perhaps the great scientist's reputation. On the other hand, if you're wrong, and they do exist, the Apocalypse of John and the Apocalypse of Michael Raville may find many passages in common. Are you really content to allow events to proceed unhindered when you've been given an opportunity to stop it?"

"What other choice do we have, Lil? Even if we understood this code and what it's telling us to do, the task is too big. We can't stop the forces that have been set in motion. It was a fool's errand in the first place."

"You always have a choice," Lily responded. "You just

seem to want to deny that you're making a choice at all. Getting swept up by the flow of history is a choice, John."

"We can choose to do this," Amara said in a quiet voice. "Or at least we can try. Maybe we *were* chosen for a reason."

Dorian scrubbed at his face and groaned in frustration. "We were chosen because we were handy, and because we were foolish enough to get ourselves involved with a wad of runaway code I should have just purged from the beginning. Don't you go all mystical on me, too. Look, even if I stipulate that the Exousiai exist as Raville describes them, we don't even know if the war *matters*! We don't know what the actual Raville with his accumulated wisdom and study of these beings might know."

"Raville told you that his knowledge would be stored inside the foam," Lily pointed out. "Are you willing to find out? That's really what this is all about. You take the risk, you learn what you need to know to go on."

"And maybe we find out that the war is a good thing," Dorian countered. "Maybe we *want* the Exousiai destroyed."

"We can't destroy them," Amara said, as flat and emotionless as stone. "I've touched them, John, and Raville's choice makes no sense to me. They're too mighty for any weapons we possess. They can burn us out of the universe if they choose, and any time that they choose."

"You haven't touched them. You've been thrown into a simulated experience of them. You saw only what a forty year old package of Raville believes them to be. You want to assume that they exist, so we'll even add that he only saw what they wanted him to see, which means that none of it is necessarily based on any actual reality. It's all just copies of unreliable experience data."

Amara's jaws tightened. "So I'm just wrong, is that it? Raville scammed me. Ask yourself this question, John. Did I experience only an illusion drawn from the demons that haunt Raville's mind, or did I break through that illusion and touch the true gods directly? How can you know what happened to me inside there? How can you make assumptions about an experience you've never had?"

"You sound just as crazy as he was, Amara. For God's sake, it was *code*. Even he told me it was code!"

"It was experience. And it was real to me. What am I supposed to believe? Your narrow definition of what text can be or what my own senses tell me?" She opened her fist, and the orb shone white and blinding like the dense, vibrant core of the universe itself. "This was code too, remember? It was word made flesh."

He was running out of arguments, out of ways to dissuade her. Amara's intense, reasonless insistence wore on him like a rain of hammer blows. How did one begin to logically argue against faith? "You really want to do this."

"Yes."

"Despite the fact that Raville's men are hunting us. Despite the fact that using the orb, getting on the Strand--everything we have to do--is just like firing off a flare announcing our location. They'll find us, Amara, and they'll kill us, and still, you want to do this?"

"We wouldn't have been given the information if it wasn't sufficient to help us. We can't just ignore it. Like Lily said, we have to walk the path he set before us."

"You're willing to trust him?" Dorian felt like he was shrieking. It was crazy. They had all gone crazy. "Still? After everything he did to you, you want to believe him now?"

"We have to find out," Amara said. "We have to know. Especially if it wasn't Raville who chose us, but the Exousiai themselves. The future hinges on this event. What humanity will become is being decided there, and we have the opportunity to have some say in it, to represent someone other than scientists and soldiers and powerful men determined to maintain the status quo you say you hate so much."

He threw his head back and gazed at the ceiling, lost for words, but looking for some, building himself up to a major rant. Across the room, Lily gathered her limbs beneath her and lumbered into motion. With her limping, pained gait, she dragged herself over to him and held herself there, staring at him. He did his level best to ignore her.

"Look at me, Johnny."

He wavered for a moment, but couldn't deny her in the end. He owed her too much. He stared into the deep, shifting patterns of her blank nanomesh screens, eyes like moonlight on dark water, and shook his head. "I can't do it, Lil. Not

again."

"No one is asking you to do anything on your own. It isn't your decision to make. She bears the orb. She's the one who suffers with it and what it all means, and she, ultimately, was the one they chose, whoever *they* turn out to be. Amara believes in these beings, these Helpers, and believes that war can be averted if the right choices are made now. All you're being asked to provide is technical support. Do you understand?"

"Belief is not enough," he said. "She can't believe in something she doesn't understand. None of us understand it and we're talking about blundering ahead with only a bunch of good intentions and wide-eyed hope to guide us. How do we know we'll be doing the right thing instead of just making it worse? Which version of Raville should we believe?"

"She believes that she can help. Sometimes all you can do is believe and let faith guide you." Lily brushed a claw against his chin gently. "Sometimes you're required to make hard choices because no one else can. You believe and you do your best, even if the outcome isn't the one you'd hoped for. But at the end of the day, there is no blame apportioned for those who believed. If you let your fear of making monsters paralyze you, many good things that otherwise would have been are lost from the world. Do you understand?"

Dorian pulled his head free and looked away. "That's not fair."

"Listen to me. I know that you're afraid. You're afraid of the price of believing, because you can't tell what the right thing is. Sartre and Kierkegaard had it all those years ago. Sometimes you just have to make that leap of faith. It's nothing new. We all make leaps of faith every day. We assume that if we make the correct choices today, tomorrow--that if we don't do something that botches the coherent narrative of our lives--that at some point all of this human misery we call living will make sense. Our whole lives are about making sense of the tragedies and chance encounters and the people we're given to know. We assume that we'll ascend eventually to some higher plane where all those interconnections suddenly make cosmic sense and we'll see the big picture like God does. That's faith. Unfounded,

unadulterated faith in what we're becoming. We walk it out by believing that our actions have consequences and the universe will ultimately reward us for making the right choices. It's the same impulse that led us to God in the first place. And if you strip away all the technological and mystical mumbo-jumbo of the Exousiai, it's the same impulse that has led Raville to the crossroads where he is now. Don't paralyze yourself with fear over making the wrong leap, John. Just do what you can do. Just make the leap and trust that you'll work it out in the end." She smiled at him, and hideous as it was, he loved her for it. The weight and uncertainty lifted from his shoulders. If somewhere the gods were keeping score, they would note that he'd still never won an argument with her.

He dropped his head into his hands, defeated. "I hear you."

She squeezed his shoulder with her third hand, warm and reassuring. "And I hear you. I know you'll do the right thing when the time comes. You always do, John, whether you believe it or not. Now, get your gear together, and set up a workspace in the kitchen. You're both going to need a comfortable place to work, and if I have to listen to that machine chattering at me any longer, I'm going to go insane. I'll have Tyrus put on some more coffee."

11.

It didn't seem to matter how he tried to stretch out the work, to fend off the inevitable. The hours passed, the tasks somehow got done, and Dorian marched steadily forward with them. He still didn't believe, and dragging out the time did nothing to change his mind. Dawn came up clear and pale through the curtained windows in the kitchen, but it brought no certainty with it. It bore no thundering epiphanies on its golden wings. Danek and Lily had finally gone to bed a few hours ago, and even Amara, for want of anything constructive to keep her occupied, had curled up with a blanket in front of the fire in the living room.

Seated at the small table in the breakfast nook near the kitchen widows, Dorian had plodded on through the long night, doing what he could with the unwieldy Korski to reconfigure his foam, enable his pool of ip masks, and alter the trace records and sig dox that uniquely identified his array on the Strand. It was dauntingly precise work, frighteningly illegal, and made that much more difficult by the fact that he had to do it as an anonymous outsider. As if the work itself was not bothersome enough, his task was rendered additionally arduous by the ghastly yellow walls and the retro bubbled polcite cabinets and appliances which surrounded him. He'd never worked well around pastels. They were the devil's hues, his mother had always said, and Dorian had never seen any reason to disagree with her. His eyes burned from this most recent exposure as though he'd spent the night

grating them with rock salt and hot peppers.

On top of that, he'd had to share what bare table space there was with Danek's battered old Chalmers-Husk portable, which was usually attached to the ex-connex. The kitchen was small and cramped, and because of the sound-proofing, he felt isolated by silence and hemmed in by kitsch. Definitely not what he considered optimum working conditions. He'd turned on the newswire audio through Danek's box for awhile merely to alleviate the silence and silence the demonic chatter of the pastel appliances but even the familiar and normally comforting content-free chatter caroming through the restricted space had given him a blistering headache, so he'd given it up.

Such hostile circumstances aside, he forged ahead, converting caffeine and nervous dread into something like creativity. A code parser, a coffee and thou. It was really all he needed.

Amara's foam was easier, but not much less time consuming, because in theory, Raville had gotten a better look at her. She required a whole flotilla of special scripts to mask her ip, and in the end, he settled less on a traditional masking than on a complex shift-id process augmented by conflicting reg pointers designed to spew erroneous log data all over the Strand. To any sysops who encountered her, she'd look like a massively infected viral zombie--unintelligible, unidentifiable and therefore dangerous. But that was okay. He didn't imagine that the *quae-ha-distra* port had a sysop who particularly gave a rat.

He expected all of his covert misdirections to shield them for all of ten minutes, maybe even less, before Raville's agents unraveled them.

Which bothered him for obvious reasons. He'd already seen some of his most complex scripts swept away like dry leaves in an autumn wind. Raville had demonstrated that Dorian's abilities didn't present him with much challenge, which meant that his ten minute estimate might really be ten seconds, or that the assassins were already en route to Danek and Lily's house, tipped off by Dorian's mere thinking about ways to delay the pursuit. It had been that sort of night, filled with doubts and accusations of failure.

But at the same time, wrangling with the cruft of doubt gave him an excuse not to think about the incredible risk Amara was taking, or the equally incredible faith she was placing in him to keep her safe. Or, for that matter, the fact that they had a universe to save from the cancerous, backbiting, underdeveloped and intra-genocidal threat that was humanity.

As the sun came up around him, he couldn't help but wonder exactly what it was he thought he was doing, and if he had ever really had any choice about doing it in the first place. It didn't really matter. Amara had made the choice for them all. All he could do was go along.

Just make the leap.

Toward the middle of the morning, Danek let himself into the kitchen and began rummaging about the cupboards for a coffee cup. Dorian looked up at him briefly. Danek had bags under his eyes and the whites were shot with sort of angry red streaks one gets after sleepless nights that followed overlong and overstressful days. For the first time, Dorian noticed that there were streaks of gray in his friend's thick, dark hair. His hands had grown wrinkled overnight, it seemed, and they trembled when he didn't keep a firm grip on his cup.

He's getting old, Dorian realized, and found that it disturbed him. They were all getting old. Danek had been a mature man when Dorian had shown up for the first day of TechTac school, a man of indeterminate years--not that biological or apparent age was ever a reliable standard--but like all military middle management, he had never presented himself as anything but tough as leather and spry as a malnourished crocodile. He was still an impressive physical specimen, of course, but was beginning to verge on *impressive* in the sense that well-preserved middle aged men were said to be so.

Danek pulled aside the curtains and peered out into the burgeoning day. There was a rime of frost on the grass in the shadow of the trees, but fat dewdrops elsewhere where the sun had melted off the ice. The yard sparkled like a field of stars. Danek grunted at nothing in particular and dragged the extra chair away from the table and across the floor. He sat

down as though his joints had stiffened in the night and leaned the back against the wall with the front legs tilted up. He propped his coffee on the windowsill and lay his head back.

"How does it go?"

"I'm almost done," Dorian said. "I'm just putting in a couple of scripts that should keep Raville's foam from slamming the door on Amara's geek. I don't want her trapped in there."

"Ayuh."

"Is she still sleeping?"

"She and Lily both. I'm going to let the old girl lay about this morning. The last couple of days have really been more excitement than she needs, but it's been good for her, too. She's missed your coming around of late."

Dorian felt himself wince. "I'll make a point of stopping by more often. If we survive this, I mean."

Danek snorted. "I didn't mean it that way. She likes you, John. She likes your company and your energy, but she understands that you've got a life. You come visit her like it's an obligation, but it's not something you owe her."

"It is something I owe her."

"No, it isn't." Danek frowned and pinched his fingers over a spot in the middle of his forehead, like he was soothing a headache. He looked up at Dorian, squinting. "You've been carrying that weight for so long, you can't put it down. Part of that's my fault, I understand that. Maybe I remind you of it too much. But if I do, it's only because I can't put it down either. We share this blame, John, but most of it is mine. I'm the one who gave you permission. But the truth is that neither of us are responsible. We did what we thought was best, what we thought was necessary. Nobody else out there could have even attempted it. I want you to know that. No one else would have even dared. The fact that it didn't work out is beside the point. If you hadn't been there, Lily would have died, and as hard as the years have been, they've been good, too. I wouldn't trade those years for anything, and even though I'm hard on you sometimes, I know that I wouldn't have had them without what you did for her."

Dorian shifted uncomfortably in his seat and looked away.

He had never heard Danek speak to him in this way. It was a bonding moment, and he couldn't help but feel creeped out by it. But Danek flapped his hand at him, a dismissive wave. "Don't listen to me. I get mushy sometimes when I haven't slept well. That happens when you start to get some years on you."

"You can look over my work if you want. Check it for mistakes, anything I might have missed. I've been careful," Dorian said. "I mapped a big stretch of the foam she'll need to traverse, hopefully provided some signposts that will keep her from getting lost. She shouldn't need to be inside for long; this is really just a smash-and-grab as I see it. But as a precaution, I've also interjected some defensive protocols for her Strand cache that should take effect when she logs in for the first time: quick escape apps, cortical shields, that sort of thing. It's not much, I know, but it should give her an added layer of protection. On top of that, I managed--"

"That's not what I'm getting at here," Danek snapped. He brought the front legs of the chair down hard on the floor. "I didn't come in here to question your technical skill, John. You can do this. If it can be done at all, that is." He dropped his head abruptly, and his whole body sagged. He continued to make inarticulate motions with his hands as if he'd forgotten how to use them. "Look, I'm not very good at--I've never had any practice, is what I'm trying to say. Nobody writes technical manuals on how to do this sort of thing."

Dorian took his hands away from the keypad and gave Danek his full attention. "What are you trying to tell me?"

And as he looked at his old boss and mentor and friend, Dorian saw something new in his face. Behind the mask of frustration and weariness, there was fear. It was a dark thing, a heavy cloud hanging over his brows. Even when things had gone so wrong with Lily all those years ago, Dorian had never seen Danek afraid. He'd always beat off his fear with anger, but here it was, naked in the morning light.

Danek opened his mouth, but no words came out, so he closed it again. His lips trembled, just as his hands had. He gripped his knees until his knuckles bulged, and that seemed to steady him. Quietly, almost whispering, he said, "Lily is dying, John. We had a medic out here the other day to drop

off supplies and give her a monthly once-over. It's cancer. She's riddled with tumors. He's familiar with her, um, her condition and her history. He's a military doc. Says it's probably related to that viral bomb all those years ago. Sort of a gradual, time released effect, I guess. It's the same type of attack, just her body picking up on all that bad code after so many years and replicating it because it doesn't know any better. He said there wasn't anything we could do for her as long as she stayed in the form she's in. That body, well, it's just wrecked, you know. Throwing good cells after bad, so to speak. He tells me that the only hope is to get her packaged into something new and loaded into a fresh corpse. I haven't even brought that up with Lily, of course. You know how she feels."

"I'm sorry, Tyrus." He croaked the words the best he could. Someone had stolen all the air from his lungs. "I-I don't know what else to say."

"Don't say anything. There's nothing you *can* say that's going to make it better, and nothing any of us can do. Lily didn't even want me to tell you. She doesn't want you chasing after her with your pity wagon."

"I won't tell her I know."

"You certainly will not. She'd kill me. And I probably shouldn't have told you, but I knew when you showed up at the door yesterday that I wouldn't be able to help myself. You've known her as long as I have. You've loved her in your own way. Now with all this other stuff going on, I couldn't let you go off without knowing." Danek shrugged weakly. "Besides, it's been eating me up inside. Lily doesn't want to talk about it, and she's the only other person in the world next to you who has any idea how much this is killing me. She's resigned herself to it. Part of me thinks she's even looking forward to it, after all these years of pain. I guess I can understand that. I mean, it hasn't been easy, and her New Res friends, they'd be just about ready to have a party if they knew. They'd be all smiles and congratulations about how close she is to entering Abraham's Bosom or whatever it is they call it. I'll most likely murder one of them if they come over here and say it."

"Don't do them any favors," Dorian said.

"Yeah, right. I'm sorry to drop it on you like this, John. But I'm not sure there ever is a good time, and I'm a selfish biter by nature. Sharing makes it a little better somehow."

"It's okay."

But it wasn't. It wasn't within a million kilometers of okay, but he didn't know what else to say.

Danek giggled, a slightly hysterical sound. "It's crazy, isn't it? We *killed death*! Our generation all but did away with the Grim Reaper completely. Took him out behind the woodshed and gave him the butt whipping of his life. My folks are running around in semi-retirement on the white sand beaches of Grenoble Tau, living it up like kids. What am I saying? They're in the bodies of twenty year old kids! I've never had to grieve anyone in my life. I mean, we lost friends, you and me, during the HD, but that was different. Those deaths at least had a purpose. I've never known anybody who just died, John, anybody who chose to let it all go and die. I don't even know how to think about it. How to begin to think about it. It's just...crushing."

And he was right. Dorian felt the edges of it, this massive, sharp-edged stone of ache that he could only perceive shallowly. It meant nothing to him. He had no scope with which to make sense out of it. They called this feeling grief, he supposed, but it was alien to him. He rolled the word around in his mind: grief. It still was obscure. It had a taste like copper in his mouth. A vague emptiness in his gut that was somehow sad and pathetic at the same time. The word alone sounded like the keening of an air raid siren in his inner ear. What did it mean?

"I don't want to be alone," Danek whispered at last. "But I don't want anyone else, either. Do you think that will go away, John? Will I wake up one day and put on a new body and just decide that I'm ready to move on? Find another wife, someone else to love and slowly forget about all this, about all the things Lily and I meant to one another? Will she disappear from me like a dream I've awakened from? I don't think I could bear that."

"It'll pass," Dorian said, not having idea what he meant. "It has to, right? People used to deal with it all the time, so it must get better."

"But I don't *want* it to pass! I'm not old. I'm not tired of living. I always thought there was more to life than just this, just my narrow window of experiences. And I assumed, in the back of my mind, you know, that one day this chapter would be over and we'd move on to something else. Lily would grow out of this New Resurrectionist phase and we'd look forward to long, long years together, getting young and new again whenever it suited us, just like my folks."

"You can still do that."

"Can I? Can I go on pretending that she never existed? I don't know. I don't know if I want to, and that seems so weak to me. I can't help but feel weak. Grieving is so big. It's bigger than the whole world some days, and it never ends. But that's comfort too, isn't it? Because as long as it lasts, and as long as she lasts, I can't forget about her, right? I can't betray her in that way."

Dorian reached out and took Danek's hand in his own. "You won't forget. Neither of us will."

"Do you think that's true?"

"It has to be." It did have to be. What was the point in dying if people didn't remember you, didn't keep you fresh in their consciousness every day? Because memory was data of a sort, just like a scheme of the human pleroma. It could be catalogued, broken down, filed and indexed for ready access. He knew that people still died in some places. Religious sects did it sometimes. The poor in some places, far away from here, where population control was an issue and packaging was an expensive proposition, the playground of the wealthy and politically connected, places that were already well settled and didn't have the constant need for laborers to keep the economy humming. He'd seen newswire stories like that, knew them as shake-your-head moments. One of those things that made no sense and no one could really help, but so distant from his experience that it didn't touch him, so he didn't have to give it any deep thought.

He didn't understand death.

Danek withdrew, pulled his hand away and folded it with the other in his lap. "My grandparents died. I was little, maybe four or five. I don't remember them. My mother says they never uploaded, not once in their whole lives. The tech

was too new and they were old. They didn't trust it, and they'd gotten to that age where their bodies were breaking down and there was lots of pain. The only immortality they could imagine was more of the same, forever and ever. I can understand that. But I don't remember them, and when I talk to mother about them, you can see her eyes get a little distant. Sometimes she stumbles trying to remember things about them. She gets the details wrong between tellings. She's forgotten. Not totally maybe, but what about forty years from now? Or a hundred? Will she remember then, or will it just be shadows and moonlight? Will their entire existence be nothing but tattered facts and mistaken anecdotes with no real emotion behind them?"

"I don't know."

"Forgetting Lily like that...that would be bad. But forgetting the guilt I feel, the guilt of even thinking about going on without her, that feels evil, plain and simple." A single tear rolled down Danek's cheek and he rubbed it away with the back of his hand. "You don't tell Lily about this. Not ever."

Dorian nodded. "I promise."

Danek lurched to his feet. He cleared his throat, spat in the sink. He made himself suddenly gruff and hard, the only way he knew of repudiating this new feeling, this grief. "It's getting late. If you're going to get this done, we'd better get your lady friend up and moving. Folks are just now getting to work. Strand traffic is picking up, no doubt. Should give you a bit of a head start if Raville's men have to sort through all that noise."

The conversation was over, and Dorian was glad for it. He didn't like grappling with it. "Smart thinking, Sarge."

"That's why they call me sergeant and you corporal." He opened the kitchen door. "I'll go wake your girl."

The beauty of the Strand was that it was ubiquitous. Anywhere there was foam (i.e. everywhere), it could be harnessed as a data access point through wireless public network providers transmitting synchronous replications of the complete Strand multiverse. Data access points were regulated via ex-connex routers which connected users

(through their arrays) to the universal data pool. This backbone technological architecture, utilizing quantum based string theory mathematics, allowed system users to leap into any publicly encoded render cluster anywhere in human space, regardless of physical location.

This was all well and good, and truly was a marvel if one was prone to thinking of technological developments as so many alchemical or natural-philosophic mysteries, which Dorian was not. He was a troll, taught to think of the Strand not in terms of what it did and how keenly it did it, but how it might be made to do more and better things.

From a design perspective, there was a qualitative difference between geek sessions that were subject dependent (i.e. internal neural interactions with private foam) and sessions that were subject independent (i.e. public interaction and intercommunication within a network matrix). Subject independent sessions normally required seenop servers running on conditionally linked foam sectors with either public key or membership restricted access depending on the operational purpose of the data store. Coffee rooms and chat lounges generally had very loose member access filters. Banks and financial institutions had extremely restricted identity recognition protocols. Organizations like the Archive traditionally hovered somewhere in between or were careful amalgamations of public and restricted sectors, appropriately hedged. Being able to set up and maintain a reasonably secure network was an essential business practice. Dorian did it, more or less, every day of his professional life. There were rules, and the rules were pretty simple. The rules were applied through the mechanism of standard corporate software packages invoked at the server level that streamlined most of the grunt work, and enforced generally accepted standards for organization, design and coding across the system. The subject independent universe had been settled and mapped and ultimately legislatively codified for dozens of years.

Subject dependent programming was an unexplored territory by comparison. It was as individual as the human experience, endlessly rich and architecturally chaotic, because foam was (theoretically) infinite, indestructible and

reprogrammable. That meant that you could play with your foam without breaking it. You could fashion it to your taste and index it according to your whim. You could do whatever you wanted to with your data storage space, and people frequently did. There was personal foam organizational system software available on the consumer market for the casual user, of course, but it came in a dozen specialized (and incompatible) flavors. On the Strand, seenop servers typically accounted for this individuation in the name of selling services to the broadest base of potential customers unless the server sysop had a particular system bias or just wanted to be a jerk about his brand loyalty.

Foam OS software, on the other hand, did not. It relied on Strand protocols to mediate data transfers between competing systems. Throw in the added dimension of specialized and highly technical users like Dorian who ran open source, heavily modified, meticulously concocted hybrid systems because they liked the additional security, tinkability or just plain enjoyed thumbing their noses at big box consumer products in a fit of elitist snarkiness, and the result was an almost impossibly (IMPOSSIBLY) complex environment to integrate. In fact, most of the equipment designed for such a purpose was either enormously expensive, proprietary military technology or patently illegal.

What Dorian was proposing to do by sending Amara back into the orb's appendant foam environment in such a way that she was operating independent of its inherent organizational structure was an exercise in seenop code theory. It was treating personal foam like a Strand object, trying to make it do things it wasn't designed to do, without the mediation of server links to smooth over the incompatibilities.

He had no idea how effective it would be.

Given more time and resources, he would have wished for a nice secure network with delimited waveform buffers where he could have dumped his map of the *quae-ha-distra*, truncated it to essential logic clusters and set up a parallel replica datascape that he and Amara could have surfed vicariously at will. Similarly, if there had been a way to safely compile and run it in his own foam where he had the tools to subject the code to external controls, he would have preferred even to do

that, but there wasn't--not without much more time and analysis than he had at his disposal. The orb and the foam it represented was simply too vast. In the end, he had settled for doing what he could, which was excavating a rough channel between his personal foam, Amara's and the orb in a clumsy three-way data share that made up in cumbersome inefficiency what it lacked in useful functionality. Channel was almost certainly not an accurate description. It was more akin to a string and tin can telephone.

He did not tell Amara any of this as he sat down across the table from her in Danek and Lily's merrily pastel kitchen nook. It was dangerous, but if she was determined to go ahead with it, he was equally determined to put a positive face on it. Let her believe there really was a wizard behind the curtain instead of a posed scarecrow stuck together with bubble gum and bailing wire.

He said, "If you need anything, if you get lost, if something goes wrong, you can contact me. I've loaded a special p2p app that will become available to you as soon as you hit the Strand so we can talk. I'll be monitoring your progress in my own session and feeding you relevant information as it comes up." As well as doing his best to obfuscate their presence and deal with hostile ip traces "You've got some basic maps and some rendered overlays that should help you navigate the orb's environment more efficiently than you were able to the last time. Your objective is to get in, access the artifact and get out again. It's that simple, okay?"

She nodded nervously. "I'll hear your voice?"

"That's the way it's supposed to work, yes. But that's not an excuse to dawdle. In and out as fast as you can."

"Because the people Raville sent after us will track my ip."

"Right."

"What am I supposed to do? Do I--do I just fall into the orb like I did last time?"

Dorian shook his head violently. "No. I want you to log into one of the public access points. Do you know Hermes Square in Southrange?"

"Just outside the arrivals desk at the Depot?"

"Exactly. There's a bank of public data directory kiosks there, past the fountain and just up from a pub called

Berman's. Scan the directory for j0n d33 919. That's an encrypted entry, but you shouldn't have any problem locating it. I've loaded the key into your cache." This was a popular jack method for trading exploits across public networks. The public data kiosks all over the Strand were filthy with specially encrypted and untraceable jack infoshares invisible to the casual observer. "That's your bounce point into an environment I've set up inside my personal foam. It will load some passive apps into your array that will give you some protection inside the other space."

"Those will keep me safe?" she asked.

"No. There are too many variables for us to imagine that I've accounted for everything. I'm working from a pre-compiled text map, and while that helps, it isn't the same as knowing the functional architecture. That means that some of the code may not work properly. That's why I'm encouraging you to be quick. The apps *should* be stable, but I can't guarantee they'll work as effectively as they're supposed to."

Amara lifted her chin. "If I get into trouble, will you be able to help me?"

"I won't be able to come to you, not like we were meeting on a Strand network, if that's what you mean. I'm pushing the envelope of seenop capabilities just to append our independent foam sessions together. When Raville passed you the orb, it delivered a mechanism that allowed you to access private foam and extract core environmental elements in a way that I don't fully understand. I can't follow you there. The comm channel that will open when you hit my foam is set up to relay real time data back to me, which my compilers will render as useful geek data. It should keep us synchronized, but if traffic on the Strand is heavy or if the orb has some sort of signal filtration buffers, I may run a couple of seconds behind you, so keep that in mind."

"When I get there and find this artifact, what do I do with it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. But I'm hoping that it should be obvious in context."

"You don't actually know?" She looked suddenly alarmed.

"So you'll be careful."

"John, what if I can't get out again once I'm inside?"

"That won't happen." He squeezed her knee. Her skin was cool, almost cold. "You'll have some code that will keep the doors open behind you. Special super mojo stuff I wrote last night, just for you. Just keep an eye on your map and follow the path I've set out for you."

"Okay." She took a deep breath. "I'm a little scared."

"I'd be worried if you weren't."

"I don't know what I'm doing."

"We'll figure it out together."

"I don't think you understand. I wasn't able to *get out* the last time. Not only could I not find my way, part of me didn't want to. It was like a dream. A good dream and a bad dream at the same time." She looked away, suddenly self-conscious. "What if that happens again?"

"It won't," he assured her. "I'll be right over your shoulder every step of the way. You start getting wonky on me, I'll pull you out myself."

Amara glanced curiously at him. "It's funny to hear you say that. The last time, I thought I felt. . .it was like you were there with me, and you grasped my hand, and the next thing I knew I was waking up in our office back at the Archive. Just suddenly, I wasn't alone and lost anymore. It didn't seem like I did anything. Isn't that strange?"

There was that feeling again, like someone had kicked him in the gut. "You'll be fine. I'll be right on the other end of the channel."

"That already feels like a long way off." She shook her head. "I know I'm being irrational. This was all my idea. Why should I be the one who's so frightened now?"

"If it helps at all, I'm terrified almost out of my mind too. So you're not alone."

"It doesn't help."

"Sorry." He squeezed her knee again, but he wasn't sure if it was to comfort her or himself. "Shall we?"

"You first."

"On three?"

"Okay."

"One, two, thr--" Dorian took a deep breath and bounced.

He scrambled through the security protocols and leapt into

his deep foam control room. The emergency lights had switched from pale yellow to throbbing red pulses out in the corridor, and an alarm blatted continuously at ear-piercing volume. Inside, output screens had sprung to life and were hectically scrolling lines of jagged text, warning him of impending trace locks. His passive defense scripts were tossing out great handfuls of binary chaff as trace programs from all over the Strand converged on his ip.

It wasn't any less than he had expected. The good news was that at least there was no longer any doubt about their circumstances. Dorian *knew* he was being hunted.

He ran his eyes over the essential systems. All the boards were still green, which was good, even the new one he had installed via the Korski, a whole rack of fresh toggles and displays that tracked the signal coming in from Amara's Strand signature via the comm tunnel he had built. That meant she had flipped with him. He noticed that the new rack was default black matte and wrinkled his nose. Everything else in the room was standard military gray. The new module stood out like an exotic plinth of alien design.

He'd forgotten to code the environmental integration theme. Not a big deal, not a functionality thing, but still clumsy. Clumsy was another word for careless. Dorian chewed his lower lip and throttled the urge to panic.

He flipped a switch and the blare of the alarm squawked off with a final plaintive yelp. On another rack in the back corner of the room, a pair of red idiot lights clicked on in the klaxon's place. At least they didn't flash. Flashing might have tipped him over the edge into full on neurosis.

They were now officially on the clock.

Dorian retrieved the headset from on top of the new display rack and slipped the earpiece into his ear, then adjusted the voice pickup so he would be speaking directly into the microphone.

"Test, test."

A burst of static crackled in response. "--lo?"

"Amara, can you hear me?"

"John?" The signal was faint and Dorian looked about for a knob to control the volume, but there wasn't one. "Are you there, John? I can hardly hear you. There's...lots...static."

"It should clear up as you get away from the public networks," he said. Either that, or the signal would vanish completely, but he wasn't going to say so to her. "Where are you?"

"Hermes Sq..., like you said. I'm almost to the..." More static. It obliterated a whole string of words. "...a bunch of people here. I can't tell if any of them are...for me. You...Ryoku, didn't you?"

"I changed your avatar, yes," he guessed. "You said yourself that everyone knew the old one. I didn't want to run the chance that one of your friends might recognize you and call attention to it. This avatar is tied to the ip I'm masking yours with. Just think of it as a loaner."

"There aren't...arms!"

Dorian grimaced guiltily. He probably should have given her a bit to come to terms with life as a baby blue balloon animal, but it couldn't be helped now. Conscious of the seconds they were burning, he forced himself to be patient with her. "You've got arms. You just have to concentrate to access them. You may have to push on things a little harder than normal because this render is a little squishier than Ryoku, I'm afraid. But you can float if you get caught up in traffic. That's a decent tradeoff, right?"

One of the code boxes on the other side of the control room spat a buzz at him, a grouchy sound like the cycle timer on a washing machine. Dorian stepped over to the nearest keypad and executed his own ip mask jump. The red lights in the corner of the room flashed green as the trace programs lost their fix on him, but only for nine seconds before clicking back over to red. That was marginally quicker than he had expected, but not something to worry over yet. Whoever was running the trace scenario for Raville's team didn't appear to be a complete slouch.

Bummer for the home team.

With a few more key taps, he launched an automated script that would flash him through his whole pool of ip masks at fifteen second intervals. He'd throw some non-standard spoof algorithms at them later, when they started to get comfortable with his switch-mask pattern. He hoped that would slow them down, but he didn't want to lose the tracers

completely. He had loaded Amara into a specialized ip on login to keep the pursuit off of her and attract it to himself and his stable of elusive and/or hostile trollware. If they lost him, they'd devote their full attention to Amara, and even with all the preparations he'd made for her, he knew his hastily constructed facades wouldn't hold up under intense scrutiny. She wouldn't be safe until she had passed through the filtered sector of his foam where he'd set up her cache load and bounced through to the uncharted territory of the orb's infospace. Dorian's job in the meantime was to lead their pursuers on a merry phantom chase up and down the Strand.

At the moment, her rack still displayed five by five, green across the board, but he did not expect that to last for long.

"Progress report?"

"Scrolling. There are a lot of entries in this directory."

"Look near the bottom. They're indexed by timestamp."

"...got it."

His trace indicator lights were now flipping from green to red after three seconds: the time it took for Raville's guns to recognize the new ip and begin parsing its identity. They were closing in. Dorian adjusted his masking interval to ten second leaps—long enough for them to keep him fixed, but not so long that they could start to dig into his fixed sub-systems--and tried a new switch protocol. The jockey riding him most definitely was not an idiot. Dorian would chew up his storage of dummy ips in no time at this rate.

"Bounce, Amara."

"I can't get the coordinates to display. It's hard without fingers."

An alarm announced a sudden jump in the mask detection pattern. Dorian consulted the display with a frown. Apparently the tech running the tracers liked the new protocol better than the old one. The trace breakpoint was now at five seconds and getting briefer. He tried to remember how many ips he had in his pool, but couldn't imagine it was many more than a hundred. If they nailed him down to one, they could tie it to his array, and once they deciphered his reg edits, they could tie him to Danek and Lily's ex-connex, and then the game was over.

The only good news was that the monitor in front of him

was telling him that he was deeply into the Galai Jarosz subnet ips. That network was halfway across the galaxy. If they caught him there, they'd have to get special permission from the Trithemius Orbis Consul to cross network jurisdictions to peel through the ip mask and obtain his array's sig profile. That three or four minutes could prove as useful as a lifetime when every second counted. Still, beads of sweat collected on his lip.

Calm circles, he thought. *Happy circles*.

"Amara," he said stiffly.

"I'm trying!"

Without warning and with alarming speed, first one light, then another, and then a third blinked over from green to red on Amara's panel. They'd found her, and were running her automated mask bounces through some sort of MAIM parser by the looks of it. Dorian's stomach lurched. That was heavy duty processing and analysis equipment. Military grade stuff. In his universe, the only thing worse than trying to jack military ice was being forced to evade military icebreakers.

He experienced a sharp, consuming instinct to curl himself up into a fetal ball. It was a good thing he hadn't counted on the full ten minutes.

"Slow down," he said into the mouthpiece. "Just concentrate and punch the directory entry. We're doing just fine. There's no reason to panic."

Four lights. Five. He'd given Amara the best masks, ones he'd never used before. Masks he'd reserved for more economic terrorism against Hometown Mart, in fact, and meticulously built from the ground up into plausible simulacra of actual Strand identities. But they were onto her now and chewing up months--in some cases, years--of steady, painstaking labor. And it was only the beginning.

"Okay. I'm in." The relief in Amara's voice was palpable. "I'm loading the foam coordinates key now."

Seven, eight masks down. He'd given her ten. "Bounce."

"On it."

The ninth light flickered red.

He should have just published the scripts in the directory. Should have, but he'd told himself that was public space, and scripts that heavy left an indelible print on the network for any

watchful sysop to find. They would have been purged long before Amara was there to find them. Reconfiguring a sector of his own foam had really been the only choice. Right?

The whole panel went dead. Dorian bit his lip, afraid to breathe.

And with a snap of virtual electrodes, the panel immediately above Amara's on the rack sprang to life and began to chatter to itself as new systems came on-line. Dorian blew out an explosive breath. Amara was inside his foam. With any luck, the quick lockdown scripts had attached to the ip mask panel had dropped a small planet's worth of viral agents on the trace jockey and his confounded MAIM parser. It would take even a genius jack a couple of days to extricate himself from that barrage of malware. Theoretically, of course.

Amara spoke in his ear, frightened. "John? Where am I?"

Dorian switched to a terminal nearer the rack where he could more closely monitor her progress and pulled up a chair. "Hold on. I'm loading your data now. Stay out of your cache files."

"I don't even know where my cache files are." He could hear the ire in her voice. At least the signal was clearing up. "It's dark in here."

Dorian rattled off a series of commands, hauling chunks of code out of the recesses of his foam and shunting them off toward Amara's sector. "Sorry. I didn't have time to flesh out that environment. It's probably a mess."

"What are you doing?"

"Loading scripts. Can you see them?"

Silence. Then, "Ooh, shiny things."

Behind him, a new alarm went off. Dorian typed faster. This would be the one telling him that he'd hit the bottom ten percent of his ip mask pool.

"What's that sound in the background?" Amara asked.

"It's nothing. Do you see the scripts?"

"The shiny things?"

"Yes. Pick them up and put them in your pocket."

"I don't have any pockets."

He'd forgotten there were no lights. "You're in my foam, not on a public Strand network, so you should be back in your

default avatar. You should have pockets. And arms."

A few seconds passed. Dorian listened to himself breathe and tried to keep his hands from shaking. "I've got them. What now?"

Fresh alarms. These were impossible to ignore, as arresting as air raid sirens. "Bounce. Into the Raville's foam. Now."

"Where will you be?"

"I'll be right behind you. Give me a few seconds."

Dorian spun in his chair in time to see the entire rack of Amara's panels go blank. She was out of his foam, completely off the known Strand as far as he could tell. Around him, all the remaining panels were blinking in garish carnival hues and screaming with proximity alerts. Warning lights and peril sensors he'd forgotten existed glared at him with hard red eyes from all directions. It was time to go.

Dorian leapt up and dashed for the door. As he wrenched it open, he imagined he heard the pounding of jackboots down the corridor outside. That was crazy, of course. Not that it altered his perception. He still *heard* them, even if it was just the panicked thump of his virtual blood in his fake ears.

On the floor beside the door sat a tamper proof case marked with large stenciled letters that read: DO NOT TOUCH. EVER. SERIOUSLY, NOT EVER. Dorian bent, opened it and withdrew the render of an EMP grenade. Electromagnetic pulse weapon (or the code manifestation thereof). The script behind it was a massively evil core wipe and decompile troll. The coder's equivalent of a secret agent's suicide capsule.

He spared one last look at his lovely control room, lit up like Christmas, howling like the Foundation Day parade, then pulled the pin the EMP bomb. He rolled it across the floor and sealed the door behind him.

Dorian didn't even hear the low, rumbling *whump* that shattered the heart and soul of his personal foam environment. He had already bounced...

...into a new space. An old space, one he hadn't touched in years. It was a dead man's foam. It felt like it, too. The corridors were pale, faintly luminescent, and chilly as autumn

gravestones. They wove in inefficient, but artful helixes through soft-textured spaces that felt springy underfoot and led through randomly placed alcoves giddy with light and high, vaulted ceilings like the naves of vestal cathedrals. Ever onward, ever downward.

Ray Morrical, the dead man, had always been about style rather than substance. Form instead of function. He was the wizard who fashioned dreams out of starshine and moonbeam and left the mechanical work of animating zombies and technographing monsters to trollish drones like Dorian. Amara would have liked him. He was always becoming something, but never actually getting anywhere.

The Marines had detected young Ray's graphical talent early on and shunted him off into coding school with Dorian, where he learned to build the sorts of environments Dorian's team was trained to destroy. If he'd been any good at it, they probably would have never hit it off. The problem with Ray Morrical was that he had a brilliant, ponderous and detailed imagination. He thought in chunks of data, fully formed blocks of spiraling integrals that he treated as *sui generis* ideal proto-forms. He couldn't break them down into the sort of rough ashlar that could actually be used to construct things. Of course, even if he'd been able to, he had coded with all the grace of a man whose hands were made of concrete.

Dorian, on the other hand, had been the Whipping Boy, what the grunts called the Technical Lead Private, which was, in turn, what the Marines called the reward for demonstrating leadership potential. What it meant was that it was Dorian's sworn duty to make certain that every soldier in his Program Stack qualified in their assigned job category, even if they had been grossly misassigned. Ray Morrical had indeed been grossly misassigned. He should have been running a complex intel mod or designing patriotic banners or even swabbing potato decks, frankly. Coding was the last thing they should have dumped on him, especially coding that tried to wed his skilled architectural vision with block by block system design.

The result was that Dorian had spent thousands of hours bailing Ray out of trouble, and Ray had spent those same thousands of hours keeping him company while he did it. They had nothing in common except the requirement that Ray

passed his exams and that Dorian made sure it happened. Somehow, that had been enough. By the time Dorian was plowing his way through the uppermost tier of TechTac curriculum and beginning to experiment with extra-curricular social disruption jacks, Ray had been looking over his shoulder long enough to become a firm philosophical convert to crypto-anarchism. He had no skills to implement his faith, but he believed in the principles. He started building environmental simulacra riddled with subterranean catacombs, hollow Trojan temples of indefinite and exploitable space for others to fill in behind him. One of those others (wink, nod) was supposed to have been Dorian.

As with most acolyte crypto-terrorists, extremist pacifism and a general distrust of corporate social systems followed, and the Marines being the Marines, they responded to Ray's philosophical balking by transferring him to the front lines just as the HD exploded. He was dead inside two weeks, though Dorian had never heard how it happened. The military tagged his package as Unrecoverable From Backup. Stone dead, in other words. It might even have been true.

The bottom line was that all of Dorian's work with Ray Morrical had not been entirely in vain. Somehow, Ray had in his last days acquired a frighteningly illicit wavehaven rip protocol designed to anonymously reconfigure the definition core of a quantum foam block. These little apps were popular with politicians and other public figures who were under frequent assault from fanspam, wannabe jacks and organized crime cyber-muscle, and even more popular with crypto-terrorists and government stealth incursion agents who had a need to vanish from the public consciousness. Better than being anonymous, they made you non-existent on the Strand. Bodiless wanderers.

What he had intended for this rip, Dorian didn't know, but at what he could only guess was the moment of Ray Morrical's death, his array had transmitted an encrypted Strand data beam to Dorian's p2p interface that consisted mostly of stream after stream of Vorman-perl key logic.

What text there was, was brief and read simply: Fight the Power!

And Dorian had found himself in possession of an

unassigned, unlisted, untraceable foam block.

Until now, he'd never used it for anything but emergency backup and critical systems storage. He had a legitimate job, made a decent living, had no interest in spending the duration of his life (natural and un) in federal prison. He didn't *need* it, after all. He didn't even want it. One couldn't build much of a jack rep from anonymous foam.

But he'd also never thrown it away, either. Just in case.

He needed it now. He'd known he would from the moment Amara had determined to go after the *quae-ha-distra* again. And now, as then, he tried not to think about the consequences of this plan, of destroying his life.

Instead, Dorian ran, plunging with each virtual step ever deeper into the alien foam.

The primary control chamber Ray had designed for his foam was as aggressively sleek and spartanly styled as the ceremonial bridge of a flagship. There was nothing utilitarian about it. The object access panels were all quietly recessed beneath elegant univisual panels, invisible unless you stood directly above them. The data displays were voice activated, the threat sirens aurally pleasant pings. There were no keypads, no manual interfaces. It was all about the architecture. There were sloping columns of slender white marble and wandering Escher stairwells that led nowhere except to increasingly sublime vantage points. It was ludicrous. Dorian had always suspected that if he followed some occult pattern of stair and vista, he would understand a great cosmic mystery that Ray Morrical had captured in the moments before his death and hewn into indelible binary stone here. But he'd never found the time. He wasn't interested in cosmic mysteries.

He was much more interested in finding a seat from which he could use the control chamber's space efficiently. The only chair Ray had designed was a sprawling leather monstrosity in the center of the room, an austere depression carved into the hump of a functionless ivory rib that poked out of the floor like the back of a great, white whale.

It would have been appalling for a troll like Dorian, this nightmarish architectural form that was impossible to navigate usefully, if he had come upon it cold. But he had

added his own touches over the years. He had plugged begrimed and vaguely fungal banks of simulated server racks in one corner, like a patch of midnight mushrooms, to synchronize data uploads between his personal foam and Ray's. Extra chairs had been rolled against the walls at various advantageous points. He had posted signs to remind him where some of the core maintenance panels were hidden. Now there was a new freestanding monolithic rack planted in front of the Captain's Chair (as Dorian thought of the ivory hump), the functional replica of the one he had built to monitor Amara in his old foam.

He was relieved to see that the new addition was up and running. Dorian fell back into the chair and stared at it for a moment, letting anxiety wash out him. The comm script simulating his headset had been left behind when he bounced, so he retrieved a new one from the rack and fitted it into his ear.

Green lights across the board informed him that the session append had transferred as well.

He hoped.

Dorian swallowed hard. He had no idea what he would find here, on the other side of the world, where everything he had ever known about the Strand and code and simulated environments might not help them. He aimed at a vocal pattern somewhere in the vicinity of calm, and spoke into his headset. "Are you still with me, Amara?"

The only sound that reached his ears was the wail of a mighty, rushing wind.

12.

"Amara!"

"I'm here, John." Her voice was very small, timid and quavering. "You were gone a long time."

He found it difficult to hear her. The wind rose and fell in the background in whooping gusts that reminded him of some of the highland dells that riddled the mountain range to the west of Sonali. Her voice had the same sort of thin air, tinny quality he had come to associate with altitude. He wished for a fleeting moment that he had programmed an audio modulator as well as a volume control.

"I had to reconfigure some environmental variables to keep the bad guys busy," he said. There wasn't any reason to explain the scope of this statement, to tell her what he had done to his foam. It was true from a certain perspective, and it sufficed for now. "It took longer than I expected, that's all. Where are you now?"

"I'm inside, but..." He had the impression that she was looking about, trying to find some adequate descriptor for her location. "It's different than the last time. More solid, more...familiar."

"That's part of the map overlay I built," he assured her. "What can you see?"

"There's a tunnel behind me with a gate across it. It's locked now, I think. It leads through a cleft in the rock, then down into darkness."

Dorian blew out a relieved breath. "That's the way back to

your bounce point. Make sure you get a good look at the terrain around it, so you'll recognize the location if you have to come back this way in a hurry."

"Okay. Can you hear me well enough? It's windy up here when I get out from the shelter of these rocks."

"You're coming through clear enough for now. I'll let you know if the signal starts to deteriorate on this end. What else?"

"There's a path here. It leads away from the bounce point. The sky is fairly overhung with clouds, but I'd guess that it leads east. It feels like east, anyway. I guess there aren't really any directions in here, are there?"

"That's fine. We just need to fix a point and stick with it. We'll agree that the path heads off to the east." Dorian rose and advanced to the panel directly across from the Captain's Chair and lifted the univisual cover. Inside was a wireless keypad logically associated with a plasma triDvid projection unit that manifested *ex nihilo* from the air in front of him. He took his seat again and brought up a command line prompt, then proceeded to scale his file structure until he had drilled into the map of the orb's code index. He called up another projection unit so he could view the code along with a parallel three dimensional render of the navigation route he had plotted for her at the same time. He started at the beginning, a long and meandering channel between high walls of impenetrable binary babble he hadn't had time to parse. The walls were largely illusory sleight of hand. He'd just done his best to wall the chaos off from her perception. In his display, the path looked like a desert arroyo carved from phosphorescent stone.

He was pleased that the path had rendered clearly enough for her to find it. Amara becoming immediately lost was one less thing to worry about. He tapped a series of keys and designated the cardinal points on the map display. Tentatively, he associated a red dot where he estimated her position to be.

He consulted the system time. She'd been inside the orb's datascape for a little over six minutes. It was time to get moving.

"Any time you're ready, you can head out for the first

signpost. Make sure you keep an eye on your environment. Let me know if anything looks kludgy or feels off to you. I'll do what I can to diagnose those problems from here and provide you with workarounds. I mark the first signpost at just over two hundred meters east by northeast relative to your current position."

He was already scanning ahead in the text to the next chunk of overlay, anticipating code eruptions or environmental instability caused by the constraints he had lain over it. A few seconds passed before he realized that Amara hadn't acknowledged him. "Hey, Amara? Are you still with me?"

"I don't know what to do."

"Do you have your map?"

"I do."

"Just follow the path where it leads for now. You can flip into a view of the map if you get disoriented or just want to gauge your progress. It isn't--"

"It doesn't have anything to do with the map. It's *them*, John. I don't think they want me to go there."

"The Exousiai?" He stopped short of saying: *They're just constructs playing out pre-designed logical loops. Ignore them and get on with it.* Amara believed they were real. Dorian pinched the flesh between his eyes, trying to chase away the beginning of a migraine. Be sensitive, he reminded himself. She's under enough stress as it is. "How close are they?"

Hesitation. "They're not close yet. Not the way you mean...physically. But they're never completely removed from this place. They're everywhere here, in the water and the stones, riding on the breeze, turning the world on its axis. They knew me the moment I arrived, almost as if they'd been expecting me. Waiting for me to return. I think their focus is still a ways off yet, but they seem to...something is wrong. They're disconcerted, filled with wonder and speculation, as if they're having trouble reading me like they did before. They're trying to decide what I'm doing here, so they want me to come to them."

Dorian experienced a sudden stab of panic. He stiffened in his seat. "That's probably not a good idea."

"I guess it means that your defensive scripts are working,

eh?"

"Sure. Let's go with that."

She was quiet for a time. "Can you hear them singing?"

Dorian heard nothing but her quick, shallow breaths. He sat there, frozen, with his fingers poised over the keypad, but there was nothing he could conjure that could help her if the song represented a threat. "They're just singing?"

"They're singing to me. That's how it feels, at least."

"I don't like this," he decided. "The code you're carrying should have rendered you all but invisible to the orb's access response sensors."

"It's okay, John. I can hear them, but there's no compunction to obey like there was before. I can think through it. I can resist their call."

He found no comfort in her explanation. Dorian delineated a new public sector in his foam with a rapid flurry of keystrokes. "I'm going to give you a new foam coordinate key. Bounce here and we'll figure out what went wrong."

"There isn't time," she said.

"We'll make time." He was trying to keep her safe. Couldn't she see that? Dorian had loaded Amara up with every sig dispersion script in his arsenal. He didn't know what kind of application Raville was running that could break his dispersion fields that fast, but he would figure it out. "It has to be something in the orb's code that uniquely tags you on entry. Get back to your bounce point. We'll find a way to circumvent it and try again."

"Let's see what they do if I move forward," Amara said, her voice low, as if she was afraid of being overheard. "You said the first signpost was only a couple hundred meters off. The rest doesn't look far on the map."

It wasn't far. Dorian had dropped her as near to the artifact as he could find a crack to exploit, but every step toward it was a step away from her secured bounce point. "Seriously, no. It isn't safe."

"Hush," she said.

Before he could object again, he heard her feet crunching along the pebbled path he had laid out for her. In the background, there was a sudden sound, a reedy sort of whisper that reminded him of strong winds blowing through

vast fields of summer grass. Strange aural eddies of discorporeal sibilants like the precursors of an unknown language swirled about her. There was a vague insistence in the sound. For Dorian, it was the equivalent of a sinus headache, an abrupt sensation of pressure right between his eyes.

He couldn't tell how it translated inside the code environment, but the rhythm of Amara's footfalls increased sharply, all at once. He realized that she was running. And the susurrus of half-heard voices chased after her, louder now, gusting. His scalp prickled. Dorian gripped the edges of his chair, afraid to move.

"What's happening?" he cried.

Her voice was calm, but strained with tension and exertion. "Which way?"

Which way?

"The crossroads, John! Which way do I go?"

"Left! You go left."

Dorian snapped his head up and consulted the render of her proscribed path. There should have been a signpost there. He wondered what had happened to it, what he might have failed to understand. He closed his eyes and listened to the scrabble of her footsteps over stone, the heaving gasps of her breath.

"What do you see?" he demanded.

"Up! I'm going up, into the mountains it looks like."

Mountains?

"Where are the Exousiai?"

"They're behind me, but I think they're just watching for now. Keeping their distance."

"Tell me at once if that changes."

"You'll be the second one to know, I promise."

Not that he would actually be able to do anything from here, of course. All he was capable of doing was shouting directions. If they decided to stop her, to harm her, he wouldn't be able to offer much more than a sympathetic ear to her dying wails.

Best not to think about that.

As she pressed on, the wind that had shadowed her steps gradually dissipated. Amara eventually regulated her pace to

a brisk walk.

"You couldn't have rendered a nice, flat plain, could you? Maybe some pretty pink flowers along the side of the path. And kittens." She laughed at her own teasing. "No, you had to make a big, rugged man render. With lots of climbing and calf-aching angles."

He could have dizzied her with a technical defense, with line by line explications of the environment she had handed him and why it had rendered the way it had, but he wasn't in the mood for it. He wasn't even sure he could have argued it convincingly to himself. There was too much of the orb's fundamental structure he hadn't had time to analyze yet.

"Tell me about these mountains," he urged her, trying to picture what she was experiencing. He glanced at the map again. He hadn't intentionally rendered any mountains. That shouldn't have bothered him, but it did, and not just because it was hard to predict three dimensional effects when one was writing two dimensional code.

Amara exhaled raggedly. "They're steep."

"Mountains tend toward steepness, yes."

"They're not anything out of the ordinary." She must have peered over a ledge, because her voice took on a faint echoing quality. "Green down there. I think there's a small river running through the valley. Up here it's mostly scrub grass and some ambuscade bushes. It's going to brown, it looks like. The temperature is too cool to be comfortable, but I can't tell if spring is coming on, or if we're nearing the end of autumn."

"Is the path still clear?"

"Mostly. There are bones of bedrock beginning to poke out here and there, and I'm heading toward stonier ground. We've been angling steadily up for awhile."

"What else can you see?"

"Everything." She paused, cursing under her breath. Dorian imagined her standing before some unpredicted obstacle, a sheer and impassible chasm plummeting a thousand feet to a muddy, raging river. "Hold on. I've got to climb."

"Be careful."

She grunted with effort he could only imagine, at one point setting loose a clatter of tumbling stones and debris, the

sound of which pattered in his ears for a time (and distance) that seemed eternal. He tried not to think about how far up she must be. When she reached what must have been the top, she stood still for several long seconds, taking deep breaths.

"This sucks, John. Which way do I go now?"

But he couldn't tell her. He had no idea where she was. She was off the map.

"Do you see anything that looks like a signpost?"

"I see an outcropping that points to the right. It has a treeish thing growing out of it. Is that what you mean?"

"Which direction does the path lead?"

"That pebble path, you mean?"

"Yes."

Amara made an exasperated noise. "I just climbed an almost completely vertical ascent of some forty meters, John, because your path led me to it. I'm now officially scaling the rock face of a mountain, surrounded more or less by other mountains that look exactly the same from where I'm standing. As best as I can tell, it's one big collection of pebbles up here. Big ones, small ones, even some in between ones. They're kind of hard to tell apart." When he didn't answer immediately, she said, "I'm going to the right. The tree thing seems pretty comfortable with that direction."

Dorian considered the winding, meticulously plotted map from bounce point to artifact once again, but it told him nothing. "Amara, I don't know where you are."

"I can't be far from the end. The map said it was only a thousand meters or so. Granted, I didn't expect most of them to be vertical, but I've got to be getting close. This direction appears to be leading pretty consistently up. It will give me a good look around at the very least. Maybe I'll see something useful."

It would also stick her on top of a mountain whose descent was blocked by inscrutable code aliens who might or might not appreciate her presence there. Dorian filed that observation away under More Things Not To Say.

"What are the Exousiai doing?"

"Stop obsessing. They're still considering for now, content to see what happens, I think." She sucked in her breath.

"What?"

"Sorry. Vista."

"Vista?"

"You should see the view from here. It's breathtaking."

"Remember what you're there for," he cautioned her.
"Don't waste time."

She climbed higher, following what she said was the appearance of a path. Perhaps even the path he had set out for her. Dorian had his doubts.

"I'm almost to the top," she said. "When I get over this next ledge, I should be able to see down into the valley on the other side. Hold on. I've got to hoist myself up again here. I'll be back with you in just a second."

A second ticked by. Then ten. A full minute of silence.

"What do you see?"

Amara spoke to him in a flat, distant voice. The sound of complete bewilderment. "Sonali, John. I see Sonali Real."

Dorian realized that something, somewhere had gone very wrong.

"That can't be right," Dorian growled. He switched from map to code, bounced around the text looking for signifiers, looking for anything that would make sense of what she was seeing. He went back to the map, spun it a complete revolution of its axis. There had to be something he was missing. Anything. "There has to be--Amara, are you sure?"

"I can see the dome of the Landgrant Office. And your building. And the peaked roof of the Archive to the north. It's Sonali." Her harsh resolve cracked. On the summit of her virtual mountain, the wind whipped past her, keening among the rocks. "What's happening, John? How is this possible?"

Dorian stared at his displays, lost. Overwhelmed by what she said to him. It wasn't possible.

Unless he'd made a mistake.

Unless he'd misunderstood the code.

The code.

He switched views again, from the map to the decompiled text, the foundation of the orb's environment, extracted from Raville's foam, the great Aleph which all else sprung.

"John?"

But he had no words. His jaw hung on a broken hinge.

As he scanned the parallel display of code, it *changed*. The characters shimmered, truncated, self-organized into new patterns. New lines emerged from the appalling whiteness of the code tablet, burst into existence like novae in a nursery of stars. A sprawling network of interconnections, hidden correspondences, and sympathetic magicks revealed themselves before his eyes. Remaking the world.

It was impossible.

The map remained stationary, just as he'd drawn it, but the environment it represented was being irrevocably transformed.

But that wasn't right, either. Not just the environment enclosed in the orb's cohesion matrix. He wasn't looking at code that represented the orb as it actually was, a living entity appended to Amara's foam, but an independent copy of that code sequestered in his own foam. A dead artifact, the skeleton of a thing that had never been.

Amara's universe wasn't shifting. Only his.

It was his own foam that was being altered. His text, his shadow datascape, his untraceable temple that no one but himself and poor, dead Ray Morrical knew existed.

"Bounce," he croaked at her. "Bounce now, Amara."

She may have nodded rather than speaking. He could not tell. But he heard her feet scratching against brittle mountain scree, heard the catch of tears on her breath.

Then silence.

Amara hissed. "I can't go back. There isn't any way down."

Dorian hardly heard her. His attention was consumed with the scroll of text on his display. He was watching the universe reshape itself before his eyes. A new Torah, a living Word exploding from the dense pinpoint of nothing into Being. And it was terrible. Awesome and incomprehensible and bursting with potentiality. Foam was supposed to be immutable. Strands and the barriers between them were fundamental building blocks of the data universe. They couldn't be manipulated without key access. He was witnessing an event that violated all the Laws of Information he had ever known. It unfurled a vast landscape without rules to structure it, without delineations between points and states

and quantum waves, a perfectly malleable and chaotically plastic dataverse encoded by gods alone.

And not just his foam, he understood suddenly, but Amara's as well. That was why she had come back again to Sonali. The orb had twisted his code, his overlays--her core environment--from the very beginning. But that made sense, didn't it? The orb had been integrated into her foam. It was part of her.

But that corruption shouldn't have touched his space. He shouldn't be watching files in his own storage blocks change. Even having shared his foam with her, the buffers between them had been as secure as walls of iron.

The Strand was the only mediator between foam, the only conduit for real data transfer, and they were off the Strand in a virtual private network ungoverned by system servers and ex-connex translators. Amara had left it when she jumped from Hermes Square, and Dorian was isolated by his foam's theoretical non-existence and his unregistered ip. The only thing that allowed them to even communicate was the finely tuned signal translation algorithms he had devised to link them together, to extract the one meaningful pulse of her array's processor from an ocean of cosmic noise. But there was always, always that keystone barricade between them, that basic distinction between wave states that represented their separate data universes.

And still the *quae-ha-distra* was *changing* his data blocks.

His own universe was being jacked right out from underneath him, and he had no idea how it was being done.

Impossible outside of the connection supplied by the Strand, unless he supplied the key himself, which he hadn't done. He would never have compromised his foam security, never have lowered his digital guard.

Except...

Dorian muttered a curse.

He'd taken code from Raville, too. Code he had copied from the dead port on the Archive's network. A script to pull Amara out of the orb. A simple tool, pointed out to him by Raville himself. Dorian hadn't even looked at it, just trusted. He had been so desperate to save Amara. So stupidly, ravenously desperate for anything that would help her.

Raville had said about the orb: *Even as we speak, the quae-ha-distra has begun to execute a sophisticated load mapping of some highly secure, pre-formatted proprietary foam...The moment the quae-ha-distra passed with Amara into a live Strand environment...*

And Dorian had been off the Strand since he had executed the script--the tether saw, Raville had called it. Until now, until they'd chosen to go back through the Strand and into the orb, just as Raville wanted them to, had told them that they must, to retrieve the artifact. And like any good mule, Dorian had synchronized his infected foam with his new foam, passing the viral agent from one to the other like the common cold.

How long, he wondered? How long had he been inside his own *quae-ha-distra*, the portal to the dimension of the overlord Exousiai, believing all the time that he had been in real space?

Had any of it been real?

He sat back for a moment, gathering himself, looking for alternatives to what he must do.

Amara was alone in there, surrounded by monsters and vivid with need. There was no choice, really. Nothing to debate.

Without really thinking, he plugged a series of extraction spiders into his file system with specific comparison parameters. Looking for one app, one common binary string in the series of recent data maps he carried in his storage sectors: Amara, the dead port, his own foam indices. He knew what they would find, but he had to be certain.

It was smaller than he expected. The spiders returned with it almost at once, a sub-file executable called, appropriately, orb.app. Amara called it a portal. He recognized it as a recursive key metalink, a way to bind independent environments into one overarching architecture.

Brilliant. Nefarious. Whatever.

Amara called his name one last time, the need in her voice was poignant, as forlorn as the bleating of a lost lamb.

Raville had played on his desire to save Amara and slipped him a mickey. His own ticking bomb. The *quae-ha-distra* itself, active from the moment he hit the Strand, but kept

dormant because of Dorian's intense environmental controls. Just as Raville had predicted.

He'd been right all along. He'd never had a choice.

He said, "I'm coming."

Dorian loaded the script into his cache, and with a single key click, transported himself into infinity.

He was.

Fingers and toes, arms and legs, torso and head. Thew and bone, skin and hair, gristle and joint and mind, mind, mind. He was wind and grass, pebble and leaf, water and wood and fierce, burning sun. He was constructed, atom by atom, from the raw matter of the universe. Where there had been nothing, becoming transformed into being.

He was. Nothing.

He heard water first, distant but roaring. Then breeze, then his own shallow panting. Next came scent, green and pungent, then the snap of cool air on his skin. Thin air that made his lungs ache. Finally, light, pink through closed eyelids, flickering like candles.

Dorian pitched forward. His knees and palms struck hard stone. The impact drove shivers of stark, white fire all the way up his arms and into his shoulders. He gasped, and opened his eyes, terrified of what he might see.

But it was only bare rock, gray like slate, littered with misshapen flecks and pebbles of scree.

Somewhere behind him, Amara made a frightened sound, a exclamation of surprise instantly silenced. Then there were hands supporting his shoulders, hot breath on his cheek and in his ear. She spoke words to him that he did not understand. It was the crash and din of ocean waves breaking on the shore.

Dorian lurched to his feet. The universe revolved about him, clunked into sickening geometries that whirled and jittered out of focus. He would have fallen if she hadn't caught him, but she did, and for her kindness, he collapsed into her arms and vomited all over her feet.

It was unpleasant, this being in the world of gods.

Amara held him until he stopped retching, then allowed him to stand on his own. The universe stopped spinning. He was able to focus on the simple, welcome solidity of teeth and

scale and implacable reptilian wonder.

If she had been Ryoku here, he might have puked on her again.

"Hey," he said at last.

"What are you doing here?"

He shrugged, a gentle gesture that almost cost him his balance. "Someone said they were reenacting the Charge of the Light Brigade around here, so I thought I'd pop over and see if they needed an extra."

"John--"

But he waved her off. Just standing was difficult enough. He didn't feel up to explaining. "Speeding bullets. Single bound. Blah, blah, blah."

"Come over here where you can sit down."

She led him by the hand to a slab of rock that had fallen against the mountainside at a convenient angle. Dorian sat, bracing his hands on his knees to keep himself upright.

"Wow," he said. "Somebody needs to work on their integration protocols. Seriously."

"It'll pass," she said. "It was easier the second time."

"If this is anything like Raville's first experience, I can see why he was in such a hurry to build the zap. I mean, why wouldn't people pay for this?"

Amara stroked the back of his neck. "Shh. You're babbling."

"No, I'm dying."

"Don't be a baby, John."

"Sorry."

He focused his gaze on a small patch of dirt until the knots in his stomach loosened and his limbs felt whole and strong again. He took longer and longer breaths until he was sure he wasn't going to vomit again if he decided to move. Eventually, he lifted his head and smiled uncertainly at her.

Over her shoulder, he could see blue sky where the clouds had begun to break, the shoulders of mountains crowding off in the distance. To the south, the land lay like a rumpled cloth, bristling with trees in teardrop vales. And far below them in a green valley, squatting like a filthy pigeon in a nest of brackish foothills, he saw the sprawling eruption of the city. The unscarred towers of Quiksand glinting in the light,

the mesh of crumbling streets, the tumbledown concrete houses unimproved by distance and unreality.

"That's Sonali, all right."

Amara nodded. "I don't think it's real."

"No, it's a render. My coffin isn't smoking."

"What do you think it means?"

He had no answer for that question, so instead he asked, "Where are the Exousiai?"

"They're on the other side. I thought for a moment that they might be making a move, but whatever was exciting them seems to have gone away. They stopped when you arrived. Now they're just waiting."

Dorian glanced warily over his shoulder, but all he could see was a spur of rock, weather battered and a dozen or more meters high. "What do you think they're waiting for?"

"To shepherd us down into the city."

"Did you tell them we've been there before?"

"I don't think they care." She gestured to a thick yellow tangle of ambuscade bushes off to their left. "There's a path that leads down toward the valley over there. My impression is that we're supposed to follow it."

Dorian narrowed his eyes. "Are they communicating with you?"

"They're transferring data to me," she said, grimacing. "They had more freedom the last time I was here. It was easier for them to communicate their will, what they thought, what they wanted. It just rolled over me like waves. Something is constraining them this time."

"At least some of my code is still working, then."

Amara looked at him thoughtfully. "You don't hear them? Their whispers, their singing?"

"It's difficult to explain. This--" He squeezed her arm. "--is not real. You're not really here with me. Raville tricked me into accepting my own copy of the *quae-ha-distra*. What I'm experiencing is a parallel datascape running synchronously with yours in my own foam. The architecture allows us to share some variables...conversation, representational object simulacra, environmental structures. You present as though you're here, but you're not. You're in your own foam, just like I am. We're having the same dream in separate universes,

subconsciously agreeing to play by the same rules as we go along."

"Not unlike real life."

Dorian chuckled, even though it didn't strike him as being particularly funny. "My foam is configured differently than yours. The Exousiai are capable of interacting with you and your environment in ways they can't with me. At least that's my guess. Raville thought it would work that way."

But maybe he was just supposed to believe that. Maybe they had just given him an environment that had replicated his expectations of the behavior and performance of his foam. Perhaps everything he had done since geeking onto the Strand had been an illusion. He had no confidence in what was real and what wasn't anymore.

Amara leaned close to him and lowered her voice. "So what does that mean? Are you immune to them? Can you-- can you *control* them?"

"I have no idea."

"But it's worth trying," she said.

"Later, when there isn't a mountain to fall off, maybe. I don't think I want to go poking them with sticks until I'm sure that they can actually be poked, you know?"

"If you don't make the attempt, we won't know if we can get back to the bounce point if they decide to stop us."

It was a reasonable argument, but Dorian wasn't ready for it yet. He still had his hands full just trying to keep his code-form under control. He levered himself to his feet and tested his balance again. He didn't feel the slightest desire to fall over, which seemed to be a good sign.

He turned back to Amara. "What does your map say? How near are we to the artifact?"

"It's down there somewhere, in the city."

"Guesses?"

"Most likely the Archive."

Dorian chewed over that one for awhile. "Ironic."

"In a boot to the gut sort of way, yes. Has Raville ever even seen the Archive?"

"I'm sure there were schematics somewhere on the network, and probably detailed maps of Sonali as well. Plenty of triDvid footage laying about to get the renders right, but I'm

not sure how much of a hand our Raville had in this. Consciously, I mean."

"I don't understand."

Dorian didn't either, not really, but he had seen the text change before his eyes. Whether those changes happened as he experienced them or had come earlier, while the orb had lain dormant in his foam didn't really matter. The orb had changed itself to integrate with his expectation, his personal experience and Amara's. "Raville didn't have any control over the particular manifestation of the orb's architecture once he passed the code to us. You experienced a different environment the last time you were inside, yourself. This experience may have been extrapolated from the overlays I created for you, using your own data storage as a reference to add relevant navigational points, but I'm beginning to doubt it. I didn't code any mountains for you, and I certainly wasn't thinking of Trithemius Orbis while I was doing the work. I think they've been here all along, waiting for you, just as you said. Perhaps even something inside the encoding of the orb itself registered your extreme discomfort with the raw experience and adapted. That makes more sense. Raville talked about how the foam the orb extracted to build your initial environment was an artifact of how the original *quae-ha-distra* had integrated with him. In any event, I doubt that he would have chosen Sonali as the manifestation given the choice. It doesn't seem like his style."

Amara nodded slowly. "But if the orb is adapting to my needs, that doesn't explain why you're having the same tangible experience. You're in your own foam. The environment you perceive should be different."

"Maybe it's trying to be, but can't overcome my system buffers. I could be seeing what you see because my compilers are still reading the signal being transmitted between us." Dorian shrugged at the inadequacy of his answers. "That's all I've got."

"Did it occur to you that we're sharing an environment because the Exousiai want it to be that way?" She lifted her face and studied him carefully, searchingly. "Or do you still insist that gods don't exist?"

"I haven't seen any gods." He offered Amara a hand and

after a moment, she accepted it. He tugged her to her feet. Though he tried to ignore it, he didn't like the way she looked at him. "Let's get this over with. Gods or no gods, it should be warmer down there, at least."

13.

The descent to Sonali was gentle. Dorian didn't even work up a virtual sweat as they followed a smooth trail that wound between thick bushes and the occasional eruption of bedrock. As they made their way down, stunted trees met them, giving way eventually to a thick, broad-leafed forest of towering feliantes, mightily boled and hoary with moss. The trees aligned themselves into sweeping columns and grand arches. The ground beneath was moist and scented with loam, buried beneath a dense carpet of brown leaves. It was dark amongst the boughs, except where golden streaks of sunlight shafted through the canopy, and there was no sound but the distant trickle of a small stream weaving its way among unseen stones.

It wasn't warm, but the chill had vanished from the air, so Dorian didn't complain. He had no way of knowing if the orb had manufactured the temperature for his pleasure, and he wasn't keen on finding out. He had no interest in exploring the full interactivity of the datascape.

Dorian had done his share of hiking in the mountains immediately around Sonali, and they were traveling through no forest that he knew. The ingredients were right: the feliantes, the covering of leaves, the rare fern poking its spring buds above the undergrowth, but the rest was completely wrong. This logical organization of root and branch, sun and soil was alien to a largely untapped wilderness like Trithemius Orbis. It wasn't even a faithful render of nature. There was no

chaotic struggle for interspecies dominion, no survival of the fittest seed, no random, rotting ecosystems of fungus and creeper and insect. The forest was quiet, serene and ideal--an artistic representation of a forest by a painter who had never seen one except in other paintings.

He was happy when they put it behind them.

The forest path eventually crossed over into a sea of pale grass, a wind blown prairie that had been cleared and marked for development by the city fathers once upon a time, but after the zap had withered to scrub and bushes, a softly rolling nesting ground for birds, pippins and caws. Some nature society had tried to introduce Terran cardinals, but they had all died come winter. Failed to migrate when the cold settled in, baffled by Trithemius Orbis's counter-instinctual electromagnetic fields. He'd never heard if they had tried again in a more temperate climate.

The path cut straight through the grass, peeling back the thin stalks on either side like Moses slicing through the Red Sea with the Children of Israel in his wake. They encountered neither birds nor rodents, and Dorian found the unaccustomed silence disturbing. As they neared the far edge, Amara peered back over her shoulder, searching the plain and the eaves of the forest beyond. She shivered.

"What is it?" Dorian asked.

"The Exousiai have stopped following us. They were there all the way through the wood, near enough I could almost feel their breath on my neck, but now they're gone. I can't even sense them."

"That would seem to be a good thing."

She scanned the way they had come one more time. "Maybe."

He understood. Dorian knew what it meant to keep his enemies closer. He only wondered if Amara knew it as well.

"Let's go." He reached out and gave her hand a tug, then decided not to let it go. "I want to get home before dark."

Amara gave him a strange look. "You are home, John."

"Not in this universe."

She pointed a finger across the last of the plain to where the grass choked out to beaten ground, cinders and asphalt. "There's your building."

"Not anymore."

"Oh, right."

They plodded forward, torn between anticipation and dread. They passed Quiksand, devoid of activity on the bright morning, or actively dead and brooding over it. Dorian couldn't resist peering up at the windows of his coffin, but he saw nothing there except light mirrored off the reflective surface. He wondered if somewhere inside, on his virtual bed perhaps, his fake cat was taking liberties with the pillowcases or shredding his important papers as it had always done. Was that cat any more real than his actual, most-likely-dead cat, given that he had actually observed neither of them? Had his cat ever existed when he wasn't there to trip over it? What would Schrödinger have said about any of this? Of course, he might ask the same questions about himself at the moment.

He quickened their pace until the wall surrounding his apartment building was well behind them. They went on into familiar residential claves, seeing no one on the streets, sensing nothing behind the blind windows. The only sound was the clap of their feet on the asphalt and the weird echoes wrought by the everpresent wind. Minus the human presence, the render proved faithful. The right houses in the right places, familiar cracks in the sidewalks, even the string of Christmas lights hung across Checo's bay window. Dorian was tempted to stop in and sample the fake curry, but decided against it for mental health reasons.

He said to Amara, "Have you checked your map lately? Are we still wending in the right direction? To the Archive, I mean."

"Why don't you check your own map, John?"

He'd tried that once, briefly, partway down the mountain. According to his map, which seemed to be tied to his original code, they had passed their target destination a thousand meters back. "It isn't working," he said.

"Nothing has changed," she replied. "We just have to figure out what we're supposed to do once we get there."

"I hope my security ips still work, or this will be a short trip."

"Somehow I don't think that will be a problem."

"Your indefatigable optimism is what I've always loved

about you." Amara scowled at him, and he grimaced. "I mean that, actually. I'm not glad to be here, but it doesn't suck as much as being here without you would. Being here with Ryoku would have sucked a bit more, though."

Amara glanced curiously at him. "I am Ryoku."

"Not from here, you're not."

"You overwrote my avatar?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

She looked away. "How odd."

But Dorian was interested. "What about me? What do I look like to you?"

"Like a big horse's butt."

"I'm being serious!"

"So am I," she said archly, and refused to say more.

Near the vacant Landgrant Office, they connected with Rue de St. John and headed north, sticking to the center of the street out of habit. Ahead of them on the left loomed the skeletal architecture of the parking garage. The sprawling Archive compound rose up on the right, its peaked slate roofs and Templar dome just visible over the nondescript block and glass structure of the Universal Commerce Bank. They paused at the ironwrought front gate. It stood open, creaking lazily on its hinges. The flagstoned courtyard within was quiet, the central fountain dry.

Dorian peered inside and saw nothing amiss. Or maybe it was that everything was amiss, and this just didn't seem extraordinarily amiss enough to attract attention to itself. He said to Amara, "Do you think we can bill the Archive for our time?"

She told him, rather sternly, to shut up.

Without another word, they pushed the gate aside and went in.

They reached the Grand Solomonic Hall without encountering anyone or anything that seemed to indicate that they were expected. During business hours, there was supposed to be a Tyler present in a security pod set in a recess off the black and white parquet floor, just this side of the Boaz pillar inside the entrance to the hall. The pod was there, but it was unoccupied. Dorian stalked halfway down the east-west

orientation of the room, poking his head into offices and meeting rooms, looking for something that appeared out of the ordinary, any sort of signpost, but found only empty spaces. Amara went the other way, toward the hall on the far side of the entry foyer and its narrow cluster of secretarial desks, studying the floor as she walked. She was scanning for arrows scribbled on notebook paper, he realized, still expecting Raville to pop out from behind a curtain and reveal himself as something other than a complete sham. Dorian gave up on his search and trailed along after her.

They met up back in the entry foyer, standing in a rectangle of comfortable golden sunlight that fell through the front doors.

"What do you think?" she asked. "We're not expected to go over the whole building, are we? We don't even know what we're looking for."

"We're trying too hard," he said.

"So we should just sit here and wait for the artifact to come to us?"

"That's not what I'm saying. Think about it: if we've guessed correctly, the whole reason behind this environment is because the code is adapting to our comfort level. It's taken great pains to surround us with familiar places and normal things. Maybe we're not giving it enough credit for understanding us."

Amara's eyes widened, and she nodded her understanding. "Downstairs."

"It has a certain elegance, doesn't it? We're coming full circle."

"I'll grab the elevator. It'll be faster than the stairs."

But Dorian caught her elbow as she darted away and pulled her down the hall toward the stairwell at the end. "This way, I think. If the elevators stall, there's no one else in the world to get us out. Hey, it's obvious that someone has taken great pains to accurately render our environment. By my reckoning, the odds are three to one against that they got the elevator right, too. Do you really want to place that bet?"

Amara didn't answer, but also didn't complain as he led her on down the hall.

The door to their office was both unlocked and standing

ajar, which made Dorian's security agent alter ego wince even in a false universe. He thought about considering the render metaphorically, but that was somehow worse. Nothing was done without purpose in code. Every environment was littered with signposts if one was astute enough to read them. He didn't like the message this one was sending.

He approached the door cautiously, with Amara close against his shoulder, and gave it a shove. Part of him expected a quantum gate horizon here, a doorway into a different datascape, a transition into mystery, but there was only the office. The same piled shelves and nondescript tech detritus, the same dull institutional cubicles and workspaces. The desk surfaces were maybe a bit neater. Not so many stacked books and loose leaf papers on Amara's side. That was a little creepy in and of itself.

They exchanged a look, a shrug, then stepped over the threshold.

"The servers are running," he said at once. He gazed across the room to another door, secured with a special restricted entry ip sensor. Through the vents, Abramhelin's accustomed click and exhaust rumble sounded like the exhalations of a light sleeping dragon after so much silence. "I guess that means the network is up."

"Why would that be?"

It was a legitimate question. Dorian moved over to his chair and seated himself at his desk. His monitor glowed dimly in rest mode, but like the server, its power light was on.

"Full circle," he mused. "This is where it began for us."

He retrieved his keypad from its slot beneath the desk and started to log himself into the system before realizing that it wasn't necessary. The network was wide open, unprotected, waiting for anyone who happened by to dive in. Dorian's monitor popped, random electrons fired. The screen blinked and came to life.

"That's why I couldn't parse the artifact outside," he said, shaking his head. "The pointers all went to an independent sub-node session with its own integral logic scripting."

"Meaning?"

"Make yourself comfortable, darling. We're going into geek."

"But we're already--"

Dorian pointed at his monitor, absent of its usual file system clutter and server stats. The screen was blank except for two words in bold, black characters.

ENTER HERE

"Don't ask," he said, before she could ask where or even how. He was done trying to come up with answers for things he wasn't able to grasp. "Just make the leap. It's not like we can get ourselves in any more trouble."

The pseudo-seenop network connections took an eternity to rattle through the Strand protocols from orb to geek. Dorian hung in recognitive stasis as the bitstream stuttered through its paces. It was dark, and bitterly cold where he was, here in the virtual space between dimensions, between environmental partitions. Quantum tidal forces tugged at him, twisted his quasi-conscious form into Moebius loops of baryonic crystal. The massive gravitational pressure had sound, a groaning, rending tenor like the collision of starships, hull to hull. Electromagnetic charges dappled the netherspace horizon with flashes of yellow and orange and green.

A thundering, rotating vortex opened beneath him, and he plummeted into it, another chunk of decohering data strapped together by the meager charge of his simulated molecular matrix. He accelerated into the void. Buffeted, squeezed by invisible hands, torn into a billion discrete units.

Then darkness, absolute and crushing.

And light, pinpoint and piercing, the brightest glare he had ever experienced.

Dorian fell toward it, conscious in a way that was not conscious, impossibly, non-linearly aware. Just being. A random collection of interconnected, encoded particles, each one a universe in miniature, each atom a microcosm of the whole. He was aware of acceleration, but the rate of his ascent, of his descent was immeasurable. There was no time to measure it against, no objects outside of himself. Data accreted to him, density spawned gravity, gravity bound him together outside of space-time.

There was a sound, the sharp inhalation of a chorus of gods.

Dorian passed from darkness into light.

Once again, he was.

It was like no geek he had ever known.

He found himself on a plain, bare and windswept, beneath a field of wheeling, glittering stars, each one a glorious fire in the heavens. It was a gently tripping stream of stars bounding down cliffs of vacuum into pools of light. He turned about. Black, craggy mountains soared about him, dizzying in their height, gripping the blank promontory of dark stone where he stood in the palm of their distant hands.

It was still cold. But he didn't shiver. He had no form with which to shiver. He was not *here* at all, merely conscious of a particular space, a series of coordinates in a plane indistinguishable from other points except that he had telescoped his awareness to these, given them meaning and purpose, mappable speed and trajectory, packet and wave. They existed because he had made them to be, though he did not know why. Only that they were, and that he was the cause of it.

A thought reached him. *What is this place?*

It was his own, but it wasn't. It had a different texture, a taste that was both familiar and foreign, a part of him in the same way that the packets of information that constituted him were, but also something else. A niggling autonomy within his oneness. The thought had no words, just knowledge. It was thunder, perfect mind. Symbol without language. To even sense it was like tumbling down the rungs of a ladder from purity to the mundane.

It is.

He wasn't aware if he had answered, or if the answer had come from the same part of him that had posed the question.

Who am I?

I am, he thought.

Who I am

But he had played this game already. Even the thoughts were coordinates in a plane of communication, plots on a graph that he could delineate in three, four, five dimensions, just as he had withdrawn himself to fashion this place. That wasn't right, of course. The fashioning, the being of it, had been inevitable. He hadn't done anything consciously. It was

encoded in the fundamental nature of the universe that it should be as it was, just as he was, though he enclosed all of the potentials within himself. It was a mystery beyond pondering.

He recognized this otherness within himself. It had a name, and a sense that it should have been discrete from him. But separation was an illusion. Data cohered in a multi-dimensional lattice of primal forces, transferring signals through dense wells of gravitation and quantum interconnections that tunneled between the arbitrary barriers of perception. He held the other in his focus and knew it, all of it, stem and cell and soul and totality. Knew it with the depth and completeness that he knew himself. It was himself, after all, but a particulated sub-routine of the great computational metaverse that called itself...

Amara?

I'm here, John!

He felt her, touched her, enfolded her. A splendid and unique essence of distinct information partitions. The being of her was warm and inviting, abuzz with knowing and sensation, cognitive parsing and data transformation spiraling off from dimension to dimension, universe to universe, as deep and vast as a primordial ocean. Limitless and undelimited, he could sail the seas of her forever.

But even now she cooled. Her hot, shuddering potentiality waned, the surfaces hardened, walled themselves off from his knowing. Tethers snapped. She accumulated a distinct form. Her coordinates plotted their own graph, and she withdrew. He felt the loss like pain, like a hole in himself that whistled with the frigid quantum wind blowing through it.

Loss. It was all loss. Becoming was loss. He grieved it, because becoming was not being. Being was particle and wave inscribed in the soul of the universe. Becoming was the constant and uniform imprecision of knowing. It was fuzzy data imprisoned in isolation.

She stepped from nothing into frozen object form in the space between breaths.

"Make yourself, John. You can't work that way."

Why? He cried out to her. *This is who I am! Why become an other?*

But if she heard him, she gave no sign. She couldn't hear him. She had cut herself off from the fabric of the universe.

"I know it's hard," she said quietly, speaking into the void that she perceived him to be. "I know it hurts to withdraw, John. I know. But you have to do it. Become yourself. The artifact is waiting for us."

She pointed, and he followed the line finger drew to the edge of the plain, where there had manifested a circle of pillars. They were ebon plinths glinting in the dim light of stars, tucked up into a scalloped vale between two crags of rock, hung with a dome as black as the night itself. He knew this place, more coordinates in a plane, neither distinct nor precious. There was nothing special about them. They held no more information than any other points, just a different configuration. Immutable, they weren't even particularly interesting to him. Not in the way Amara had been. Why would she limit herself, her infinite potentiality for the sake of a dead and finite data model?

It was an unanswerable question. He couldn't even ask it, because she had taken herself away from him. She was unknowable.

But he loved her, the memory of her and the hope of her. He was willing to suffer much for her sake.

Even to surrendering the infinite himself and taking on the lonely and delimited form of a man.

With a sigh that stretched itself for aeons, he became.

In becoming, he snapped a connection, spawned another node that grew heavy with the weight of what he had been, that consumed itself, sucked in all of his potential being and wound them tight, tighter, impossibly dense, until the well burst from one existence into another. A different universe, cut off from him. It was a being he could never touch again, and that was loss, too, but having already become, he hardly felt it.

Even the awareness of it was fleeting, flickering, dead.

Dorian shook his head and rattled all the marbles into their appropriate holes. He breathed deep of cool, thin air. It made him feel giddy. His fingers tingled with sensation. His face felt raw and new, and his lungs throbbed with pressure, as though he had never used them before. It was exhilarating.

He turned his eyes to Amara, and she looked back at him, full of sadness and longing. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know how hard...I remember what it was like the first time."

"That was the *quae-ha-distra*?"

"It still is. The mountain, Sonali, the transition, even this place. It's all contained inside, all those modes of being and manifesting being."

Dorian breathed again, steadying himself. *I knew you*, he wanted to say, but couldn't. Not now. Speaking the words would have been a profanity. He let his thoughts and his face turn away, to the structure on the edge of the plain.

"What do you think it is?"

"We could guess, or we could go find out."

So they set off. The plain was larger than it had appeared to him before, but flat and almost completely featureless. Meter upon meter of black stone, here pitched up like a wave of magma, flash cooled by the vacuum, there rippled like sand on a beach as the tide slides back out to sea. But those were aberrations, too, for the most part. Not even frequent enough to make their footing treacherous, which would have at least been interesting in its own way. They walked for several minutes in silence, seeming to come no nearer to their goal. The chill settled on their skin and began to work its way into their bones. Dorian hugged his arms over his chest and tried not to shiver.

It was only as they finally began to draw beneath their shadow that Dorian understood how immense the ring of sharp peaks about them truly were. Six, seven thousand meters in some places, but the crags were dark, untouched by snow or ice as far as he could tell. He couldn't be entirely certain. He could only make them out at times by the stars they occluded with their towering bulk. They had heard no hint of streams, no rushing water or blowing grass or sound of other living thing. It was all stone glinting faintly in the light of the stars.

"Where do you think we are?" he asked.

Amara shrugged as though the question was pointless. "Nowhere. Anywhere. A place that doesn't exist in any human space."

"I wonder if this is how Raville imagined the home of the

Exousiai. Bleak and empty. Maybe that's why he thought they were lonely. Or perhaps the render is an extension of that belief."

"You still don't believe," Amara said quietly. "After all you've seen. After what you've experienced, you still don't believe that they exist."

"It's not that easy."

"You've been with them, John. You've experienced what it is to be them, to ascend to their level of consciousness and contain the universe and everything in it within yourself. How can you still deny it?"

Dorian sucked in a long, slow breath until the cold made his sinuses ache. "That's how. On a rock in nonexistent space with no ecosystem, no atmosphere, I can breathe just like I'm sitting in Danek and Lily's kitchen pretending that I'm having a dream within a dream. It's impossible, but it is, nevertheless. Where's the necessary reality in that?"

"You made yourself this way. Can't you see that? You understood what you needed, and you made it. You chose to breathe because it suited your vestigial need for embodiment. You could have become anything, even the stone itself, but you chose what was familiar."

"Just like you did," Dorian said, arching an eyebrow. Amara said nothing. "It's a clever and immersive render, Amara, but that's all it is. I'll admit that it was pleasant for awhile. That feeling of interconnection, of potential and omniscience, of oneness. It was seductive."

And for an instant, an ever fading moment, he had known her to the depths of her soul. He had touched her in a way he had always longed to know another, immersed himself in her, and she had been beautiful and splendid and ever-changing. A brilliant flame worthy of adoration.

But it was gone. He was who he was, plain old John Dorian.

"It was any number of laudable things. It just wasn't real," he finished.

Amara stomped off ahead of him, and he knew better than to speak to her for awhile. She wanted to believe.

They walked on for another hour or more. Eventually she let him catch up, and they went side by side, but they still

didn't speak. Dorian's head began to ache from the cold and from trying to discern their way in the dark. Amara didn't complain, and he wondered if her thermal coils and night vision mods had translated into geek with her, or if it was just her anger with him that kept her warm.

At last, they came to a broad stair carved into the base of an angled slab of stone. The steps climbed up through a narrow cleft cut between walls of rock where one mountain's feet abutted another's, then on through a pitched archway like a tunnel that vanished into darkness beneath the high ridge above. Dorian lifted his face to the sky to get their bearing, but the mountains overhung him. He couldn't see the stars.

They climbed the long stair up into the hills. When they reached the arch that led to the tunnel, Dorian paused, scanning the darkness for signs of danger. He saw nothing to alarm him, but he wasn't entirely certain what might constitute recognizable danger inside this render in the first place. But as bits or bones, it was impossible to approach a dark hole one meant to pass through and not wonder what might be lurking inside. It was human nature.

Still, he went carefully into the blackness, feeling his way along the smooth, cold wall with one hand and groping ahead with the other to fend off low hanging rocks. Amara kept one hand on his shoulder so they wouldn't get separated. The tunnel was brief, and quickly spilled out into the upland coomb or glen they had seen from the plain in the distance. They entered onto a great dais, two hundred meters on a side as Dorian reckoned it, what seemed to be a perfect square. In the center had been arranged the circle of raw stone columns he had glimpsed before, but just as with the mountains, they were many times larger than he had initially believed. Dorian had to crane his neck to see their full height, and each plinth was easily seven meters wide.

The space between the columns, however, was narrow, and it was only as they approached across the court of the dais that he could discern another structure in the midst of the pillars. These inner walls emitted a pale and shimmering light, like a beacon flame set in a lantern to aid their navigation. Taken together, the frowning megaliths and the

haunting glimmer, the place gave an impression of hoary and incalculable age, an ancient-ness that was outside of time, unscarred by the passage of years. A temple erected to contain the ineffable far back in human memory when men were still capable of being awed by such things as gods.

They moved toward it tentatively, drawn by the light and the hope of knowledge, repelled by a fear and an awe they did not understand.

When they had reached the outer ring of pillars, they stopped. The inner structure was solid--slabs of naked stone stacked side to side so expertly that there was no seam between them. The rock was smooth and glossy on its surface, and at the top and bottom had been carved narrow shafts from which the steady silver light streamed. The whole structure glimmered with faint opalescence, light cleverly bounced from the shafts against polished surfaces on the outer pillars, which once again directed the light to the reflective sheen of the walls. The trailing arcs of light bounced from surface to surface looked to Dorian like spectral figure eights painted on the air.

Without speaking, they turned to the left and circumambulated the outside of the temple, searching for a way inside. The stone beneath their feet was smooth, flat and meticulously polished to a high sheen, just as the walls were. It was like walking on a sheet of solid glass, which affected their balance if they focused for too long on the soles of their feet rising up to meet them, uncertain after awhile which form was the reflection and which was the real. As they wound their way around the temple, Dorian gradually lost all sense of orientation. He wasn't sure if they faced the mountains or the plain they had left behind. They seemed to be going around and around in circles, never finding an opening.

On the third trip about the circumference of the inner wall, they finally found the door. It was unadorned, just a slit cut into stone. Steady waves of light washed from the inner chamber about their feet. Its glow was cool and sterile, silver that leached the color from its surroundings and the warmth from the living things it touched. Dorian caught a whiff of some unknown scent that reminded him of late summer flowers and rare spices. It hung heavy in the air as he

approached the doorway, both sweet and sickening, enervating and suffocating.

He stepped inside. Amara followed closely behind, her hands pressed into the small of his back--hurrying him along or hiding behind him, he couldn't tell. The chamber was a perfect circle, walled about and domed above. A shelf of tightly packed flagstones ran along the curve of the wall, creating a raised collar for a sunken stone floor. In the center was a hole, a void, a well banked by yet another circle of stones, over which hung a globe of light suspended from the apex of the dome by a thin tether. There was a step before them, down to the floor, and another step on the opposite side of the well which climbed up to a narrow dais and a broad stone seat like a throne.

The seat was empty.

But the well...the well was not.

Dorian drew near to it, uncertain of himself, his head tilted in curiosity. It made a sound that reminded him of the sigh of the sea heard from beneath the waves. A heavy sound, pregnant with meaning, at once soothing to the mind and alarming to the senses. The sound of drowning and oblivion.

He peered over the lip of the well and saw darkness. Not darkness only, but a heaving cauldron of emptiness, the substance of the void. It crackled and hissed at him, snapped the way the great ice floes of Sae Phen had seemed to spit and pop as they drifted from arctic waters into more temperate seas. But there was more than just the dark, he could see. On the face of the deep, there were reflections of the silver light that hung above the void. The pattern of light on dark danced before him, seemed to weave itself into shapes that bore meaning, elemental forces that longed to emerge into being and reached with all their half-formed and monstrous strength for the light.

Dorian bent himself over the void, straining to penetrate the surface shimmer and see what might be beneath. He had a sudden, overwhelming urge to plunge himself into the well, to kick his legs and thrust his arms and bury himself wholly in the darkling waters. There were mysteries there, locked in the deep. Knowledge striving toward the light.

Near enough to touch.

"It is perilous to touch the waters of chaos even in this pseudo-form you have taken for yourself. It would not, I think, be wise."

Dorian stiffened at the sudden sound of the voice and stumbled back from the side of the well. Behind him, Amara drew in a sharp breath, even as she caught him.

The lamp suspended above the void grew bright. Its color warmed, strengthened until it hummed with a golden glow. The lingering shadows within the chamber vanished.

Upon the throne sat a woman. Her face was pale and stern, her lips thin and red as the dust of Mars. Her hair was russet, like blood, long and plaited so that the fat braid hung over her left shoulder and draped almost to her waist. There were jewels woven amongst the strands--sapphires and emeralds, brilliant diamonds and agates and pearls nearly as smooth and white as her glorious pale skin. She wore a simple gown, flowing and purple, lined with ermine at the collar, the wrists and the hem, and on her fingers were many rings, each one laden with precious gems and inscribed with an unknown, vaguely alchemical device. She was beautiful and terrible to behold, but Dorian noted most her eyes. Gold, they were, flecked with red. And they were hard, searching, all-seeing, all-knowing. The eyes of a god made flesh.

Dorian squared his shoulders and drew himself up to his full height. "And what are you supposed to be?"

The woman studied him, her body stiff and straight, but with a slight inflection of her head, she said,. "I am the Mother."

"Whose mother?"

"I am the Mother. The Mother of all my children."

"I guess that makes sense."

Her lips tightened perceptibly. She frowned down upon them, but did not move. "What do you seek?"

In a burst of awe, Amara cried, "Knowledge, Mother. We were told to come here. We were told that you would help us."

"Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and then he will rule over the All. But knowledge is not the end of all roads. What knowledge

unlocks, belief must set free."

Amara pushed forward, leaving Dorian alone and crowded against the foot of the dais where the woman, the goddess was seated. "We--I do believe, Mother. I've seen and felt the wonder of it. But belief is not enough. We need information that will help us decide what to do next."

"What information do you require of me?"

Heartened, Amara bowed herself toward the woman's knees, almost touching them with her forehead. "What must we do? The war is coming that could destroy us, all of our hopes, if it isn't stopped. We need your help."

"Speak what it is that you seek," the woman responded evenly.

Amara hesitated, searching for the right words. "An artifact, a key. You possess the key that will show us how to prevent the war."

The face of the goddess became disturbed. "I bear no knowledge of an artifact or a key that would serve you."

"No, not a literal key, perhaps," Amara replied in chagrin, hanging her head. "But knowledge. You must know something that will help us. Tell us what we need to do."

"When you make the two into one, when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, the above like the below, when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, and when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter the kingdom."

Amara started to answer, but her voice caught in her throat. "I--I don't understand."

The goddess only stared down at her, regal and silent.

"Mother, please! Help me to understand."

But no answer passed from her lips. Amara turned herself about, wide-eyed and bewildered. She fixed on Dorian. "Why won't she help us?"

"Because she can't."

"What?"

"You're not asking the right question."

Her mouth quivered. She gave him an imploring look. "Help me, John."

Dorian crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. "Who are you?"

The goddess lifted her chin. "I am the Mother."

"Whose mother?" he asked, once again.

"I am the Mother. The Mother of all my children."

"Who made you?"

"I was made by the hands of the Father."

Amara stared at him in horror. "What are you doing?"

"Formulating a query," he said flatly. Amara furrowed her brow, lost, and he forced himself to explain. "She's a render, Amara. She *is* the artifact, a search index avatar for the central data repository of this foam's architecture. She's a form; an executable script operating on keyword matches to retrieve pre-defined data sets. She's just like the golemch that controls access to your bank."

"No." She shook her head fiercely.

"I'm sorry, Amara." Almost, he wished it wasn't true.

But she didn't deny it again. She swallowed once, and scowled at him. "How did you know?"

"Because I've seen the images of his first wife. This form is maybe a bit idealized, but the likeness is more or less the same. Her name is Moira."

The goddess blinked at this new revelation, but did not object.

Amara rose to her feet and backed slowly away from the throne. Her lower jaw tightened, and she said bitterly, "Then why did we come here, John? To talk to a--a thing? A script? Why would he do that to us? What was the purpose?"

"Ask her. She knows if we can figure out how to get her to tell us."

She snorted. She curled her fingers into fists and demanded, "What is your purpose?"

The render of Moira Raville smiled solemnly. "I can give you what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand has touched. I possess the knowledge that has not arisen in the human heart."

Amara growled at her.

"She only speaks in riddles."

"Not intentionally, I think. She's just clumsy. She must have been written a long time ago, when Raville was still

learning his craft. He was probably able to compensate for her shortcomings because he built the index and knew the underlying structure of the data. Some programmers are like that. They build a platform, a nice soft render that pleases them, and then they get sentimental about it. It was his wife, after all. He probably didn't have the heart to tinker with it enough to make it fully functional, or was afraid that complete functionality would ruin the verisimilitude."

"You ask her something, then."

Dorian shrugged and took a step forward. "Moira?"

The avatar's smile broadened. She relaxed her pose, and her eyes softened. "Yes?"

"Do you know who I am?"

"You are my beloved."

"And do you know what purpose you serve?"

"I serve my beloved's will. I ponder in my heart the secret things he whispers into my ear."

Dorian nodded. "Good."

"I take joy in pleasing you, Michael."

He glanced sidelong at Amara and grimaced in embarrassment. That was like a programmer, too.

"Go on," Amara urged him in a whisper.

"Moira, what do you know of the Exousiai?"

"They are the Helpers. The glory of my countenance and the light of my eyes. They come on the sighing of the wind and the rolling of the thunder. They are the pinnacle, the absolute, the unknowable name and the unformable thought. They are--"

"End query," Dorian said. "Reset parameters and void cache history."

Moira drew herself up, her back once again straight, her manner cool and forbidding. "What do you seek?"

Dorian nodded his approval. To Amara he said, "I've got it now, I think. Raville left an open coding procedure for complex queries to access data that hadn't been indexed in this environment yet. That means that Moira here is probably drilled down all the way into the datacore, but she hasn't been loaded with all the updated plugs and patches to keep her in synch with the primary data retrieval drones. This must be a very old stratum of code, maybe even one of the original

routines. I think that's why Raville sent us here. He knew we could exploit his own sentimentality to jack the core, assuming that his alter-self wouldn't become less sentimental over the years. He must have loved her deeply."

"Just get what we need so we can get out of here," Amara spat. Dorian understood her disillusionment and let it pass without comment. There was nothing he could say.

"Moira, retrieve and load sub-procedure object executable gnosis.app."

Moments passed, the beating of a heart. Moira Raville lowered her eyes in introspection. She pressed her hands together beneath her chin in an attitude of prayer. The edges of her render blinked uncertainly as the code extrapolated variables from his query. Dorian held his breath, hoping that the architecture was limber enough to comply with a cache retrieval and load that was as potentially complex as the one he'd requested. He didn't want to have to break the request down to original code structures for her. He wasn't even certain what language Moira was running.

But at last she lifted her face again, and smiled softly.

"I have successfully accessed the knowledge you seek."

Dorian nodded. "Queue it up, please."

Pleased to have served him, Moira Raville smiled, held out her hand in a gesture of offering, and bowed her head. The golden lamp flashed brightly and went out, casting the chamber into darkness.

14.

In the dark, the substance within the well began to hiss and churn. Dorian could hear the disturbance, the seething, and he took a step back from the ring of stones surrounding the void. Strange echoes bounded off the walls, so that he wasn't certain where he stood, where Amara had gone. He put up his arms defensively, ready to ward off an attack.

A fountain of stars burst from the well, as bright and blinding as a roman candle. He gasped in surprise and shielded his eyes. The stars sprayed in a tall, slanting arch up toward the bowl of the dome overhead, but instead of falling back the ground, they hung in the air, swirling to the left in a dizzying spiral. Points of light began to carom away and attach themselves to fixed places in the darkness. The spiral thinned to a stream, a trickle, then depleted itself altogether, and when it was finished, Dorian stared up into alien sky, a galaxy of stars he did not know.

Again the well churned and grumbled, and once more heaved its contents into the air. This time it was astrological glyphs, complex mathematical equations, three dimensional terragenic schemes and explosions of wriggling, tumbling twin helices that turned themselves about like earthworms washed out of the ground by storm waters. Some of the symbols Dorian recognized from the rings on Moira Raville's fingers, but they meant nothing to him. They rose from the well, pulsing constructs of silver and gold light, then streaked away and embedded themselves in the surrounding walls

until the surfaces were covered with arcane symbols plotted in curiously alternating patterns that suggested a purpose or meaning Dorian could not fathom.

For a time, there was silence. In the shimmer and glow of glyph and symbol and stars, Dorian cast about until he found Amara. She stood back from him, near to the door they had entered through, watching the thunderous detonations of light and scowling, teeth bared and fingers flexed as though she was greedy with the need to hurt something. On the other side of the room, Moira sat completely still, her lifeless gaze fixed on the floor, her purpose fulfilled.

From the heavy silence a sound began to emerge. At first it was whispers, then a light puff of breeze, then the moan of a steadily rising wind skirling about sharply angled stone. The pristine floor of the temple cracked into interlacing networks of fine rills and undulations, and through the breaks, there appeared plumes and floes of sand. Low, undulating dunes spread across the floor until it was covered completely. The sand was slightly damp, cool and brittle. It crunched beneath Dorian's feet.

The walls and dome of the temple had vanished, replaced by a night vista of towering ridges, gently sloping valleys and the honeycombed hills of another world. The air was thin and cold, the stars gloriously bright on a field of purple dark. They stood in a sheltered place, a shallow cave, a scallop carved from the rock of an overhanging ridge. Amara pressed herself against a smooth wall of reddish bedrock. Dorian caught her questioning glance and shrugged.

Some features remained familiar: Moira Raville on her throne, a misplaced artifact incongruously set atop a small rise on the outer verge of the cave; the bubbling well delved deep and eternal in the center of the floor, ringed now by rough hewn rocks of russet sandstone; the glowing symbols affixed to the walls that still expelled a faint, effervescent light.

But something else had changed: they were no longer alone.

A man stood a few paces back from the well on the opposite side of the cave. Dorian did not know him, hadn't seen him arrive, but assumed that he had been vomited up from the floor of the temple just as the sand and cave and alien

terrain had been. He was old, thin to the point of emaciation, a bundle of bones. The rags which he wore blunted the sharp outlines of his body in cancerous lumps and cunning shadows. His face was worn and tough, weather-beaten, and his beard long and unkempt, matted with clots of ruddy dirt. There was a wild light in his eyes, a shimmer that made him look fanatic.

The old man bowed his head and clasped his bony hands together before his chest.

Because he was closest, Dorian was the first of them to see the manifestation that crawled up from the well. There was no hiss, no sound of boiling or other hint of imminent arrival this time, only a damp slap of flesh on stone. A shadow emerged from the darkness. First a hand, or what might have been a hand, gripping the border stones. The oily substance of chaos, black and glistening, slithered itself up from the cold dark, fingers and hands, face and eyes, body and legs and feet. The lights all about reflected off its skin in dappled patterns and indeterminate streaks of color. The creature's ungainly flesh seemed to shift and pulse like a viscous liquid tenuously contained in a latex skin.

It was a man, or the shape of a man, continuously dripping and running and reshaping itself. Dorian took a couple steps back, placing himself between the creature and Amara. For the first time, he reached into his system architecture and uncached a withering series of antiviral scripts, but when he looked down at his hands to get the feel of the renders, there was nothing there. The scripts failed to load inside the mediated environment of the *quae-ha-distra*.

His pulse thundered in his ears, and he licked his lips. He was defenseless. He might have panicked then, but Amara hissed softly in amazement.

The figure crouching on the lip of the well, gripped the stones with its midnight fingers and turned its shapeless head from side to side. It bent its gaze toward the old man, neck extended, eyes narrowed, hunting. When it had located him, it crawled down from the ring of stones and stumbled toward him with an ungainly, stuttering gait. It took no notice of either Amara or Dorian.

It halted before the old man, uttering a spew of wheezing,

coughing gutturals. The old man evidently understood this language, because he lifted his head and answered in a slow and weary voice.

"These are the words of the Helpers given to me for you, to reveal to you your own true heart: 'When I was a little child and dwelling in my father's house, and was content with the communion of my people, from our kingdom, our home, my parents equipped me and sent me forth. Of the wealth of our treasury they took abundantly, and tied up for me a load large but light, which I myself could carry: gold and silver, rubies and agates, adamant which can crush iron. And they took off from me the glittering robe which in their affection they made for me and which had been measured and woven to my stature. And they made a compact with me, and wrote it in my heart, that it might not be forgotten: "If thou goest down into the darkling lands, and bringest the one pearl which is in the midst of the sea away from the serpent, thou shalt put on thy glittering robe and thou shalt be content, and with thy brethren, thou shalt be heir in our kingdom."

'So I quitted the land of my father and went down with my guardians, for the way was dangerous and difficult, and I was very young to travel it. I went down into darkling lands and my companions parted from me. I went straight to the serpent; I dwelt in his abode, waiting till he should slumber and sleep and I could take the pearl from him. But when I was single and alone and become strange to my family, I dressed in their dress that they might not hold me in abhorrence, and recognizing that I was come from afar in order to take the pearl, arouse the serpent against me. But in some way they found out that I was not their countryman. They dealt with me treacherously, beguiled me with their strange arts and alien ways and gave me their food to eat. I forgot that I was a son of kings and instead I served their king. I forgot the pearl for which my parents had sent me, and because of the burden of their oppressions I lay in a deep sleep. But all these things that befell me my parents perceived, and were grieved for me, and proclamation was made in our kingdom, that one should go forth from our gate and rescue me, that I might not be left in the darkling lands. Thus, they sent to me these words: "Call to mind that thou art

a son of kings! See the slavery--whom thou serve! Remember the pearl for which thou wast sent! Think of thy splendid robe which thou shalt wear and with which thou shalt be adorned when thy name hath been read out in the list of the valiant." Thus came the messenger, bearing these tidings across the lands of the wicked ones, the children of strange signs and symbols, and their savage demons. His voice startled me and I arose from my sleep, and I heard the words of my father and inscribed them upon my heart. I remembered that I was a son of royal parents, and the child of noble birth. I remembered the pearl for which I had been sent, and I began to charm him, the terrible loud breathing serpent. I hushed him asleep and lulled him into slumber, and I snatched away the pearl and turned to go back to my father's house. And their filthy and unclean dress I stripped off and left it in their country. I took my way straight to come to the light of our home. And the messenger, my awakener, went before me on the road to lead me with the light of his form and the guidance of his voice, encouraging me to hasten and drawing me on with his love. And when I had come again to my father's house, I put on my bright robe which I had stripped off, but I remembered not its fashion--for in my childhood I had left it in my father's house. Yet on a sudden, when I received it, the garment seemed to me to become like a mirror of myself. I saw it all in all, and I too received all in it, for we were two in distinction and yet again one in one likeness. And I saw that all over my robe the instincts of knowledge were working, and I remembered at last the spark that was within me, and the true nature of myself."

The tableau, man and creature, froze. The render shifted, warped, and gradually receded until they stood once again within the walls of the temple.

"What does it mean?" Amara said.

Dorian held up his hand to hush her. They were not alone. The creature remained, still with its back to them, waiting for some as yet unsatisfied system parameter. Its gently undulating form wheezed with sticky breath.

"Amara, what do you see?"

"Michael Raville," she said, speaking the name like a curse. "Why is he still here?"

At the sound of Amara's voice, the creature made a snuffling noise, scenting the air with its nose. It turned to her, curious and questioning, and began to stagger toward them.

"That's far enough," Dorian warned.

But the creature, this thing that Amara recognized as Michael Raville, did not acknowledge him. It brushed past his shoulder as though he was beneath recognition and stopped an arm's length from Amara, muttering at her a chorus of wet and scudding sibilants

Amara growled. "Don't you think I've tried? I took the *quae-ha-distra*, just like you asked. Do you even understand the risks we've taken for you?"

What was happening here?

The pseudo-Raville answered something short and stern, punctuated by fierce, angry gestures.

"You asked for our help, remember?" Amara barked in response. "We've done everything you wanted, and all you've done in return is subject us to *theatrics*. There are men trying to kill us!"

At that, the creature extended a hand to her, palm up in offering. The hand seemed to be empty.

Dorian thought, *Michael Raville?*

"No, I won't take it," Amara said sternly, and crossed her arms over her chest. "Not without knowing what it is this time. Exactly what it is and what it does. It's time that you were honest with me if you expect me to help you. I want the truth."

Dorian could only guess at their conversation from Amara's side of the exchange. But she *saw* Michael Raville, *heard* him speaking to her, while Dorian experienced only the amorphous render, malformed and speechless. It hadn't even recognized his presence within the environment. Something about the configuration of his foam and the way the orb had appended to it was interfering.

But why now? How could he exchange meaningful variables with the index, load the application he had selected, and see the render of the old man that must be, he realized, Eliahu ben Hai, but not participate in this? What was different about the creature, the *chaos* as Moira had called it, from the well?

Except the fact that everything else to this point had been scripted events in an inflexible datascape.

Dorian sucked in a breath, remembering the well and his initial reaction to it, the way it had called out to him, as though it was a living thing, structures and information crying out to be given form. Chaos. Absolute potential. Raw architectural objects.

It wasn't that he was perceiving too little, he realized, but too much. His compilers were translating beyond the code that rendered this tightly simulated environment and showing him the naked core of the dataverse, the mathematical dance of signal packets redundantly broadcast through a wall of noise. He was geeking the environment's pure binary information--a thief in the treasury of the king.

That was why Raville had sent him here. Not to interrogate Moira or to swap incriminations with a script of Raville's virtual self, but for the well, the mainline straight into the orb's sacred datacore and the secrets Raville sought to keep even from himself. And not as dead text, but as fully compiled executables, as a simulated reality within his own foam that Dorian could manipulate.

It was freedom.

But the well was empty. All that it was, all that it contained had been drawn into the form of the creature that had emerged from it, a living representation of the pleroma.

He remembered Moira's words: *When you make the two into one, when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, the above like the below, when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, and when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter the kingdom.*

Male and female. One and zero. One image subsuming another.

He understood in a flash of sickening insight.

Slowly, Dorian wheeled toward Amara and the proto-Raville. She was growing increasingly hostile, spitting her responses like venom and pressing toward the creature as though she meant to rend him with her claws. "No, I want a better answer than that. I won't be your pawn anymore. I want the truth, not more riddles and lies. I won't accept it

until you tell me more. John!"

He heard her call his name, but he hardly acknowledged her. His mind was full of possibility, grinding through the calculations. Raville was trying to give her something. Some code object he could not see, could not evaluate. A potential threat, but also an essential artifact. Raville had sent them here for this too. To receive on faith what they might not accept on knowledge and exotic proofs alone.

"Take it," he said. "Do what it asks."

Amara's brow creased skeptically, but she wavered between trust and treachery. She flicked her gaze from Dorian to Raville, and sighed. She put out her hand. "Fine. Give it to me."

The creature pulsed with satisfaction and reached out to her.

And Dorian crept up stealthily from behind while the creature was distracted, completing its transaction with Amara. At most, the core perceived him only as a transient aberration in the digital stream, but Dorian remained cautious. Some things demanded stealth. The instinct, the protocol was etched deep in the human heart.

Amara glanced up at him, wondering, he was certain, what exactly he was doing. He couldn't tell her. Wouldn't have told her even if there had been time. It would have horrified her.

A render. The whole environment is a render. None of it is real, just the representation of a technical, mathematical process.

Dorian thought it, repeated it, made himself believe it.

And then he gripped the soft, viscous head of the creature in his hands and wrenched it back until the black eyes stared up at him. It made no sound except a moist and spongy wheeze, but there was a glint of awareness, a cascading cognition of environmental malfunction, the idiot instinct of a finely crafted codework inexplicably hauled out of its standard routines. Dorian found the shimmering, pulsing hollow between shoulder and throat, the vulnerable flesh of an impossible being, and lunged at it.

He bit down, pierced the thin skin with his teeth and sucked.

Amara screamed, and Dorian could only imagine what it

was that she saw.

His mouth filled with the taste of ash, of oil, of rotten things and thick, poisonous fluids. He choked on it, vomited up black liquid data and forced himself to swallow it again. Suck and swallow, to devour the whole of it.

The data form of Raville reacted. Perhaps it read him as a potent viral assault, a signal leech, a ravenous invader in the fields of plenty. It fought against him with powerful hands, pistoning its legs and twisting its body, trying to writhe free. It launched itself against him in a frenzy, pushed him back toward the well, to safe forms and lockdown applications. Dorian clung to it with all the strength and ferocity he possessed, attacking its neck, its face, its chest--anywhere he could find a soft place to bite and suck. It tried to strike out at him, but Dorian restrained it, grappled with its limbs, and finally put all his weight against its back and bore it to the ground.

The creature writhed beneath him in desperation.

Dorian straddled its torso, let it kick and struggle all it wanted, then used its own slithering resistance to flip it over onto its back. He held its arms apart and knelt over it, went at the throat again. The construct couldn't resist him. He was stronger, faster, more agile.

Dorian took the thing into his mouth and consumed it one swallow at a time. Suck and swallow, over and over, contemplating only the mechanical process of what he had to do. It struggled less and less as the moments passed. Its strength waned, and it clawed weakly at the air. Finally, it mewled at him, gazed at him with an empty and uncomprehending expression.

But Dorian sucked until long after it had ceased moving and the light had vanished from its eyes.

When he was done, nothing remained but a pale, translucent skin like the deflated bladder of a waterskin and a drying spatter of fluid that had leaked from its many wounds. Dorian staggered to his feet. He wiped his sleeve across his mouth, and it came away stained with black and greasy liquid. His stomach felt heavy, filled with lead. His clothing was disheveled and torn, smudged with the digital gore of the datascape he had consumed.

Devoured.

He was sure he would vomit again. Any second now.

But it had been worth it.

He had taken the sacred datacore into himself and assimilated it into his own foam. The *quae-ha-distra* held no secrets he could not discover. It no longer owned him. He had consumed it.

Still scrubbing at the raw data that covered his face and hands, Dorian looked toward Amara. He felt a stab of shame. Not simple embarrassment, but something darker, hideous, as irrefutable as guilt. She had scrambled away from him and put her back against the outer wall.

Her face was a mask of horror.

"Data," he croaked at her. His tongue tasted like ashes.

"You're covered in blood." She turned her head away, unable to stand the sight of him.

"It was data," he repeated dully. "Just data."

I did it for you!

She did not respond. He was covered in blood. What should he expect her to say?

"I have what we came for," he whispered. "Let's get out of here."

15.

Once again, Dorian and Amara assailed the mountains that crowded about the virtual Sonali, wending their way back along the path that had been provided for them to the bounce point. They left the city behind them, a blight on an otherwise pristine landscape, ever receding behind field and forest and flying ridge of digitized stone. Dorian was much more aware of sound this time: the flow of water tripping through narrow defiles and the call of anonymous birds, the quiet roar and creak of the wind through tree and leaf. The world had a voice, and everything it said rushed past his ears like an incomprehensible language. Except that he could comprehend it, if he chose. He could break it down to scripts and executables, object code and sub-routines that tumbled end to end like a fall of dominoes initiated by their own unconscious input strings. They were pebbles in a pond, setting off an endless chain of computational reactions that crashed against one another, counteracted, melded in patterns too complex for human analysis.

He mused upon these qualities of sound because Amara had spoken to him not at all since they had flipped out of geek in the basement of the virtual Archive, except for the minimum grunts and sighs when he left her no choice. He let her have her silence. He had horrified her with the things he had done. He understood that, even if he couldn't help but resent it a little. It was just a render! And despite how apparently abhorrent his actions had been, they had both seen

worse, he was certain. Environments devoted to human dissection, virtual orgies of necropheliac violence, open season hunting preserves where overstressed investment bankers unleashed their pent-up barbarous fantasies on friends and coworkers. These were all cottage industries of the imminently post-human Strand.

The difference was that those were fake experiences, detrimental only to impressionable young men with imperfectly de-engineered blood fetishes (if the outcry of their parents and assorted hysterical social watchdog groups were to be taken seriously). But the orb, the orb and all that it simulated, was something else entirely. For Amara, it was sacred. It was a seed of the One Truth that she was seeking, whatever that was. She believed, and by treating the orb's functions as something other than a looking glass into Truth, he had defiled it.

He wasn't sure exactly what it was that she had expected him to do, but he had obviously failed. And as a consequence, she had set up a wall between them that he couldn't breach. After the fleeting experience of interconnection, of perfect harmony--or even the illusion of it--that they had shared outside the temple, he felt the rejection that much more poignantly. Having caressed a dream of her, he wanted to go on doing it forever, or at least believe that such a thing might be possible again.

So he was surprised as they scaled one of the few difficult ascents back to the summit of the mountain, working upward one at a time, she a few meters above him gripping handholds in the rock while he waited below pretending that he could catch her if she slipped, when she spoke to him. They had left the path a ways back and mutually decided to attempt a decently graded rock face rather than spend the few hundred meters to wind up and around it more gently. He was once more ruminating over the events at the temple, pondering where exactly he had gone wrong.

It was just thinking out loud, a query for the aether, that he asked. "What was it that Raville gave to you back there, anyway? You never showed me."

Amara paused, and he assumed she was just looking for a suitable hand hold. The climb was turning out to be more

difficult than it had looked on the way down. Every mountain looked like a molehill from the top, even fake ones.

But she said in a tired voice, "It was a zap destination address."

"Really?" He wasn't certain if he was more amazed by the information or her offering of it.

"No, John. I'm making it up."

"What terminus?"

"I don't know. It wasn't one I recognized. Maybe it's the new one, the depot that was just established in Phi Sophia."

Dorian squinted thoughtfully, trying to pull the name of the place out of his memory. "Kedesma," he said. "No, the moon was Giari Tau. That one, you mean?"

"I assume so, yes."

"Hmph. That doesn't seem very helpful on the surface of it. Frying pan into the fire and all that."

She sighed. "John, darling, I love you. I want you to understand that. But you are not the person I want to talk to about behavior that may or may not seem very helpful to the cause right now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Can we talk about this later? Like when we're both at the top?"

"No. This is the most you've spoken to me since we geeked to that godforsaken temple. I want to know what you mean by that."

He could almost make out the individual curses she leveled at him. "Fine. I'll come down."

"Nevermind. I'm on my way up. Just wait there."

Dorian closed his eyes and imagined himself beside her. There was no sensation of movement, no physical transition; he simply opened his eyes and he was there on a ledge wide enough for him to sit comfortably with his feet dangling over the twenty meter drop to the scrub and mounds of broken rock below. If he had not thought to extend the ledge to contain Amara as well, she might have tumbled off the face of the mountain.

"How did you do that?"

Dorian put his back against a stone outcropping conveniently shaped to fit his back and shrugged innocently.

"I can do a number of things here that I couldn't do before. You taught me how back there," He gestured vaguely toward the area where Sonali and the Archive lay, "when you told me to make myself. I learned some important features about the architecture with the information I" *consumed* "accessed and added to my foam. It allowed me to force a connection between my architecture and this one, using its own protocols the same way the orb appended itself to my foam in the first place. All I have to do is imagine it and the environment handles the rest. The coding is transparent and instantaneous. I think this was what Raville wanted all along."

Amara released her grip on the rock and edged over to him. She seated herself beside him and placed her hands in her lap. For a time, they just sat, watching the horizon and mulling over things they might have to say to one another, but didn't.

She glanced at him pensively. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"You weren't talking to me."

"Well, that's certainly an adult perspective on matters."

Dorian grimaced. "It wasn't just that. I've been playing with it to the extent that I understand it. Seeing how it works. It's really rather clever, the way the orb manages to replicate synchronous variable memes across independent foam sessions. No, *clever* is too light a word. It's groundbreaking. On installation, it copies some of the fundamental foam structures that we manipulate as reg files and boots them off into a shared sub-kitrionic reservoir of potential waveforms that feed the environmental compilers. The reservoir is hardcoded, which means that we and anyone else who accessed it via the generation of the orb we were given can share the same experiences in a sort of cosmic p2p connection, at least to the extent that our foam didn't lock down the architectural regs. It's like jacking the space-time continuum--the structural dataverse itself and doing whatever you want with it. But the bottom line is that while we're inside it, in the liminal space between our own foam and the sub-kitrionic reservoir, I'm able to use the native capabilities of my foam to re-order the functioning of the orb. I've taken back my own territory from whatever logic was driving it and can propagate

those changes across the network the orb created."

He was getting carried away, he realized, and not answering the question she had asked in the first place. "That possibility--that I could jack the reservoir and free us from the orb's absolute influence--was why I did what I did in the temple. I'm sorry I didn't give you more warning. I should have said something to prepare you for what I was about to do. It's just that...well, the knowledge came to me. What I was supposed to do, I mean. It all came together and I had to act on it. For some reason it seemed important that I got my hands on the data before it could slither back into the well. I really didn't have a choice about what form that access took. Maybe I could have done something else. I probably should have, but--"

Amara reached out and took his hand between her own. She held it in her lap, stroking it softly. "Hush. It's okay, John."

"I don't want you to be angry with me."

"I'm not angry with you. Not anymore at least. I just didn't understand."

"What did you think I was doing?"

"I thought that you were sabotaging us. I thought that you were trying to keep Raville from telling me what the next step was, so that we wouldn't have to go. So that we could do what you want to do...run off and hide from it all." She bit her lower lip. "It was stupid of me. I should have trusted you."

"But I don't believe," he said.

"You don't believe. But you would do anything to keep me from being harmed. I see that, too. You'd let the whole universe burn if it was a choice between that and saving me. Because of Lily."

Lily. The mention of her name was like a knife jabbed up under his ribs, aimed at his heart. "Lily is dying. Danek told me this morning before we left. I'm not supposed to say anything to her about it. I'm not supposed to even know. She doesn't want my pity."

"She doesn't want you to feel guilty for something that isn't your fault."

Dorian lay his head back against stone and waved his hand. Floating on the air before them, a woman appeared.

Lovely and dark, strong and smiling, a beautiful child in the first bloom of youth. Exactly as she had once been, all those years ago, and the way he still imagined her in his mind's eye.

"Why can't it be that easy out there?" he said. "I wave my magic wand and all the pain, all the mistakes just go away. No one dies; no one suffers because of failure. Just pure bliss."

He dropped his hand and the image vanished in a puff of cloud.

"It can be that way, John. One day, when we've put off this existence and learned what the Exousiai have to teach us. That's what we're fighting for: the end of the suffering we've created for ourselves. The end of human experience and the beginning of something glorious that we can't even imagine yet."

"Heaven," he said. "She already believes in that. Maybe that's what she thinks she's doing--beating us to it. That would be just like Lily, going off to prepare a place for the rest of us rowdy kids."

Despite himself, he found that he liked that idea. It was better than the alternative, better than believing that she would be gone, just more data to be recycled from the universal waste bin.

"If you think that Raville sent us here only to give you the means to control the orb, what are we supposed to take from the scene that was played out for us in the temple? He said it would explain everything."

Dorian shrugged. "Let's ask him."

"I don't think the Archive is safe for us."

"Feh."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

But he was already in action, reaching across the ever-thinning barrier between his foam and the orb, activating selected files he had placed in his original datascape, then backed up to the new one before his old foam had been destroyed. The landscape around them shuddered like a triDvid file caught in a loop. The sky wavered and the trees far below them rocked from side to side. The world skipped, blurred, and reformed itself in a sharp transition that took his breath away.

Dorian exhaled and shook his head to clear the last wisps

of signal replacement out of his array's moderator. Gone were the mountains and raging blue sky, the cool touch of stone against his back and thighs. In their place was stone and leather, the great windows and perpetual afternoon sunlight of Raville's memory palace. They found themselves once more on the creaking sofa before the fireplace in the richly textured lounge.

Raville lifted his eyebrows in amazement. "Impressively managed, Mr. Dorian. You may just get the hang of this yet."

Dorian winked at Amara. "I told you I hadn't hurt him."

Amara gazed about her with a shocked uncertainty. "Where are we?" she asked in mild alarm.

"Our friend intimated that he might have more information to pass along if we got this far, so I copied the latest iteration of his core files into my foam and gave him a reporting stream to keep tabs on our progress."

"And hardly more than that," Raville interjected. "Here I sit, a copy of a copy. Quite literally a shadow of my former self. It is mightily humbling."

"You deserve a little humbling," Dorian groused at him. Whatever else might have changed, his estimation of Raville's motives had not. "The only reason you got as much as you did was simply because I didn't feel like ramping up the iteration I already had in my foam and subjecting myself to your introductory spiel all over again. You've been more trouble than you were worth from the start, but now you're going to repay my kindness and toleration in full. We have a couple of things that require explanation from you."

Raville ignored him for the moment. He climbed to his feet and scented the air, turning his head from side to side. "What is this place? This isn't your foam."

"You should recognize it. It's your code, after all."

"The *quae-ha-distra*?" He seemed legitimately impressed. "You've grown more adept than I had even imagined." He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. A slow smile played across his lips. "Yes. I remember now. Then you've assimilated the datacore, just as I'd hoped. Splendid!"

"Not as splendid as you'd probably like, I'm sure. I've disabled your access to inter-architectural input for the time being. You're just a spectator here."

Raville grinned broadly and resumed his seat. "There's that paranoid streak again."

"I think John has proven that he knows exactly what he's doing," Amara snapped.

Her inexplicably cool attitude seemed to stun Raville. "How quickly our faith turns to skepticism in trying times. I thought for sure that you were my one true ally in this business."

"Allies communicate truthfully with one another. They don't manipulate friends for their own selfish ends."

Dorian interrupted them before the argument could get properly underway. "A conversation for another time. Right now we need some answers. Let's start with something simple like what you intended us to take away from that scene at the temple."

Raville arched an eyebrow. "You *would* call it simple. You are a master of understatement, Mr. Dorian. *That scene*, as you put it, is the key to everything. It was the turning point in human history as you know it. Simple, indeed!"

"Which is why I want you to parse the narrative for us," Dorian said patiently. "It may have been readily understandable to you, I had other things on my mind at the time--like figuring out how to assimilate the rogue datacore, per your designs."

The notion that anything short of imminent and violent death would have been more pressing seemed to offend Raville. "What you witnessed was a faithful recreation of the first words spoken to me from the mouth of the Exousiai. It was the revelation of their map for the human destiny. All of their intentions, all of the blessings they sought to bestow were unveiled to me. As Eliahu spoke, I was transported into a magical space of pure memory. Not my own memory, but a universal memory written on the very fabric of being. No less than the mythic retelling of the intended evolution of our whole species."

He read their blank expressions with obvious dissatisfaction. "Don't you see? The Exousiai have come into our savage lands and made themselves known to us over time, the sleeping denizens of this darkling material plane, in order to awaken us. I was awakened as part of that first wave of

explorers to blaze a trail with zap through the wilderness of embodiment and place us back on the road to the end that should have always been ours: ascent to the perfect mind of cosmic knowledge. It is our doom to wrest the pearl, the hidden pearl of knowledge, from the dragon of the flesh so that we might be liberated--so that we might all put on the cloaks of our true being and see ourselves as we truly are and should be--as we will be when all our individual sparks are gathered up into the grand cosmic organism. What you were meant to experience during the transition into the temple sequence was just a taste of that Being, raw and unrefined, but as much as our underdeveloped human consciousness can tolerate of the ineffable. I wanted you to touch it, however imperfectly, so that you would understand what is at stake here and what we stand to lose if my other self is allowed to perpetrate his madness." Raville spared a look of disappointment for Dorian. "After having drunk from the well of knowledge, you at least I would have expected to understand these things."

"I brought you along to explain it to me," Dorian responded. "Don't give me any more reasons to remember that you serve no purpose otherwise."

The fact of the matter was that he needed any insights Raville had to offer. He needed information in order to understand how to combat the forces arrayed against them. The hijacked datacore was full of promises, but it was still largely a mystery to him. He had only dipped shallowly into the pool of data he had assimilated, taking only what he had needed to counteract the orb's control. The rest was an intricate, incestuous nest of sub-routines that were dazzling to the eye and wrenching to the mind. It would take days of steady analysis to make much sense out of it. If he was lucky, he could seed most of it into his mem extensors, but what he had seen already wasn't in a form that could be easily rendered for seeding. It would be another task for his copious spare time.

Raville fell into a pout and stared unhappily out the windows. "I've thrown open the windows of the universe for you," he muttered, "and all you choose to see is the draperies."

"So John was right," Amara said, her words tinged with

sadness that made her sound momentarily lost, a child crying out in the wilderness. "From the beginning, he was right. You wrote the code. You created the environment and the--the *objects* within it. It wasn't the Exousiai that touched me at all."

Raville wavered uneasily. "Technically, yes. The load from the origin foam to appended orbital space involves some...ah, manipulation."

"Then it was all just an illusion."

"An inspired illusion," Raville stressed. "A foretaste of the divine."

"And yet still a fiction."

"But a fiction grounded in truth. That is the difference. You can't catch God in a bottle, my dear. There aren't bottles made that are big enough for the task. But with this space, I've tried. I've translated mundane human physics into the pure mathematics of a divine race. Yes, some moderation occurs. The lines are blurred, the absolute potentiality is truncated. Yet I was as faithful to the Truth as my skills permitted. That's always been the work of theology, hasn't it? The Truth is beyond us. Instead we create our pleasant fictions, weave our catechistic tales, clothe our truths in garments we can readily understand. It's the nature of the ineffable to *be* ineffable, you understand? Every telling is an embroidery upon that central experience. Every relation of the tale is a metaphor for that which words cannot describe. The metaphor is--must be--fiction to one degree or another, because we cannot comprehend or express naked Truth in our present form. But recognizing the fiction that overlays it as such does not make the Truth any less true, just more occult." Raville furrowed his brow darkly. "Prophets and mystics have declared their mysteries, their patient infiltrations of the House of God, from the desert wastes just as I have for time immemorial, and we call them holy! Stop looking at me as though I was a charlatan."

But Amara stubbornly insisted on her point. "You said it was a portal into the world of the Exousiai."

"And it is! When you come here, you make yourself ready to receive the incarnation that is coming."

"It isn't the same," Amara said in a quiet voice. "They're not here. This is just a game."

"You call it a game. I call it a sanctuary where we can learn to understand the things we cannot otherwise know, where we can breathe the sweet incense of their exhalations and interact with them through the thinnest of veils. This is a training ground for our future mode of being. I'm sorry if that wasn't immediately clear to you, but it is not mere illusion." Raville reached out and plucked at the skin of Dorian's hand. "I call flesh illusion, a test to see if we're worthy to take the next step. How can you argue with that? Just look at me! I have no flesh, and yet I live, I grow, I see with clarity that those of you still roiling about in your bags of meat can't, even when the truth is laid out before you. That has always been the Word of the Exousiai. We've reached the limits of flesh's capabilities. We don't progress so much as we just devise new and clever variations on the ancient themes that have always plagued us: what do we eat, how do we acquire goods, how do we make ourselves live longer and increase our quality of life. Now we have better tools designed to provide those answers with less effort and little risk. But our technology isn't gnosis, it's just modern solutions to the old problems. I don't know about you, but I'm tired of fighting the same battles our species had waged since we crawled up out of the slime or shared a bit of apple or whatever myth you prefer. I'm ready to wrest the pearl from the dragon and get along to the home that should have always been ours in the first place."

Dorian applauded in polite mockery. "Wonderful. When we get around to building the First Church of Michael Raville, we'll have those words inscribed above the front doors for the edification of the faithful." He fixed Raville with a hard gaze to make it clear that any response would be unwelcome. "The problem is that I'm a happy heathen. I like believing in the Old Gods, and I'm not nearly as convinced that they're dead and in their graves as you are. But a wise lady recently pointed out to me that I don't have to believe in your gods to see that they've begun to attract disciples, even to tickle the ear of an emperor who may or may not be happy to knock down our high places to erect shrines of his own. Someone out there believes enough to have dispatched a few thousand Marines to the utter limit of human exploration, and eventually that viral meme will begin to propagate across human space."

Something is happening out there. A strange wind has begun to blow, and it doesn't take a meteorologist to see that it's eventually going to blow over my house. In fact, it's already blown over my house, and I'm a little pissed off about it, frankly.

"So, here's what we're going to do: we're going to stop engaging in these merry little worldview clashes and agree that something is going on. We're going to agree also that people who sit in big chairs--and are used to ordering around people who don't--are making decisions that could potentially affect us all, so it's in our best interest to at least find out what they're arguing about behind closed doors. To that extent, we're all reading off the same agenda. Where it goes beyond that is a topic for future discussion, but for us to continue to stay on the same page henceforth, we need to exchange useful and accurate data. Is that clear enough?"

There were no objections, so Dorian nodded briskly and got on with it. "First item, then. In the temple, prior to my assimilation of the datacore, it passed a zap terminus address to Amara. Where is that depot?"

"With any luck, it is the new EOSO depot established on Giari Tau."

Amara blinked at him, nonplussed. "With any luck?"

"It isn't as if that's a published terminus. That's highly restricted government information. But the fact that it was given to you makes me reasonably confident that it is correct." Amara looked as if she was about to erupt, and Raville went on quickly in placatory tones. "It isn't really so bad as it sounds. The code engine that drives the temple environment is an open ended dynamic query builder--"

"We figured that out," Dorian informed him.

"Yes, but you undoubtedly relied on standard facilitated input protocols...you directed your queries to Moira as a gatekeeper. But it isn't only Moira that's linked into the query engine. The iteration of the orb that I embedded in your foam--" he flicked his finger back and forth between them to indicate that he meant both of them, "--contained its own formula query generator that was launched when the datacore was accessed the first time. The pre-scripted query kicked out a parameter file tagged to your orb id profile, Amara, and

would have done the same with Dorian's if his security measures hadn't blocked it, that searched the datacore for any terminus string address format that didn't match the most recently updated list of addresses I had hardcoded into the script. The address it gave you was merely the answer to a question you weren't aware you had asked."

Dorian nodded in understanding. "You wrote it on the assumption that you would continue to store any new data related to the Exousiai in that foam."

"Exactly. And if I was mistaken, or my enfleshed half had changed his pattern of behavior in the intervening years, the query would have returned no data. The fact that it did respond means that this is a new address not listed in the depot destination directory published last month. That makes me, as I say, reasonably confident. Reasonably only because contrary to public opinion, there are scores and scores of proprietary military depots all over settled space which are also not listed in the directories. But it's another fair assumption, I think, that even if my other self was aware of these addresses, he wouldn't have stored them inside this particular subset of foam."

Amara looked queasy as he reeled off his string of assumptions. Dorian knew what she was thinking. There were ways, it was said, for humans to zap themselves to unknown or undelineated terminus points. Cultish groups of ecstatic zaptronauts claimed to have done it for decades, riding the aetherial waves throughout the cosmos, bouncing from point to point and all points in between in an eternal zap. They claimed to hear the voice of the cosmos speaking to them upon return, some of them going so far as to publish phantasmic memoirs of their encounters with undiscovered races of alien beings. But the clumsy physiological truth was that zap relied on depots both as receptor nodes and as signal coherence stations that captured *in transit* schemes and refreshed them against the everpresent tug of entropy. One didn't just zap from Point A to Point B, but traveled complex routes from terminus to terminus to insure proper signal packet retention, because the alternative, the gradual erosion via entropy, was as certain and immedicable as death.

As revolutionary as zap technology was, it still had its

limits, and most people--sane people--respected them and didn't go leaping into zap launches that had no guaranteed destination.

Dorian didn't like Raville's reasonable assurances any more than Amara did, but he had more pressing questions on his mind.

"Okay, so we assume that this is the proper terminus. What do you intend us to do with it? It's not like we can zap ourselves to Giari Tau and expect to receive a warm welcome from the man who has already tried once to kill us."

Raville grimaced in consternation. "I expect you to be clever, Mr. Dorian, and to use either the brain God gave you or the education the Marines inculcated, preferably both in tandem. I can't tell you everything that must be done step for step. But it's reasonable to assume that EOSO has set up its depot facilities much like every other depot, meaning that the acquisition and production of zapped scheme objects is an automated process. There may be a technician or two present on-site to coordinate the storage of reproduced materials, but I'm certain you'll find a way to deal with them appropriately. That should buy you a little time, at least."

"Time for what, exactly?"

"Whatever you deem necessary, of course."

Raville gave them both a significant look, and let his words hang ominously in the air.

"Right," Dorian remarked. "Because as a card-carrying Border Marine, blowing stuff up comes naturally to me."

"That was one of the qualifications that recommended you, yes."

He stabbed at Raville with a significant look of his own. "You know, your admirable willingness to have your actual self murdered for the greater good notwithstanding, before I start wreaking havoc on your behalf, I'd really like you to explain to me why you decided to help your alter-ego try to kill us in the first place."

Raville put on a shocked expression. His eyebrows climbed halfway up his forehead. "Pardon me?"

Amara gave a little yelp like she'd been stung. "What?"

"I've been giving recent events some serious thought, and there's one tiny detail that keeps sticking in my mind. There

wasn't enough time for Raville to break my encryptions, dispatch a strike team and wire my coffin with key-sensitive explosives between the time you gave the orb to Amara and the time my coffin exploded. That is, not unless there was someone on the inside feeding him information--like who we were for instance, like the sort of data that could be extracted from our personnel files." Raville paled. His mouth fell open as though he intended to protest, but no sound came forth. Dorian forged ahead. "But that was impossible, right? I mean, you had no access to the world outside the Archive's network. There was no way you could send him that information because you didn't have access to the Strand."

Raville squirmed and gripped the arms of his chair, and Dorian smiled craftily. "But you didn't need the Strand once the orb had been activated, did you? It creates its own network, and not just between Amara and I, but also to the reservoir where the environmental variables reside, which can be instantly accessed from Raville's foam. When you booted Amara from your node on the Archive's network, it wasn't so she could assimilate the orb; it was so that you could use her to transmit data back to Raville through the conduit the orb created. You made her into a messenger, and once Raville received your ping, he had access to whatever he wanted in her foam, including any information you had loaded about the two of us into the orb script. Everything that happened after that was your way of slowing me down so he would have time to react." He paused to give both of them time to consider his accusations, then continued in deadly earnest. "What I don't understand is *why*. Why ask for our help and then turn around and try to kill us?"

Raville studied him for a long time without speaking. Whatever he was considering twisted his lips into sour and unhappy shapes.

"You don't understand," he said at last. "You so clearly don't understand, it's ludicrous."

"You'd better make me understand, then, because until I do, you can carry out your crusade to save humanity on your own."

Raville's eyes darted from Dorian to Amara. "I must do what I was created to do. You understand that, surely. There

are certain constraints--"

"What I understand," Dorian snapped, "is that you've been entirely too willing to pass off half-truths and outright lies in order to manipulate us into carrying out your private agenda. That's going to stop."

"He wasn't trying to kill both of you," Raville rolled his eyes in exasperation, then fixed them on Dorian. "Just you."

"That's comforting."

But Amara stiffened with alarm and clutched at Dorian's hand. "But why? Why would he only go after John? I was the one who took the orb, not him. He should be after me!"

"Mr. Dorian was kind enough to perform a service for me after you had accepted the orb. A technical service of sorts that was designed to protect your anonymity from unwanted attention. In hiding your infiltration, he necessarily exposed himself."

"Then it's my fault. Oh, John, your beautiful coffin--"

"No, my dear," Raville said softly. "Your activity with the orb is not the *sole* reason, at any rate. He was a target because he doesn't fit into the grand design Raville has envisioned. That's all. He was a wild card, a potential threat, and ultimately expendable. What happened at Quiksand is best thought of as an error. . .a misjudgment on my shadow self's part. Not so much a misunderstanding as a necessary misdirection that entailed some unavoidable risks."

Dorian pondered that one word with rising displeasure. *Misdirecting who, exactly?* "Why do I not like the sound of that?"

"Everything that has happened occurred because it must. The stakes are much higher than one apartment, one man, though I regret the inconvenience, of course. But you knew that Amara had to be protected from Raville, and you willingly accepted that burden. He couldn't be allowed to have knowledge of her possession of the orb."

There was a troubling nuance in Raville's tone. Something he was saying without speaking it. "You didn't send me after her just because she was more vulnerable than I would be," Dorian said, halting, working it out as he spoke. "I would have had a better chance of masking myself, but that's not it, is it? It had nothing to do with masking me, because *you* turned

around and gave me up. You didn't just want to trick him with an anonymous intrusion. . .you were trying to protect Amara specifically."

Raville grew thoughtful and the lines of his face hardened. "You have no idea how perilous the explanation you seek is, how precarious is the balance of history. With one misspoken word, I could destroy everything I have worked for."

"It's Amara. Something about her that you thought you needed to hide at all costs."

"Yes."

Amara's attention wavered between them. "What about me? I don't understand."

Raville seemed to make a sudden, difficult decision, but there was no relief in it, only a terrible sense of dread. "It's only because you choose not to understand. You've been eating the food of the darkling lands for so long, you may have forgotten that you even want to. But you will remember with time. The *quae-ha-distra* has already begun to awaken you."

"Awaken her to what?"

"To her true nature, of course. It's the reason she came to me in the first place."

He was talking about the memory palace, Dorian assumed. "She came to you by accident. She was following me, remember?"

"Don't blind yourself with linear causes and effects. What is and what seems to be do not always align where the Exousiai are involved. She did what the immanent emergence of the *quae-ha-distra* demanded."

"That makes no sense," Dorian argued. "You gave her the orb only after we had shown up on your doorstep. That's some wicked non-linear causation."

Raville lanced a sour glare at Dorian. "Your mistake is in presuming that the orb and *quae-ha-distra* are the same." He opened his hands to indicate their current environment. "This is not the true *quae-ha-distra*. It is little more than a clumsy machination, a shadow of an ideal, constructed so that one might partake of the divine world to the extent that we mere humans are able. What I gave to Amara was only the catalyst to inspire her to reclaim what was already her own. Your

involvement in this whole affair, Mr. Dorian, was merely to facilitate that transmission and then to keep the orb in secure foam where it could be manipulated without exposing us all to our enemy's scrutiny.

"The orb itself was designed to serve as a bridge between the unknowable and the mundane, the Exousiai and the merely human. It is a simulacrum of the true *quae-ha-distra* possessed and mastered by the Exousiai themselves, and to a certain extent, as I have said, capable of translating the experience of the Exousiai into human understanding through the manner in which it interprets and interfaces with the foam environment the *quae-ha-distra* itself controls. But the universe of the Exousiai is a pure state of knowing. No one can hide from what is known, and for that reason, the limitations of the orb are also its strength. Because it operates in human reality, driven by code and subject to the limitations of our technology, the state of pure knowing can be obfuscated. Given the right tools, one can touch the orb without being touched by it. It can be manipulated in a way that provides access to the sacred foam without fully becoming immersed within it."

Amara appeared nonplussed and shifted warily in her seat. "You said you were only returning to me what was mine. I don't know what that means. Why was it necessary that I have it?"

"Because the time is short. Raville is moving and you must be--"

"Awakened. We know," Dorian muttered.

"Yes, but what are you trying to awaken me *to*, exactly?" Amara asked.

"To the mastery of the true *quae-ha-distra* that has been latent within you all along, of course."

A grim weight settled in Dorian's stomach. "The pearl."

"No. Even the true *quae-ha-distra* is not the pearl. Amara is the pearl. All that she is, all that she encompasses, all that she desires to be, seems to be and is becoming--that is the pearl."

Amara blinked at him, uncomprehending. Dorian thought he might vomit.

"You are one of them, my dear," Raville cooed, smiling. "You are Exousiai."

Dorian could only laugh.

"Why is it so hard to believe? Think for just a moment about the things you have seen. Why does Amara feel and see and experience the Exousiai in this place, but you don't? Because of your superbly advanced security structures?" Raville barked a harsh, sarcastic laugh. "Please. They are *gods* to creatures such as us. You do not sense them because for us, for mere mortals, they do not exist on this plane. They're not *here*. I would never have dared to code them. It would have been blasphemous. But Amara feels them, because the orb opened her up and allowed her to reach beyond the constraints of the environment and touch the universe on the other side through her own *quae-ha-distra*. She reaches out to them, because she is one of them, and they reach back, and if she would but open her eyes a little more, she would see that she doesn't need the false orb at all. All that she requires is already contained within her.

"But you ask yourself, *what is this awakening, then? Why would one of the Exousiai need a flawed mechanism to remember themselves?* Because she is wholly human and wholly god. Those two realities war within her, and she loves them both--that which she is, and that which she has chosen to be. Have you even asked yourself why the orb environment rendered as it did? Surely you weren't expecting your own beloved Sonali of all the possible renders in the human imagination. For what inconceivable reason would it take such a form? There is only one answer: Amara. Amara the woman and Amara the pearl of the Exousiai both struggling for control. She chose what pleased her most, and as a result what had been became something completely new."

Dorian tried to scoff. He wanted to turn to Amara, to look into her eyes while she denied it, and laugh Raville into oblivion. It was stupid. Senseless. Insane. But he could do none of those things. He was suddenly afraid. Afraid that she wouldn't, or couldn't deny it. Because she believed. She had always believed.

It was Amara who broke the silence that fell among them. "Maybe that explains the orb, John, when we were with Lily and Danek. . .out there. Even though it was impossible, I was able to make it real, remember? Maybe that's why, because it's

a part of me."

"No." He wasn't even going to entertain the idea.

Raville, however, lifted his head and offered a comforting smile. "It isn't a part of you, Amara. It is a manifestation of the fundament of you. You're coming into your own, and part of that becoming is being able to warp the fabric of simple matter to your will. To choose it and make it so.

"This still doesn't explain to me why you've been working in consort with your other self against us," Dorian spat.

"Actually, it explains everything to one who has the proper context for understanding all that I've tried to tell you. I've been honest to the extent that I was able up to this point. The things that I've told you about the war, about what my actual self has determined to do, that's all true, every word of it. But I have kept things from you. If I had told you the truth from the beginning, you wouldn't have believed me. Some things you had to see and experience for yourselves. Awakening is a delicate task. Too much signal and the communication fails. Too much noise yields the same result. Communication is a ratio between truth and lies."

"And what is the truth, Michael?" Amara said, almost whispering.

"The truth, dear Amara, is that I can't afford to lose you again. Failing now would doom us all."

"Again?"

To Dorian, Raville suddenly looked as frightened as Amara. "It's hard to even know where to begin. I have sought you for so many years. Longer than you could possibly know. My entire life has been devoted to the task of finding you. From the instant Eliahu passed the *quae-ha-distra* to us--our birthright, Raville's and mine--it was you who called out to us. Everywhere in the universe we touched, your warmth already was, vanished yet lingering. You filled the firmament with your wonder; you imbued the darkness with light. Your voice was the thunder rolling down from the mountains, and the memory of you a mystery. You are the pearl, and we were commissioned by the gods who made you to help bring you home.

"I was created to serve that single purpose: to keep my actual self informed of developments that he could not readily

track in the virtual or secured dataverse. I know this. At base, I am just a spider, a script, and even though I live, I ruminate, I grow and learn, that fact is inescapable. We wrote the orb, he and I, back when we were still one. We created it on the model of the original *quae-ha-distra* to provide a conduit for communication between ourselves once we had become separated, in case I should find evidence of the pearl's existence inside the Oak Ridge foam.

"And because of this simulated orb, because of its fundamental nature, I had no choice in performing the service for which I was made, both at Oak Ridge, and afterward, at the Archive. It is part of what I am. It correlates the things that I have learned and waits for a bounce point to deliver its payload into the parent foam. So I have had to be cautious, because my thoughts are not my own. I can hoard what I learn only until it is taken from me, and then it becomes his as well. Because of this, I've had to be crafty, do you understand?"

She nodded, but did not speak.

"When our paths diverged, his and mine, and I could no longer see into his mind, I continued to do what I could to accomplish the mission for which I had been made. I sought the pearl, and he has allowed me to work independently either because he does not believe that I will guess his plans or he simply is not aware that I have continued in this infernal existence. But it's clear to me that whatever transformations he has undergone, one thing remains the same: Raville still craves the pearl. But he is wary of moving prematurely to take it on his own. He has learned over the years to be cautious, to beware the dangers of acting rashly, so he has been content to trust my observations and wait for my signal, even as he conducts his own private research. And that is where I have been able to deceive him. You see, while Raville is aware that the pearl is here on Trithemius Orbis, he knows nothing beyond that. He does not know you, Amara. That is a secret I have guarded most jealously.

"And now you see why I sought John's assistance. With his help, I could both give you the orb and protect you from the consequences. Dorian could quarantine it. He could help you to explore it in depth and yet safely. He might even find a

way to render it harmless for your use, so that you could be awakened without Raville being alerted."

Raville grimaced as if the decision still pained him. "It was admittedly not the best plan, giving you the orb so unprepared, Amara, but it was a better hope than we had otherwise. The danger, of course, was that once it had quickened within you, it would access the Sting as its encoding requires and transmit your identity to the parent foam. I would not be able to hide the pearl from Raville any longer. He would know the truth at last and move to take you for his own. That was where John's assistance was essential, though I fear I had to bait my line with one or two false pretenses on your behalf. Fortunately, he did not fail."

Hook. Line. Sinker.

Dorian barely kept himself from groaning aloud.

"He hid me from Raville," Amara said.

"Indeed. He both hid you at the critical moment before you could be revealed to our enemies, and he pulled you back from the precipice of disaster when you balked at recognizing your true self and your own people."

"And that's why Raville wants to kill him. Because he covered my intrusion with his own."

Raville hesitated, chewing his lower lip. "As I said before, only in part."

Dorian suspected that it was the other part that was going to piss him off. "Get on with it."

"There were a couple of complications to this plan as I had formulated it. One problem, as I said, with delivering the orb to you was that for the orb to quicken within you, it had to access the foam domain of the *quae-ha-distra*. This fact cannot be hidden as easily as the identity of the person who may have assimilated the orb itself. Raville might not immediately know who it was, but allowing him to know that it had happened at all was problematic in itself. After the code we had written had been dormant for so many years, he would assume from any activity via that source that the pearl had been found, and he would subsequently bend all of his resources to locating that individual. It would only be a matter of time before he found you."

"Unless you gave him a fatted calf," Dorian said. It was the

logical conclusion. It was also sort of clever. The sort of thing he might do. . .sacrifice one Strand identity infiltrating some dense ice to hide the incursion of another. "Moo."

Raville chuckled, but uneasily. "It wasn't a decision I made lightly."

"Blah, blah, blah. It was a calculated risk. Blah, blah, blah. We get it. Getting it doesn't mean we're going to think more highly of you, it just means that we get it, okay?" Pfft. "So Amara hit the Strand, jacked Raville's foam and allowed a comm. Channel between the two of you to be opened. What did you tell him?"

"I told him that you were a singularly troublesome and pig-headed cretin who had jacked my hidden port and that it wouldn't be long before you uncovered all of our dealings with the Exousiai and splashed that data from one end of the Strand to the other."

"Makes perfect sense to me. Much more useful than telling him, for example that I was a mostly harmless bungler, the intrusion was an accident and he could just as safely leave me alone as waste perfectly good explosives on my account."

Raville stared at him. "I can't say that line of argument ever crossed my mind."

"Doesn't surprise me."

Raville dismissed his sarcasm with an indignant sniff. "Tell me, Dorian, if none of that had happened, if this experience hadn't physically cost you anything precious, what would you have done with the things I revealed to you? I'll tell you: you would have done exactly nothing. You would have gone home to your cozy coffin, changed into your pajamas and tucked yourself into bed. In the morning, you would have gotten up and gone to work and pretended that nothing had happened. You would have turned your back on everything and convinced yourself that what you had been told was only ranting of a soured upload package that desperately needed purging. And you would go right on believing that until the moment the world ended in a bitter conflagration of Exousian fire."

Dorian grunted. "Yeah, and if I'd been in your shoes and had determined to dump the orb on Amara like you did, I would have at least admitted that I was about to rat me out to

a bunch of intergalactic professional killers so that I could, you know, be ready for it or something."

"And what would that have availed you? You would still have been hunted. And forewarned, you would have found the deepest, darkest hole in the galaxy and crawled into it until the storm had passed, and what is worse, you would have taken Amara with you against her better judgment and simultaneously condemned the rest of us to extinction. That was not an acceptable option."

"Unacceptable to you, maybe. It's always easier to be reasonable when it's isn't your life that gets blown to bits, isn't it? The fact remains that you almost killed me. You almost killed both of us! Tell me that wouldn't have put a damper on your plan to save the universe."

"You're overreacting. If you'll recall, we happen to share the same foam address at the moment," Raville said, tapping the side of his head with his finger. "And while both of us are readily recyclable, getting us killed would indeed have put a crimp in my timeline. I had just as much at stake as you did, so I was both ready and able to ping your system with a warning if you had ignored your instincts and proceeded toward your apartment last night. But I had to make sure that you left an audit trail both arriving at Quiksand and accessing your local network router so that Raville would believe that you had been successfully terminated. If anything, I *saved* your life through the choices I made. And I bought us some valuable time. If Raville had guessed the truth even for an instant, he would have been much more careful about making certain you were dead."

No matter how Raville explained it to him, as far as Dorian was concerned, the plan still sucked, even if it wasn't actually as monumentally bad as it had seemed on the surface. Maybe all plans sucked from the perspective of the bleating calf. He glowered at Raville for awhile, and when that didn't make him feel better either, he eventually set about to making himself understand why. If the actual Raville had truly believed him to be dead, he wouldn't have chased him so vigorously from one corner of the Strand to the next. He wouldn't even have thought to look. But he obviously had thought it, and had spent the down time digging into every link to Dorian's public

and private accounts that he could find--apparently with great success, judging by how fast they had burned through his ip masks.

He and Amara had squandered any freedom they might have had by logging back onto the Strand. His foam, his coffin, his whole life: it was a high price to pay for a few hours of reprieve.

All because Raville had told them that they had to go back into the orb.

All because he was so determined to awaken her.

Nope. Even looking at it beneath the surface, the plan still sucked.

"The only thing it did was buy us some time," he said.

"Yes. But he doesn't know where you are."

"And Amara?"

Raville shrugged. "He'll know about her eventually, if he doesn't already. That has always been inescapable. My hope is that he'll believe she is just your partner in crime for a while yet."

"And when he believes otherwise?"

Raville became intensely sober. "He'll hunt you down and kill you. He'll petition the Archive to have me purged."

"And me?" Amara asked quietly. "What will he do with me?"

"You, he will possess. He will take you, and if he can, he will bend you to whatever purpose he intends. What he can't do is hurt you, Amara. You are the pearl, a creature of another order entirely, the product of a defiant and supreme physics. You can't be destroyed by any tool known to man."

"I hear you say that, and you seem to sincerely believe it, but that's the part that has me worried. You keep saying that I'm indestructible, that I can't be harmed, but I'm not. I've already *been* dead. Twice. How can I be an Ex--one of *them*, if that's true?"

Raville shrugged as if she was only making excuses. "Even a human should know better than think so literally. Flesh is transient; it is nothing. The only true death is data corruption and signal entropy. To those things, you are immune, because you are formed from the raw material of the universe itself. That is what I'm saying. You cannot die. As long as the

universe endures, you are beyond mortality."

"If I'm not human, if I am Exousiai, what am I doing here?"

Raville tried to smile, gently curling his lips, but he was troubled. "You still don't believe me, do you?"

"I don't know what to believe. There's so much that doesn't make sense. You said that you've been watching me for years. But how can that be? How can you know anything for certain when I've only been here in Sonali for five years?"

Dorian heard the question she did not ask: *Or is it just that you're not certain?*

"My dear, you must stop thinking in human terms," Raville answered, without apology. "We've been pursuing you for decades. More than decades, in fact. Over a century, certainly, in one form or another, long before I arranged to have myself bequeathed to the Archive."

"Michael, I can't be more than twenty-seven or eight, even by the Trithemian calendar."

Raville chuckled. "You haven't been that young even in this body in quite some time, Amara, despite what you have convinced yourself to believe. Raville and I first came upon the scent of your incarnation in confidential dox transcriptions from the post-operational interviews with Malcolm and Bernhardt all the way back at Oak Ridge. They spoke of having had visions during their military proto-zaps of a small mining confab on Caviel's Paradiso, of being drawn to that place by incomprehensible forces, and meeting there a young boy there with a remarkable talent for divining lodes of calyx phosphate merely by meditating on the structure of the rock. We understood the significance, if they did not. But by the time our agents reached that distant world, the boy had vanished. Not even his own mother recalled his existence. I learned this after the fact, of course, through newswire feeds and decrypted documents my actual self loaded for me into the Oak Ridge foam.

"Thereafter it was an urban Indo-Thaikon slum where an *aicheniko* Untouchable, a girl, miraculously and inexplicably exhibited an eidetic recollection of the entire corpus of ancient Babylonian arcane cosmological knowledge, much of which had been lost to antiquity except for scattered bits of papyrus locked away in assorted academic collections. Her people

believed she had been possessed by an unclean spirit, and approached her with fear and reverence. But she slipped from our grasp too, by a matter of minutes, sacrificed on some pagan altar to appease the local gods after a period of drought. Mere minutes! It might as well have been eons, as thoroughly as she was taken from us. And so it has gone for years, us slinking about behind you, scenting your trail and closing in. Sometimes missing you by hours, sometimes by days or even whole months. We began to suspect that you were intentionally evading us, and you see why even now, Raville has had to be careful. He's learned that it is pointless to attempt to flush you out if it isn't your will to be found.

"But in those former days, we were content to wait. We did the work that was in our hands to do. We perfected human zap. We developed advanced mimetic techniques for capturing and cataloguing the complete human pleroma. We pushed humanity as near to the brink of the evolutionary leap as we could by technology and social design alone, trusting that when we came near enough to perfection, as high up the mountain as we were able to claw on our own, the pearl would reveal itself to us and forgive our remaining unworthiness.

"Sixty years ago, I finally found you once again, on Sae Phen, of all places. A desert of ice and rock; the last place anyone would expect to find a living god. Do you remember?"

"I remember Sae Phen," Amara said cautiously.

"In those days, there was nothing there. It was a hab colony of regional ice prospectors drilling for compressed Frist Amencules. One day, a young man appeared in the colony. He simply wandered in out of the wastes. No ship, no hab gear, not even a proper winter coat, as the story goes. He spoke a language none of them recognized, and seemed to be out of his head. The prospectors assumed that he'd crashed somewhere beyond their outer markers and by some stroke of fortune survived the harrowing and near-miraculous trek to safety. They took pity on him and found him a bed and blankets, warm food and rest, but there wasn't one among them who didn't believe that he would die. He was severely hypothermic, more frozen than frostbitten, looked as though

he hadn't eaten a proper meal in weeks. They put him to bed in the communal hut expecting him to never regain consciousness.

"For two days, he gave them no reason to believe otherwise, but on the third, he woke suddenly, with a start, it seemed. He climbed out of bed and began to wander the hab, as though seeking something he had lost, but could not remember. This would have been spectacular enough, not only that he was up and moving and in apparently good health, but he greeted the prospectors in their own tongue, and by their names, as though he had been among them his entire life. As time passed, he displayed a startling talent for the work, for mining Frist Amencules. But beyond that, he *knew* things. Wonderful things about Sae Phen, about its hidden life and ecosystem. Some claimed that he could hear the planet itself speaking to him, giving up its secrets. *Groaning*, was his word. The planet was groaning, yearning to be. He told tales of fabled Hermes the Thrice-Great. He recited whole chunks of Lurianic mysteries, Kao-Carelin wisdom and Chao particulates, all in carefree and easy syllables, as if he had known the Masters and loved them well, and he taught the children of Sae Phen to love them also. It changed the entire trajectory of the colony's future history."

"You're talking about Gowan Morgan," Amara said, confused. "The founder of Academie Waldenaise"

"I'm talking about you."

Amara shook her head fiercely. "That can't be right. My mother knew Gowan Morgan. I think she was qualified to tell us apart."

Raville was unfazed by her objections. "Yes, and on the day he died--suddenly, of an apparent stroke--your mother gave birth to a healthy baby girl, though she had been barren when she left Horus Oculi to study at the Academie, as a result of a radical and elective hysterectomy. Incapable of fertilization, she conceived. From a withered vine, she bore fruit. One of her colleagues, a Dr. Jorgen Heinselm wrote a paper on the spontaneous regeneration of post-surgical reproductive systems in artificially manufactured scheme templates. It caused quite a furor in the practical mimetics field, I can assure you. I personally found his paper

disappointing from a methodological standpoint."

"You're suggesting that I am a reincarnation of Gowan Morgan?"

"No, I'm *telling* you that Gowan Morgan was but one of the incarnations of you, just as Amara Cain is another. But where he was a historic curiosity protected from our scrutiny by Sae Phen's isolation, you, sweet Amara, were the break that I had been waiting for. It was a remarkable stroke of fortune, if it was fortune. Here we'd been chasing you across human space for over a century, ever on the watch for tales of children who exhibited strange talents, individuals who suddenly developed access to impossible founts of knowledge--little eruptions of the ineffable into mundane experience--and always coming so close, but never succeeding in claiming you. Every time you vanished, the search had to begin again from scratch. All the previous data was discarded and new potential incarnations examined. It was maddening.

"But I had become quite adept at sifting through the datascape for traces of you, immune as I am to tedium and ever capable of expanding my reach and correlative powers. I was fascinated by Gowan Morgan, and recognized you in him, your particular feel and presence. Chasing him through the depths of the Academie Waldenaise data library was how I stumbled onto you."

He chuckled again, but without mirth. He was deadly serious. "Yet from Gowan Morgan to Amara Cain, you did something new: You remained. You had found a home that appealed to you, it seemed. It was cleverly done. You almost slipped past me again, almost outsmarted me by simply failing to be miraculous in the way I had come to expect. Only the circumstances of your birth were unique enough to warrant interest. I was troubled by that for many a long year as you consistently failed to reveal hidden knowledge and steadfastly refused to demonstrate your otherworldliness in any quantifiable way. As the years passed, even I doubted. Every time a new report emerged from somewhere else--some child purported to have this or that special ability, some comatose patient suddenly coming awake with wild tales of unearthly visitations--my doubt spread like a carpet of mushrooms along the forest floor.

"But still I clung to belief: in spite of failure, counter to all the evidence and arguments against you that seemed to exist. You were a maddeningly normal child. Bright and happy, full of life and love and joy, beautiful to behold. And that was the key, in the end. You didn't need miracles, or didn't want them. You had finally obtained a human existence in which you delighted. Surrounded by love and acceptance, you loved in return, and buried your true lineage so deeply that it was all but forgotten. Only one who had pursued you so ardently and come to know your essence so well would not have missed it altogether.

"I took hope from that. It said to me that my work had been accomplished. Humanity had been drawn to such a place of enlightenment and knowledge that the pearl could be content with us. We were so near to taking the final, inevitable step. How much longer then could it be before the Exousiai came to complete our transition? I nearly convinced myself that Sae Phen was going to be your manger in a stable.

"Ah, but I had to be cautious lest I reveal my pursuit and spoil your hidden plans with my fumbling desire. Surreptitiously, I watched over you. From Oak Ridge, I interfaced with the Academie Waldenaise network and followed your progress. I slipped recommendations into your files to guide your education, served as your silent tutors and your virtual friends, all with the purpose of gently encouraging you to awaken.

"When you chose to leave Sae Phen and embrace the broader community of mankind on Trithemius Orbis, I lost you for a time. And when I did find you again, it was only through a police bitstream reporting the circumstances of your first death. I nearly went out of my mind, certain that you would abandon this incarnation. But you didn't. And eventually, when you took a position at the Archive, I arranged to have myself sent into my lasting isolation where I could better watch over you and wait for your emergence. And now, after forty years of solitude and service, that time has finally come.

"How long have I known you, you ask? You've been in this incarnation for nearly sixty-five years, and I've been with you, admiring from afar, every single day of that span. But as

to your true provenance, who can say? Hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. You may very well have been here when the universe as we know it began."

Dorian could only stare at him, unable to fathom the things he was saying. He couldn't imagine it, couldn't begin to parse its meaning. Amara slumped against him, forlorn and bewildered. If he was disoriented, she was completely outside the edges of the map with no hope of rescue.

There was nothing he could say to help her, not even to scoff.

"But I should remember, shouldn't I? At least some of it," she said. "I don't remember anything except this, my own life, my handful of years."

"You will remember when you're ready."

"But why now? After so much time, why is this happening now?"

"That is a question I myself have asked myself of late, and it is one of the many answers I do not possess. Perhaps your own people desire your return. You yourself may have made the choice, sensing on some level what Raville intends to do. Personally, I like to believe that you have been watching over mankind and waiting for us to become worthy of you, shepherding us, if you will, into a glorious future, and we have finally pleased you. That is my vision."

Amara dropped her head into her hands and squeezed her temples between tightened fists. "I don't remember," she said again. "I don't know what to believe."

"But it churns within you still, doesn't it? This past that might be your own, this needling thought that you are more than you have believed yourself to be, that you are a stranger in a foreign land. It swells in your heart as though you would burst from the sheer joy of becoming what you were meant to be. You can't deny that. I've seen it in your eyes."

She began to tremble, then sob quietly. Her shoulders twitched and she hid her eyes as if she expected to be struck.

Dorian, not knowing what else to do, put his arms around her and drew her against his chest. He held her there while she cried, almost silently, like a child.

He turned his face to Raville. "That's enough."

"It isn't enough," Raville responded. "Don't think I have

undertaken this task lightly. If she refuses the awakening, she could very well vanish from our existence, as she has done so many times before, taking every hope of salvation that we possess with her. But the attempt must be made. She needs to know now. She deserves to know who she is and what purpose she serves. She is the pearl, Dorian, and without her, we are all lost."

Dorian held her tighter. "She's scared and confused and needs some time to sort out the truth from the lifetime of manipulations that you've practiced against her. Can't you even pretend to have a shred of human feeling and shut up for a few minutes?"

"I'm afraid that time is a luxury we do not have."

"Of course it is. The Marines only left for Phi Sophia a few days ago, and it will take them six months to reach Giari Tau under standard burn protocols. Your precious war can afford to wait five minutes."

"It isn't that simple, I'm afraid. This is not a mere girl you can coddle into accepting your view of what should be. There is a part of her, deep and mysterious, that longs for emergence from the veil she has constructed to contain it. That being is a timeless creature beyond our ken who ever breathes upon the waters of our existence and turns her conscious incarnation to its will. Even here, in this false existence, you've felt it brush against you. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes," Dorian said. How could he not?

"That creature has an agenda of its own, and where Amara has been slow to act, it has been swift and decisive in its own way."

Dorian's throat tightened unaccountably. He was certain he did not want to hear this, but Raville wouldn't stop until he told it all.

"It was a singular experience you shared with her, that oneness of being. I attempted, with my clumsy hands, to simulate that fair alien shore when I coded the orb. I thought, as I said, that it would be valuable for you to know what you are fighting for. But when you entered the sacred space on the way to the temple, you left my simulation behind you and crossed over into a land somewhere between here and there, the human and the Exousiai, that I could never have invoked

with text and variables, code and Strand. You vanished from the human sphere, completely and utterly, and then without warning, reappeared in the simulacrum, just as you always should have been. It was not my doing." Raville looked knowingly at Amara, though he said nothing. "But it *was*, nevertheless."

For several moments, Dorian forgot to breathe.

Vanished.

"How long?" he said, his voice breaking.

"The gods operate on their own timetables. We cannot perhaps know why, but we are not as wise as they are."

"How long!"

Raville smiled, reckless and terrible. "A few days, two or three. It's difficult to tell from the little access to your architectural systems I was provided. But I have no doubt that the world has changed while you slept. Every hour you delay threatens everything we have accomplished."

Dorian's mind reeled. Obeying synaptic commands that his body could not, his virtual flesh tensed, spasmed.

"You have been honored as few others of our species has been. You have basked in the eternal embrace of an Exousiai, where a year is but a day."

Danek and Lily. Even with his hidden foam and his camouflaging scripts, he couldn't have shielded them from determined pursuit for that long. What disaster were they about to awaken to? What threat had he brought down on their heads?

What had Amara done?

Dorian dropped her from his embrace as though she had stung him. "My friends are in danger."

"Oh, John, no," she said, breathing hard, still fighting off her tears. "I didn't know--I didn't do it on purpose. It wasn't--John, please!"

But he sprang to his feet, unable to think clearly of anything, except that he might have lost...lost everything that was dear to him. He didn't want to see her, didn't want to touch her or hear the sound of her voice. What had she cost him?

"We've got to get out of here." He stalked toward the exit, his fists clenched as though daring her to follow.

Raville called out after him. "You must be careful. I don't know what Raville has learned in our absence or what plans he might have put into place. If Raville's agents catch you, there will be nothing more I can do to help, so you must evade them at all costs. If they do apprehend you, they will move quickly to transport you to the Southrange Depot and have you uploaded for immediate transmission to Giari Tau, where Raville himself will be expecting you. He has been loath to attempt a direct intervention, fearing that he could inflict damage on this incarnation of the pearl or that threatened, the pearl would attempt to flee his grasp, but if he has pierced my schemes and grasped that the pearl is awakening, that time will be at an end. He will want all of his assets gathered together so he can decide what to do with them. I am certain that you will not be given the choice to decline this invitation."

Dorian stopped, but did not turn around. "I never was."

Without another word, he closed his eyes and Raville's memory palace wavered, faded. What replaced it was a towering cliff, the lower summit of Maighen Braga, the highest peak in the range of mountains that shouldered against Sonali as though they would rim in the whole world. Here was the path, the cleft in the rock, and the tunnel stretching back into darkness. The gate he had strung there to protect the bounce point was gone.

As was Raville, once again. Dorian and Amara were alone on the mountain.

The wind tugged at his shirt and ruffled his hair. It howled among the crags and outcroppings that steeped them in late afternoon. He was frantic and desperate and terrified. And he was angry for feeling that way. If he hadn't already drawn his fingers up into fists, they'd be trembling. He hated that. Hated, hated, hated. His head continued to throb with the effort of holding so much inside of him. He made himself stop before the entrance to the tunnel and paused to press his forehead against the stone, trying to draw clarity from the bones of naked rock against his skin. He needed solidity, reality, to orient himself, even if it was a false reality.

He heard Amara crunch up the path behind him, but she stopped a few paces away. Even over the wind, he could hear the catch in her breath, the sobs she struggled to swallow.

Not that there was any use in crying about it now--for either of them. He may not have been given a true choice at any step along the way, but he had sworn that he would see Amara through, that he would care for her, even if he hadn't known what that meant when he made the promise. Of course, neither had she.

And even if she had, he realized suddenly, it wouldn't have changed anything for him.

He was with her because he wanted to be. Not just because he believed that he could help, but because he *wanted* it.

Dorian turned away from the cliff. He gazed at her steadily, but she looked away. Her eyes were raw and swollen from crying, and when she did lift them to meet his, it was like an imminent wince, as though she expected him to rage at her.

"Do you believe what he says is true?" he asked. Even his gentle voice sounded like it was strung with concertina wire.

"I don't remember it, John. Not any of it."

"I'm not asking if you remember it. Do you believe that you are the pearl?"

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, she nodded her head.

"That's all I need to know."

Nothing was where he had left it. Not the Korski, the table and chairs, not the alarmingly yellow cabinetry, or even, truth be told, the kitchen itself. Dorian flipped out of geek and found himself staring up at the heavy and worn crossbeams of an unfinished ceiling. An inordinate number of competing sensations surged toward the locus of his neurological matrix, all crowding together and shoving one another aside in an attempt to vie for his attention. There was the ache in his back, the rank scent of sweat tinged with the underlying sourness of urine, cool air on his flesh--on *all* of his flesh, from forehead to toenails. The familiar crackle of a fire in the hearth, the steady buzz of voices rapt in ardent conversation, the creak and clomp of footsteps treading across wooden floors.

Three days, Raville had said.

He lay still for several moments, putting together the pieces of lost time that presented themselves to him as physical evidence. His throat was parched, his tongue swollen and his lips cracked and dry. His stomach rolled, and if it had actually had anything in it, he would have vomited, but it was empty. It felt like a football, slick and hard and deflated. He was naked, surrounded by strangers, yet still in Danek and Lily's house, miraculously relocated from kitchen to sitting room. He couldn't make any sense of it. It was like trying to reconstruct from its various shards an expensive vase dropped on the parlor floor.

Dorian inhaled sharply and attempted to lurch to his feet, but the motion was too sudden for his recently revived body to handle with any sense of decorum after having been abandoned to its own devices for so long. Darkness fuzzed the edges of his vision.

"Hey, not so feisty there, partner," a voice called out to him. Strong hands clutched his shoulders and eased him back onto his makeshift bed, a pallet of blankets on the living room floor. "The spirit is willing, my friend, but the flesh is definitely weak. Karo! Hey, Karo! Get some water in here." A pause. "Check that! See if we've got any soup left."

Dorian was in no position to resist. Still gripped by his unseen assailants, he let his limbs fall where gravity took them and closed his eyes again. He thought of Amara, but it was only fleeting. For a moment, the voice had reminded him of someone, but he couldn't place the identity. It was certainly not Danek's. That should have filled him with panic, but he found he wasn't up to it. His body had burned all the energy it had for everything except breathing in his absence.

Besides, they were bringing him soup. The Forces of Evil never brought soup.

Hail the conquering hero, he thought. *Ba-da-dadada-da-da-da...*

Dorian grinned at his own foolishness and merrily passed out.

He woke again, how many seconds, minutes, hours later he couldn't say, only that it was unwillingly, because it drew him from a luxurious dream. Vegetable beef, in a tureen larger than Morley Municipal Stadium, with carrots the size of tree trunks and all the crackers he could eat. It was possibly the best dream he'd ever had in his whole life.

In spite of the ample sensory evidence that he should shift his mental alert status straight to DEFCON 69 or some similar level of emergency response, Dorian moved carefully toward full consciousness this time. First the eyes, blinked and focused, rolled about like pebbles in a tin cup until he was sure that they were working. Then by steady degrees, the wiggledy-piggledy squinching of his fingers and toes to make certain they could both comprehend and reasonably obey complex commands. Wrists and ankles next, elbows and

knees, shoulders and hips and finally his head lolled experimentally from side to side. Everything seemed to be in order.

Between episodes of emerging consciousness, someone had covered him with a blanket. It was thin and scratchy against his skin, which reminded him of the woolen-ish, olive drab military blankets they'd been issued during field deployments in the Border Marines. For some reason, he found that association reassuring. More importantly, it bespoke of a burning consideration for his personal modesty, which was another strike against the Forces of Evil Hypothesis that had still somehow failed to gain a convincing toehold in the battle campaign of his awareness. So fortified, Dorian attempted his most complicated maneuver yet and hauled the heels of his palms up from beneath the blanket to scrub them against his eye sockets. His arms proved clunky, but serviceable, which was a fair description for the state of his body in general, he determined.

Dorian slowly raised himself to a sitting position. He realized that the sweat and urine he had smelled earlier were both most likely his personal responsibility. The strands of hair falling across his forehead felt appropriately lank and oily, the way he'd expect them to feel after three days without showering or otherwise failing to devote any attention whatsoever to personal hygiene. His mouth tasted like he'd been sucking on a strip of catgut.

And beside him, on the floor, someone had placed a tall glass of cool water, just beginning to drip beads of condensation. Next to it was a plain saucer containing a pair of round acetaminophen tablets. Forces of Evil Hypothesis: strike three.

Dorian took them both, water and pills, in one greedy sweep and chucked them down before he could be told not to. The liquid hit his empty stomach like a hammer, but before it got there, it had to slosh pleasantly down his various digestive ditches and gullies, so he honestly did not care. It was like an alarm clock sounding to the bits and pieces of him that hadn't realized it was time to roust themselves for work yet. He enjoyed the whole sensation of it immensely.

"I don't know who you are," he croaked to the room at

large and any occupants who might be in range, "but I want you to know that I love you."

"A man would sell his soul for a glass of water, if it was offered at the proper time," a man answered him. "Beware of geeks bearing gifts."

There was that tickle in his brainpan again, the familiar timbre of a voice he couldn't place. Dorian heard the scuff of chairs across the plank floor and turned himself about. His pallet lay on the floor parallel to the fireplace in Danek and Lily's living room. The rocking chairs and assorted other furniture had been cleared out and pushed back against the walls to make room for him. He shifted all the way around to look back in the direction of the dining room table. It was almost more than his body would tolerate, and his numerous joints cracked and popped like warning shots fired by his limbs across his mental bow.

There were three men there, two of whom had recently gained their feet. The one who had remained seated, hunched over elbows propped on the table's edge, was Tyrus Danek. He gave Dorian an idle and appraising look, but didn't otherwise move except to roll back and forth between his hands a longnecked bottle of beer. Though Danek's expression had a hardness to it, it wasn't hostile, only wary, as though he couldn't make up his mind about how he should be feeling about recent events, and as Danek expressions went, that was close enough to normal for Dorian to take some small comfort. Whatever else these men might represent, they were not in and of themselves immediately threatening.

Which was odd, because Dorian would have perceived them as threatening if he had encountered them in a less familiar setting--in a shadowed alley after dark, for example. The one on his left was massive, shaped more like a boulder than a man, with arms the size of timbers and legs like pilings. He was hairless and gray-skinned, perpetually scowling and when he moved, his flesh made a grinding sound like smooth stones scraped together. Strapped to his back were a pair of heavy iron cudgels studded with sharpened tines that shone in the lamplight like bloodied nails. He looked like a man who not only could use them, but itched to demonstrate how much he liked to.

The other was thin, gothically pale, with limber, almost disturbingly long hands. His hair was dark, moppish, and worn in a style that completely obscured the left side of his face. The mouth was a gash, as pale as the rest of him, tight and bloodless. Dorian looked at him from across the room, and little bells chimed once more in his memory. Some distant familiarity, something in the sharp angles and ponderously chiseled lines of his face that should have meant something to him, he was certain. One didn't forget a face like that. It was like looking at the personification of a cathedral, each bone a buttress, each hollow a shadowed and calculated nave designed to strike an impression of awe.

Peering at these two men, muscle and brains, Dorian realized that it was past time to get his head right.

"Where is Amara?" he demanded. His tone managed to sound considerably more dangerous than his current physical condition was capable of supporting if the need arose.

"Have no fear. Your friend is being more than ably tended by the lady of the house," Brains said. "No, no, don't try to get up yet. We'll come over to you. You're not in any condition to start getting yourself into a flutter just yet." He spoke to his companion across the table. "See if the soup that was prepared for Mr. Dorian is still warm, Ghast."

Muscle grunted his displeasure, but shuffled off in the direction of the kitchen. Brains abandoned the dining room table and made his way across the room. He drew a chair up beside Dorian's nest of blankets and settled into it.

"There's no need to be alarmed," the man assured him. "You're perfectly safe, as is your lady friend, at least for the moment. We, at least, mean you no harm, which puts us in an ever-shrinking minority, as you are probably aware."

"You'll have to forgive me if I don't take your word for it," Dorian answered. He started to wriggle out from beneath his blankets, then remembered that he was naked. "Where are my clothes?"

"Karo has them in the wash. You'll get them back shortly, now that you're awake." Brains wrinkled his nose. "After you've been given an opportunity to bathe, of course."

Dorian nodded an acknowledgement, but said nothing.

"I don't blame you for your distrust," Brain continued. "It

is misplaced, but understandable given the circumstances. Part of that is my fault. If we had acted more appropriately, we might have spared you some trouble, and subsequently some of the discomfort you're feeling with this admittedly strange situation you've found yourself in."

Discomfort seemed like an insufficient term for what he had been through over the last few days, but Dorian wasn't about to quibble. The man relaxing in Danek's rocking chair beside him didn't appear to be the sort who was easily impressed by the bizarre.

"As it is, I think you've performed admirably, given what you knew and what you've been led to believe was going on. There may be some fair criticisms of your actions, but overall, you should be granted at least some credit for your cleverness, John. Things might have gone badly, indeed, if you had sought refuge in a less suitable environment." Dorian only stared at him stupidly, and Brain pointed one of his long fingers at the ceiling. "Signal damping tiles. Sergeant Danek put them in for Lily's benefit, as you know, but they've done a startlingly competent job of frustrating the geeps devices of our enemies. My crew is doing their best to cover the ambient leaks and scramble the feedback ip pulses in the meantime."

"Your crew? Who are you?"

"Oh, sorry. I've forgotten that you missed the introductions." Brains gave him a significant look, gauging his reaction. "Collectively we call ourselves the Misfit Toys."

Dorian stiffened in recognition.

"So you know of us, eh?"

"I've heard of you."

The Brain grinned slyly. "Yes, a man in your line of work, I'd imagine that you have."

He knew of the Misfit Toys, of course, mostly by reputation and their well publicized crack hx exploits. They were the crew who had taken down the Furman Che ice and exposed the silicate market manipulation scandal. They had ripped open the Chilton Banks ultra-secure parliamentary datastream and streamcast it in real-time across the Strand during a war cabinet meeting--an act which subsequently led to the arrest and prosecution of Lead Selectman Harlen Naid for his proposed unlawful annexation of surrounding

territories. Rumor had it that they had single-handedly decimated the Tornwall Caliphate colony's industrial base with datacore chewing viral worms for (allegedly) driving their emerging economic engine solely on the backs of illegally imported slave labor.

And there was more, much more, if all the stories were to be believed. Alternately admired as savvy anarchist jackmen and merry pranksters, and reviled as countercultural industrio-terrorists, they were infamous for their unpredictability, their technical competence and their unwavering hands-on pursuit of their peculiar brand of vigilante public infoshare justice. There wasn't a sysop on or off the Strand who hadn't studied their case histories in detail and then spent months of his life patching holes in his security matrix to fend off their intrusions.

Dorian realized that he should be flattered that such mercurial figures should even know his name. He also realized that this was how Brain wanted him to feel, which meant that he needed to proceed cautiously. What should impress him foremost wasn't *how* they knew his name, but *why*.

He asked: "What did you mean when you said if you'd acted more appropriately?"

"You aren't aware that we might have acted *in*appropriately, you mean." Brain laughed. "We've monitored your network and Strand activity with growing interest for the last several days. Initially, it was only as a historical and technological curiosity. We take pride in keeping an eye on some of the more promising jackmen on the larger networks, and we've watched your progress for some time now. Unfortunately, this business you've involved yourself in happened to coincide with a delicate, long term operation we've been executing out near the Corsair Rim, and here recently we weren't able to give you the attention you properly deserved. To be honest, I thought that you'd be at it for at least another several days before you cracked the spider's logic." He gave Dorian a shrug and grimace, as if that was a form of apology. "You surprised me. That was my mistake, and by the time I was able to get back 'round to you, events were already proceeding at too rapid a pace for us to

do much else but scramble about and make fools of ourselves. I understand that our first offer of assistance missed you by a scant matter of minutes."

The pieces fell into place, and Dorian gasped. "You're the one who called the Archive."

Brains covered his eyes. "Shameful, I know, to be forced to rely on such an antiquated and clumsy technology. But just like you, I hadn't yet come to grips with the hornets' nest you were stirring up, or I would have paid closer attention. I was as surprised as you when Raville's agents sprang into action, and since you had pulled your plugs to the Strand, I didn't have any other way to warn you except through the Archive's switchboard. But it worked out well enough, I suppose. You lived through the night, though it was a fortunate turn of events that we were so close. We came as soon as we had wrapped up our *business* with Prime Minister Kahn."

The Brain winked at him. "The question you're asking yourself right now is how I could have possibly known either about this spider or Raville's imminent attack on you given that it took place not in the wasteland of the public Strand, but within the confines of your own isolated network space."

"It had crossed my mind, yes."

"Someone of Michael Raville's stature will always be an object of extreme interest to us. The troubling thing about men is that they can't help but wield the power they acquire, and more often than not, they choose to use it badly." Brains arched his right eyebrow in a way that suggested he knew more than he was telling. "By the same token, the movement of as many troops as have recently been dispatched on Raville's command toward Phi Sophia would naturally also be of concern to the Misfit Toys. Toss along the subsequent covert paramilitary actions of this man's network of private soldiers, and an interesting pattern begins to emerge. It especially draws our curiosity, however, when by apparent coincidence one of our favorite jackmen manages to land himself smack in the middle of all the fun immediately on the heels of illicitly unlocking the private world of Raville's own digital doppelganger."

Dorian suddenly understood and experienced a stab of outrage, but Brains waved him off, grinning wickedly. "Oh,

don't look so surprised. There are very few secrets in the dataverse that we haven't tapped, and most of the ones that remain are only untouched because they aren't worth the effort to peel them back. We've had our run of your network for ages, or at least ages in digital years, which is the way men like you and I think of time. If there was anything truly interesting in your precious Archive, more interesting than the mundane sexual and economic perversions of aging social glitterati I mean, you would have heard from us before now. We're not interested in data theft for its own sake.

"But I see that I've offended your professional pride. You've forgotten the cardinal rule of this business: no matter how good you think you are, there's always someone better out there waiting to take advantage of your lapse. No, no, it wasn't any particular technical failure on your part, John. You run a tight ship. You shouldn't need me to tell you that and stroke your ego. So while it's true that you *are* responsible for our access to the Archive, it isn't your fault professionally. Rather, it's your fault nostalgically. You've always been one to hold tight to your friends, even when it wasn't in your best interest. Sometimes, if you're not careful, those friends cling to you in return. Even the dead ones."

Dorian must have paled or given some other signal that his body was about to fail, because Brains leapt from his chair to catch him before he could fall over. He certainly felt like he was going to pass out again. His head swam, his stomach churned. A creeping numbness froze his limbs. He stared up into the face of a man who had been dead for more than fifteen years. A man who had been a proto-anarchist even then, all those years ago, but hadn't possessed the tools to give structure to his ideals.

A man who had bequeathed to him the private datascape where Dorian had crammed a lifetime's worth of secrets, both personal and professional.

A man who had once called himself Ray Morrical.

Ray refused to speak to him about his resurrection for the next several minutes. Plainly concerned about his ability to handle more surprises in his current physical condition, he insisted that Dorian eat first as much of the soup as his

stomach would tolerate, then poured coffee down his throat on top of that, and might have even added a perilously sizeable dose of fine Mexican amphetamines on top of that if he'd had any handy. Danek was drafted to assist Dorian up the stairs and to watch over him while he showered and shaved and gratefully dressed himself in his freshly laundered clothes.

It helped to steady him, though he suspected that had more to do with having the time to work through the information he'd been given than with the food or other creature satisfactions. Too much had happened in the last few days. Too much data had been poured into his brain, too many complex relationships explored, too many gasping revelations of plots and counter-plots and deviously doublecrossing counter-counter-plots by seemingly disinterested third parties exposed. Oh, and lest he forget, his lovely cubicle mate had, by all indications, been commonly accepted in the meantime as some sort of pseudo-alien pan-dimensional divinity by an intergalactic conspiracy of financial, political and military leaders. The fact that this was the bit he was having the least trouble processing was one of those things that should worry him. The happy little community of neurons on the common sense level of his brain were shouting to him that this sort of thinking should at the very least be more critically examined before he made any life-altering or irrevocable decisions based on assumptions that arose from it.

He needed time to ponder these things, to dig into them and figure out what they meant. He was exhausted with feeling caught in a maelstrom, and having time to do nothing but react to shifts in the wind. But first he had to deal with Ray Morrical and figure out what this ghost from his past really wanted.

He was fairly certain that it wasn't just to help.

As Dorian and Danek made their way back through the house, they encountered strangers whom Dorian could only assume were more of the Misfit Toys. Most of these were busily humping it from room to room, talking with knots of their compatriots or poring over racks of thrumming technical equipment. In many cases, they had to shout to one another

over the racket of the portable generators that powered their complex scramblers and monitors and ex-connex router pinches. Often, they greeted Danek with hearty laughter and flashed him a thumbs-up, but Danek did little other than acknowledge them. Dorian quickly lost track of the people he encountered, despite the fact that they were in many ways typical jack pirates, which is to say physically distinctive, with incredible mods engineered to be memorable, if nothing else.

He met a willowy sprite of a girl with green hair and several too many arms, tripping back and forth between racks with a portable power dispersion unit, running the numbers on their erg signature. He didn't catch her name, and she had laughed like a bird and darted off before he could ask it again. There was silver toned Karo, a stumpy and puggish man whose shaven skull was studded with micro-antennae, and whose eye sockets were encased in out-moded triDvid interaction goggles. The round, scarlet lenses made him look insectile, but he smiled massively, like a rotten melon split by the sun, and laughed cavernously with a whole battery of back-slaps and thigh jerks that made his amusement infectious. In addition, he met several long-bodied Screechers with protruding flexsteel exoskeletons, a young woman swathed in flesh-grafted diaphanous scarves of nano-woven scanmesh that could be inflated on demand to render her into a human receptor dish, and too many others to differentiate properly, each specimen of human modification more outlandish than the last. Most of them bore extra arms or biometric extensors, both detachable and not, that enabled them to accomplish more tasks at once than the kits nature had endowed them with would have normally allowed. The whole carnival sideshow collection of them hummed efficiently at their appointed tasks, each mutant form in its place and intensely on-task with his or her duties.

What he remembered most of the whirlwind introductions, however, was that each of them was strapped with weapons. Clever blades and pin bombs, automatic Gibbon pistols and even military issue Krueger MatterKast rifles. Most of the weapons still had the well-oiled blue gleam about them that suggested they'd only been recently unpacked from storage, which told Dorian that this crew was not

without resources and cunning of their own. If what Ray had said was true, that they had been off planet just a few days ago, it would have taken either a great deal of capital or a readily maintained storage depot nearby to supply them with so much equipment and weaponry so quickly.

Whatever else the Misfit Toys might be, they were not amateurs.

Dorian paused at the top of the staircase, and grasped at Danek's forearm before he lifted the cover to lead them back into the living quarters. They were alone for the moment, and there were explanations he owed to his friend.

Because he wasn't certain how to begin, Dorian simply launched into it, hoping to make up with sincerity what he lacked in oratory.

"I'm sorry, Tyrus," he said. "I didn't mean to bring this down on you."

But Danek only snorted at him. "We invited it, boy. There's nothing for you to apologize for, except maybe for addressing me by my God-given name. Not even Lily got to do that until we'd been married for close to ten years."

"How long have they been here?"

"Since the morning of the second day."

Dorian grimaced. His defenses hadn't even lasted to the first of his worst-case benchmarks.

Danek squeezed his shoulder companionably, something he would never have done as his Sergeant. "It's a good thing, John. Lily was getting frantic when I couldn't wake you up, either one of you, and I don't have the hardware to diagnose that sort of behavior anymore. We were sure that you were gone, brain fried or something worse, or that Raville's thugs were going to crash through the door at any moment." Danek gestured vaguely toward one of the extra rooms piled full of Misfit Toys. "Ray and his crew waltzed up here as calm as kittens and asked if they could help with our *troubles*. That was his word. Lily didn't like it at first, but he went off on a rant about our signal leakage and ip spikes that could be read from the moon, punctuated with and all sorts of additional techno-jumble that I couldn't even begin to understand. I filed all that stuff in the mental trash bin years ago. But it was clear that they knew something was going on, and they had enough

of the general outline that it seemed worthwhile to see what they could do. I was sure you were going to be pissed when you woke up. If you woke up, I mean."

Danek uttered a low, rumbling chuckle that caught Dorian by surprise. "They're a handful, I won't deny that. Always banging doors and flushing toilets and crashing down the stairs in a panic about some signal or datastream that isn't reading the way it should. But to tell you the truth, I think Lily likes it, even if she won't say so. It's been a while since she's had a house full of rambunctious youngsters who don't glaze over when she comes in the room. That kid Karo, in fact, is something of a wizard in the kitchen. He's been doing some modifications on the carb-paste the docs engineered for Lily to keep her weight up, and shoot me if he isn't making it edible for human consumption. Lily just accuses him of trying to make her fat--but she laughs when she says it, and that's good enough for me. It's worth a little disorder in our lives."

Dorian smiled at the image, feeling a flicker of relief, and maybe even a twinge of jealousy that he hadn't been around to witness it, but he said, "You know who these guys are, right? The sort of work they do?"

"I watch the newswire."

"The newswire doesn't tell you everything."

"I know they're good, and good is what you need to help you get along against impossible odds. Lily seems to think this is a Divine Appointment."

Dorian didn't like that idea at all. "Lily should read more technical intrusion-prevention manuals and fewer spy novels. These aren't nice people, Danek. Not evil necessarily, but they're hard, and they're well trained and they have an agenda of their own, or they wouldn't have gotten themselves involved."

He didn't know how much Ray Morrical and the Misfit Toys might have gleaned from his foam, from the Archive itself, or even from their own covert bitstreams wired into Raville's networks, but he felt safe in assuming they knew something at least, or thought that they did, about the events shortly to play themselves out in Phi Sophia. The last thing he needed was another set of greedy hands groping after the pearl. He wondered what Amara would have to say about

this turn of events.

"There could still be some trouble," he said at last. "Raville's agents will find us if we stay here much longer."

But Danek was unperturbed. "Raville's agents may find more trouble than they've bargained for."

"That's what I'm hoping."

"You and me both, boy. You and me both."

With that, Danek pulled on the rope that raised the cover off the stairs, and together, they went down.

There was food set out on the table awaiting them, ham salad sandwiches, turkey sandwiches, rich slices of fried eggplant, heaps of potato salad and beer, plus a bottomless pot of coffee. It was early evening, and Dorian was mildly amused to find that he was hungry again, even after all the soup he'd consumed just an hour before. More chairs had been hauled up against the table, including Danek's comfortable old rocker and the metal chairs from the kitchenette. The sandwiches were piled into a mountain of triangular slopes and beige crust ridges on a platter in the middle of the table. There were fresh vegetables, raw and cold, wedged into smaller dishes about the perimeter, but these seemed to be mostly ignored in favor of mustard and mayonnaise and vegetable-substitute condiments--which, as most grade school children knew, was the real form in which God had intended mankind to eat vegetables in the first place.

A number of the Misfit Toys, many of which Dorian had met fleetingly, had already descended on the spread, playing a fascinating game of musical chairs as they pawed for beers and cucumbers and whatever else was just out of easy reach. The moment anyone showed signs of putting a layer of air between themselves and their seat, someone else swooped in behind them to survey the culinary terrain, forcing the original occupant to move along. This went on for some time as plates were assembled and goodies piled into frightening, counter-gravitational stacks, a constant and curious revolving carousel of multi-colored skin tones and reaching arms and good-natured caterwauls from those who had been ousted. Ray Morrical sat at the head of the table, his plate empty except for a few odd crumbs, mostly watching the chaotic progressions

playing out around him. When he recognized their tread on the stairs, he popped out of his place and took up a cautious stance behind it, warding the opening against opportunistic diners. With a stern word, he cleared out the spaces to the left and right and waved Dorian and Danek over.

They took their seats amidst the cacophony, Danek in his accustomed chair, and Dorian and Ray opposite one another to his left and right. Getting their own plates filled put Dorian in mind of wrestling a fish from an octopus, but he managed it with a little guile and some well-timed shoving of his own. When they had settled in, Ray leaned his shoulders against the high back of his chair and made himself comfortable.

"Lily peeked out a few minutes ago and let us know that your lady friend is awake. She's gathering her senses and doing her best to fend off Lily's determination to get some soup in her stomach, but she should be joining us shortly. She appears to be recovering nicely."

Dorian restrained his sigh of relief so Ray wouldn't see it, and hence squirrel it away for possible use against him later. "I'm glad to hear it," he said airily. "But what I'm more interested in at the moment is how *you* recovered. Last I heard from you, you were dead on the front lines of the HD rebellion."

"As far as the governments of human space are concerned, Ray Morrical is, in fact, dead. My mother receives a nice stipend from our community fathers for her loss, and I work hard to make sure the rupees continue flowing into her retirement accounts. These days I go mostly by my professional name, Hiram Lazarus, and I'd appreciate it if we kept specific knowledge of my previous incarnations between ourselves."

"Lazarus," Danek said. "The man who passed from death to life."

Ray gave a self-deprecating cough. "It seemed less presumptuous than calling myself Jesus the Messiah."

"What happened to you?" Dorian asked, doing his best to keep his voice low.

"A funny thing, actually," he said, hunching forward as though he was about to share a secret. "I was aboard a Marine exploratory vessel when the HD broke out, and we were well

inside the disputed territories. The craft was called the *Mording Covenant*. It was just a tug, really. Couldn't have been carrying more than ten or twelve deuce-and-four Kent Disruptors in its entire arsenal. There were only fourteen of us on board, and most of us were technicals anyway. Marine Dispatch was using her as a forward listening post, which meant, of course, that someone had a sense that HD was verging toward an explosion. We spent most of our time holed up in a rad cluster outside their sensor range, catching media pulses peeled off from the comm and coord nets and running them through standard crypto-filters.

"After about six weeks of this, the CC nets spiked. We started getting all sorts of encrypted traffic from the Janus sector, heavy band stuff that suggested tight-beam, multi-thread matrix communications. We certainly didn't need Trithemian command to tell us that most likely meant a fleet of battle cruisers, but *Covenant's* skipper, a Captain Granczyk, informed us that it was his duty to pull us out of the cluster and broadcast our data back home. This was standard procedure, and none of us thought much of it at the time. The signals we were detecting were originating from a point still safely out on the rim of our territorial space.

"We dropped out of cluster right into a scrum patrol of advance Janite harriers. Fast little buggers, Incisor class, I believe. The Kents didn't even get lock before they punched through our plating with half a dozen zippenclangs. You ever hear one of those?"

Ray shifted his visible eye to Dorian, but Dorian shook his head. "Saw a few of them used against battle groups on our side. Impressive damage radius, but not much visual candy in the vacuum."

"The sound that gives them their name comes from projected Shavlet waves smacking against the Rand Integrity Matrix. Because it happens so close to the hull, the sound waves are propagated through the plating into the decks. It sounds, no kidding, just like a zipper being undone. The clang is the detonator head affixing itself to the hull. The explosion is instantaneous, which is perhaps why they aren't called *zippenclangbooms*. Anyone close to the detonator head doesn't live long enough to hear anything but the zip and clang."

Ray frowned, grim with memories, and cupped his chin between his fists. "The first salvo took out our propulsion drives. The second narrowly missed the bridge, but gutted the reactor two decks down. Captain Granczyk, foreseeing the inevitable, focused all of our energies on transmitting our full data load like mad. It wasn't much of a loss, I suspect, from his perspective, and certainly not from the tactical side of things. The *Covenant* was barely spaceworthy on its best days, and we'd all been backed up before shipping. At worst, we were out eight to ten weeks of tedium, but the data we'd assembled was irreplaceable. At least, that was the Captain's opinion."

Dorian had known Ray well enough to guess where he was going. "But not yours, I take it."

"I'm afraid I'll never be accused of romantic patriotism. You see, the workload aboard the *Covenant* hadn't been what I would call exactly strenuous. Most of us were misfits of one sort or another, cast-offs from a variety of technical schooling and poor fits with the military-industrial culture in general. The Captain was probably the only one among us who didn't recognize that most of our mission had always been about warehousing troublemakers at a safe distance rather than providing valuable service in the public defense. I only found out later that the Hamers-Doss Insurrection had been officially underway for almost two full weeks when we were attacked. Someone had apparently conveniently neglected to inform the *Covenant* that we had gone to war."

"Or it could have been that the rad cluster blocked incoming comm transmissions just as effectively as it did HD and Janite detection," Danek said. "It's not uncommon."

"I won't argue with you, Sergeant. Believe me, I don't take it personally one way or the other. After all, even if the communication failure was merely an oversight, the outcome wasn't other than we deserved under military law. I freely admit that I'd been in active rebellion for some time when these events occurred. I'd spent a fair number of my leisure hours inciting a select few of my shipmates to mutiny throughout the cruise." Ray spoke calmly, matter-of-fact, as though he was commenting on the weather. "The Janite attack was the opportunity we'd been waiting for, albeit unforeseen."

The zippenclangs conveniently disposed of most of the crew I had failed to persuade, and the others, including the Captain, were in no condition to oppose us when we offered to surrender the ship's datacore to our enemies in return for our lives."

"But how did you keep central command from recycling you from backup?" Dorian asked.

"We introduced Janite pre-extraction koruptor virals into some of the dead mens' foam architecture as a way of convincing CC that we'd been compromised, most likely captured as prisoners of war. Central Command wouldn't risk those virals escaping containment and running loose in the general backup storage bins for the sake of a few malcontents who'd gotten themselves captured."

"You murdered them," Danek said sharply. "Your own crewmates!"

Ray's jaw tightened, almost imperceptibly. "We did what the Janites would have done as soon as they boarded the ship, nothing more. It was perfectly legal once the hostilities commenced, so I don't think we were that far out of bounds. You could just as easily say that we spared those men a few days or weeks of torture."

Dorian scowled at the casual way in which he discussed treason and murder. It was worth keeping in mind.

"That was the original core of the Misfit Toys, we deserters. I took Ghast, Second Officer of the Watch, with me, and Karo, the Logistics and Supply Chief. Marilea, whom you might have met by now, was our hardware specialist. Williams and Torres--whom you probably haven't seen yet since they're outside on patrol--came aboard as general security and communications officers. There were a few others who are no longer with us, unfortunately." Ray's lips curled into a grin, hard and fierce. "We didn't prove to be much better citizens of Janus Prime than we were of Trithemius Orbis, I fear. They spared our lives, but didn't earn our fealty, especially as the insurrection stumbled toward its conclusion. But I harbor them no particular ill will. Failing governments are like wounded predators, inherently dangerous and prone to attacking even their own kind. But they served their purpose. We learned much that was

essential to trade by practicing our skills within the relative isolation of the collapsing Janite military regime."

Ray bent his head in Dorian's direction. "Don't be too hard on me. I know my treachery galls you, but remember that without it, you wouldn't have had access to the secondary foam architecture that so recently preserved your life."

"Why do I have trouble believing that your sacrifice was completely altruistic?"

"I was banking that you'd go far, a man with your prodigious talents, or at least go to interesting places. Being useful to me on occasion seems a small price to pay for what you've gained in return."

Dorian suspected that the price that he was being asked to pay hadn't yet been fully calculated, but to say so would only invite more questions from Ray and the Misfit Toys. He sat in silence, formulating a neutral response, but fortunately, the door to Lily and Danek's room opened, saving him from having to say anything to him at all. Amara appeared in the doorway behind Lily, looking timidly across the room full of strangers, and Dorian excused himself from the table at once and went to her. Lily lifted her face to him as he passed, and he paused.

"She's been wanting to see you," she said. "Be gentle with her. She's a bit out of sorts."

"Thanks for taking care of her, Lil."

She smiled and moved off the way he had come to take up a watchful position on a pile of pillows against the wall near to her husband.

Amara looked worn to him, weary despite so much sleep, and her gaze was deep and troubled. He suspected that there was more behind it than the sudden accretion of so many odd folk to their cause, and he was careful to situate himself between her and any curious onlookers. She took his hands in her own with undisguised eagerness.

"How are you feeling?" he said, urgent, yet hushed, so they wouldn't be overheard.

"I'm okay. Tired." She peered with uncertainty over his shoulder, studying the unfamiliar faces. "I don't know what I think about all of this, though."

"You and me both."

"Lily warned me that we were no longer alone. She says she thinks we can trust them, but that you'd know better than her how far."

"I'm working on it," he said, then added, "We don't have much of a choice right now."

"What do you know about them?"

Dorian thought of the things he had learned, and the things he had once believed that were no longer true. "It's a long story, and not a safe topic for public discussion right now."

"Can we talk in private? Maybe p2p?"

"No. I don't have access to a private channel for the time being." To her questioning look, he answered simply, "I'll explain later, mouth to ear. The old fashioned way."

She might have pressed him about the problem with his foam, but there came the sound of chair legs scraping across the floor back in the dining room and Ray called out to them. Dorian turned to see him beckoning with an outstretched hand.

"Don't keep her to yourself, John. Bring her on over to the table. We're all anxious to meet your companion."

Heads swiveled, the tinkle of bottles and plates subsided, and Dorian became aware that all of the Misfit Toys present were looking at them, as if some codeword had been spoken. A knot formed in his throat. It occurred to him that everything that had gone on up until now had been preliminaries for this event, for Amara's emergence. He had no reason for believing this, but the thought lodged in his brain all the same. Maybe he *was* paranoid.

"How much do they know?" Amara whispered to him.

How much do we know? he thought. "I haven't told them anything."

"That's not really an answer, is it?"

"Indeed," he said. "Just be careful what you tell them. And for God's sake, don't bring out the orb, no matter how strong the urge might be."

He meant it as a joke, but it only deepened the concern that clouded her eyes. He stroked her cheek with his fingers until she clasped his hand and indicated that she was ready to go, then he led her across the room to the table. An extra place

was made for her at Dorian's side, and they took their seats warily.

Ghast rose and whispered something into Ray's ear, then lumbered off up the stairs and disappeared behind the covering.

Ray Morrical set his hands along the arms of his chair and considered Dorian and Amara, his eyes veiled and calculating as they flicked back and forth between them. At last, he nodded his head and put on a broad smile and said, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance at last, Ms. Cain. I trust that you've emerged from your ordeal in good order. Your friend John and I have been renewing our long friendship, and it is my sincere hope that you'll accept a similar offer of mutual conviviality between us. After all, any friend of John's should consider themselves a friend of mine, which is the reason, one might say, that my companions and I have extended ourselves on your behalf."

Amara glanced across at him uneasily. "I understand that we owe you a debt of thanks for what you've done."

"Don't think of it as a debt, please. It's long been our self-appointed mission to defend the innocent against the schemes of those who deem themselves to be mighty because of circumstances of socio-economic or political power. In this case, it proved doubly pleasurable, because we were able to help a friend."

"I see."

"Is there anything I can get for you, my dear? Something to eat or drink, perhaps?"

She shook her head. "Lily brought me some food earlier."

"Wonderful." He paused, and a familiar glimmer passed across his gaze, a faint whicker of eyelid, that was all but imperceptible. His brow furrowed for an instant and his eyes clouded as his focus shifted to the virtual elsewhere, but he collected himself quickly and re-polished the shine of his smile. "I wish that we had more time to get to know one another properly, but unfortunately, time seems to be against us, which means that we'll have to dispense with the traditional pleasantries and get right down to the specifics of what we can do for one another. What we bring to the table has already been partly displayed. We are the Misfit Toys,

and we have placed ourselves at your service because an unexpected co-mingling of interests has made it clear that we should do so. For your part, you wish to avoid apprehension by the forces of one Michael Raville until certain tasks that may be essential to the future of mankind can be performed. However, your hope of long-term evasion has been significantly complicated by the imminent arrival of certain military forces recently dispatched to Mr. Raville's present location. The problem, as I see it, is your inability to arrive at a certain location, in a suitable timeframe and with sufficient resources to accomplish your tasks on your own. Would you agree that this is a fair assessment of your current circumstances?"

"Generally speaking, yes," Dorian said. "What I fail to see is how that qualifies as a co-mingling of interests."

"An event as seminal as first contact with an alien species," Ray said evenly, "should be of deep interest to all of us, I should think."

There was that twinkle in his eye, that saucy playfulness that once again said Ray knew more than he was telling. Dorian gripped Amara's knee before she could speak.

"I hear you," he replied.

"Good. Then you'll similarly agree that something of this magnitude--economically, politically and spiritually--should not be allowed to become yet another factor in the perpetuation of a system of class slavery wherein we are all ruled by the social elite. To call a spade a spade, as it were, it is immoral for a self-selected embassy of proto-tyrants to conceal the potential richness of such an experience from the common man on the belief that we are incapable of guiding our own destiny. And similarly, it is just as immoral for these powerful few to suppose that they can speak on all our behalf without our consent."

Nodding vaguely, Dorian shrugged in agreement. "Sure."

"While you slept, my people took advantage of certain data mining and reconstruction techniques with which you should be familiar, John, to follow in your footsteps. We have successfully managed to contact the disembodied essence of Michael Raville on the Archive's network."

Amara nearly yelped. "You've spoken with Raville?"

"In some depth," Ray assured her. "He is a remarkable personage to have survived for so long and with such clear ideologies still intact. Nevertheless, the upshot of those conversations is that it has become plain to us--and I include Raville himself--that the two of you were selected for this mission out of necessity rather than any specific or native ability that would otherwise recommend you. We respect that you have suffered considerably for this cause already, and endured both perils and hardship sufficient to have earned you both the enduring gratitude of all mankind. Primarily, that is the reason we have felt obligated to offer you our protection to this point. On the other hand, it's also clear that because you were the products of necessity, you're not as capable as others might be of carrying off the things that have been asked of you. And while I appreciate, as I say, your courage in the face of impossible odds, I would submit to you that it would be better--that it would better serve the common good--for you to step aside and allow others to go on in your stead."

"Meaning you, of course," Dorian said.

"We are the most qualified apolitical organization in this particular field of endeavor."

It was Dorian's turn to furrow his brow. "You believe that you're *more qualified* than Amara to prevent Raville's war?"

"Oh, please." Ray rolled his eye. "I could supply you with a hx of similar activities whose hard copy record would reach to your shoulder. Let's not make this a personal pissing contest, John. I've said that I admire your pluck, but at some point, experience trumps blind courage."

"Right, but humor me here. You're saying that Raville specifically told you that you--" He waved his hands about to include the lot of them. "--that the Misfit Toys were more qualified than Amara and I to...to stop this exact war?"

Dorian looked about him, feeling a bit wild, even a bit hysterical. He happened to catch sight of Lily tucked away in the shadows beyond Danek's shoulder. His eyes felt as big as saucers. But Lily lowered her head slightly and touched the claw of her third arm to her lips.

Hush. Listen.

Ray curled his lips sympathetically. "Yes, about that.

Raville said he'd had to punch up certain elements of his presentation to get your attention. There is a mild threat that our future cosmic neighbors might be tempted to mis-perceive the military presence as a threat of war, especially if they are as unfamiliar with our cultural history as we are with theirs. But Raville explained to us much more credibly, I think you'll agree, that the men-at-arms requested for this summit will be more focused upon keeping the undesirables--that is, the consumer-culture cash cows who will muster the rupees for alien products and services--in blissful ignorance, while the leaders of industry hammer out the trade agreements and technological exchanges and other forms of power currency that will maintain their status into the foreseeable future. That injustice cannot be permitted."

Dorian almost exploded with laughter. *Raville*, he thought, *you wily old wizard*. He made a show of coming to grips with this new revelation. It involved a great deal of blinking in amazement and looking dumbfounded.

"So what are you proposing exactly?" he asked after a reasonable period had passed.

"In order for someone to reach these talks in time, that is, before the arrival of our well-armed and literally minded brother Marines, they would have to find a way to place themselves in the Phi Sophia sector in reasonably short order. Given our position relative to the spaceports of Stratiskaya Daransk, it's obvious that this cannot be accomplished through standard burn plotting. Thus, another way must be found."

"Zap. We know."

"Precisely. Except that we have been informed that the summit's zap depot address is a highly guarded secret. But we were also subsequently told that the only avenue for procuring that address without notifying the actual Michael Raville of our intentions to intervene had already been traveled."

Ray and Amara exchanged a look that approximated wariness.

"We have it," she said.

"You have it and cannot use it without exposing yourself to peril. It being a proprietary and secure depot, one also can't simply stroll over to Southrange and zap themselves to

that address without interference from certain public and private authorities whose business it is to protect the integrity of such addresses." Ray smiled sagely, as though this conversation was proceeding exactly as he'd planned. "So you've reached an impasse."

"But you can't get there at all without our cooperation," Dorian said. "How do we reach a mutually beneficial compromise?"

"My ship, the *Proletariat Horde*, is currently docked at the synchronous Southrange port, ready at a moment's notice to burn for Glastenhome on Torburg's Fortune, where certain associates of ours would be willing to allow an unauthorized transfer of data schemes into the arrival queue of our choice without asking too many ill-advised questions."

Danek sat up. "I thought you weren't particularly popular with the Janites."

"Part of the reason we fell out of favor with the government of Janus Prime is the reason why these associates would be so willing to assist us." Ray winked at Amara. "*They* owe us a debt of gratitude."

"So you'll get us to Glastenhome, where we'll give you the address and then we all zap to Phi Sophia together?"

"That is the deal on the table."

Dorian and Amara exchanged another quick glance. She squeezed his knee beneath the table. He tried as hard as he could not to appear giddy. They didn't need to discuss it any further.

"It's a deal," he said. "Provided that you swear to keep your nose out of my foam from now on."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. After all, if we can't trust our friends, who can we trust?"

Dorian was sure he was lying, but he accepted Ray's proffered hand over a plate of cold cuts and shook on it anyway. As if that was a prearranged signal they had all been waiting for, the Misfit Toys sprang up from the table as a group and scattered up the staircase like leaves blown before the lead edge of an autumn storm. Only Karo remained behind to collect the dishes.

Ray took an extra several seconds gathering himself and climbed slowly to his feet. He nodded to Lily, then to Danek

and said, "It's been a pleasure visiting with you again, Sergeant. You have our thanks for your fine hospitality."

To Dorian and Amara, he added, "Gather your belongings. We leave on the hour."

17.

He stares off into space. Not literal space, not *outer space*, but at nothing, letting his eyes blur and the colors of the nothingness run together until they swirl and dance and gradually fade into a pistache of dull and incoherent brush strokes, the way a surrealist paints if he isn't particularly good. He feels the constant, gnashing rumble of the thrusters vibrating up through the deck plates and the outer shell of the fixed hull so that the whole ship seems to ring at a pitch just beyond the limits of his hearing. It makes his skin crawl. His stomach flips and curls, trying perhaps to latch itself onto his spine, which it more than likely believes to be an anchor of stability, or at least not vibrating in time with the viscous sack of his body. There's a tickle in the back of his throat that tastes like metal, or like he's touched his tongue to both terminals of a battery at once--that coppery taste that kids like so much--but it's been in his mouth for so long now that he suspects he's going to have to run to the head again. Or wobble to the head is more likely. He'd forgotten how difficult it was to walk in simulated gravity, even to navigate a straight corridor, when the flesh is being pummeled by a hundred different tidal forces and balance-point shifts at once.

He's space sick. Space sick! Just like some fresh-meat muzzle monkey strapped into a g-suit and burning for Sae Phen. It's embarrassing.

He has never liked space travel, and the body forgets the things it doesn't like. Forgets the pain of childbirth and

broken arms, sprained ankles and dislocated knees. It's what keeps us getting out of bed in the morning, because if we remembered, even for a moment, how vulnerable and miserable our bundled nerve endings could make us, most of us would never leave our rooms. We'd wrap ourselves in cocoons of comfort and protection and wile away our waking years immersed in virtual fantasies of living that were completely immune to suffering and age and violence.

Hmmm.

So he sits on a bunk of sturdy grey steel bolted to one of the outer bulkheads in a cabin two decks off-center from the onion ball of the ship that is the *Proletariat Horde*. He leans forward with his feet on the floor and his hands over his stomach, his body folded completely in two so that his chin rests on his knees and his eyes are pointed at (what passes for) the ground. Recent experience has taught him that he's the most comfortable this way, the least likely to hurl stringing arcs of projectile vomit across the claustrophobically narrow room and against the, under most circumstances, unoffending wall. Karo and Marilea and a few of the others have amused themselves by banging down the multiple, incestuous helices of stairwells within the ship's guts to check on him and to pass along their advice for coping with space sickness, as well as sundry other well-meant cajoleries. How it's better in the long run if he bounce himself around a bit. How this misery will fade once his system adapts, and that it will fade much faster if he takes an active interest in educating his physical senses in the rudimentary physics of counter-intuitive spatial cognizance.

He has thanked them all for their concern and merrily informed them in which direction it would be best for them to take when going to hell.

It isn't even like this is the *worst* craphopper he's ever been on. There were some Scalpel class cruisers back in the day that he still believes were so cramped he could have stuffed them into one of the closets in his apartment. Those had been so narrow and so tight (for the sole purpose of carrying an insane thrust-to-mass ratio, he'd been told) that there had to be traffic signals hung at the intersections of corridors to keep crewmen from colliding in the middle. This ship was a dream

compared to most of the naval scrap Trithemius Orbis passed off as military transportation. She was solid as a rock, deftly modified with numerous open spaces and cozy antechambers, responsive in the turns and gloriously vector-baffled. Karo said she wafted through the vacuum like a feather on the air.

Karo, obviously, had neglected to take the feather's perspective into account.

Amara, on the other hand, says that he just has a sensitive tummy. She jumps about the decks like a schoolgirl tackling the new playground jungle gym. He tries not to hold this against her, even though she uses words like *tummy* in his presence and insists on patting it whenever she comes into the cabin to see about him.

He should have known when they boarded the drop-shuttle at the Southrange Skyway and launched for the orbital docking station that this was a bad idea. The acceleration had all gone to his head, despite the g-couch he'd been strapped to and the literal way in which he'd followed all the shuttle captain's instructions to prevent high altitude discomfort.

The problem was that he'd not been in the proper frame of mind. He'd done what he was told without internalizing it, and so hadn't adequately prepared himself for the reality of space flight. He'd been too busy thinking about Lily. Shouldering his gear and trundling off to whatever awaited them, he'd kissed her on the cheek and said goodbye, just as he'd done so many times before. But this wasn't any other time. He was leaving the planet of his birth. Not for the first time certainly, but for what very well might be the last time. At the last moment, just as the ominous, white elephant silence had fallen between them, Danek had given him that hard look, and Dorian had choked back any thought he might have been entertaining about saying all the things to Lily that he needed to in that moment.

He'd just wanted to tell her that he loved her one more time, and that he was still sorry. He wanted her to know those things. He wanted to hear himself saying them and see her knowing them just this once more, just in case it was the last time.

But if he'd begun, she would have seen a look in his eye or heard a break in his voice that would have spoiled Danek's

secret, and then they would have both been in trouble. She would have been fierce and angry, and *that* would have been how he'd have to remember her if they never met again...and that would have been worse.

Women were too freaking complicated. That's what that was all about. No matter what you tried to say, it was going to be wrong, so you might as well just shut up about it. That was undoubtedly why Danek had looked at him so hard. He was an old married guy. He probably had all this stuff more or less figured out.

And partly, though it is completely irrational, he blames the Misfit Toys for all of his miseries. If they hadn't been so efficient at stripping their gear, coordinating their exit and shoving all their crap into the caravan of moving trucks they had arrived in, he might have been better prepared, both for the departure and the aftermath. If they hadn't been so happy and receptive and bubbling with good-natured camaraderie, he might not feel so lousy for having lied to them all, or at least participating in the lie Raville had told them. Most of all, if he didn't have so much in common with them, this glorious band of pirates, he wouldn't feel so conflicted and troubled and immedicably, hopelessly lost.

Because more than anything, their joyous pleasure in simply being, in embracing life and purpose, and simultaneously, clinging to one another, never ceases to remind him that Amara is the pearl. As much as she means to him, and for all they've been through together, it's useless for him to cling to her. She doesn't belong to him. She doesn't even belong to the universe in which he has discovered her, and no matter what else happens, whether the war is averted or not, the process of her awakening has begun. With each passing moment, she comes nearer to the threshold through which only the pearl may emerge, and then to the event horizon that will strip away her human husk and leave behind the pure and elemental consciousness that delights not in John Dorian, but only in the significant features of his individuated data.

The Misfit Toys are bearing them irrevocably to that threshold. He can't stop it, can't drive it off. Even now, they're all just walking out the path Raville has set before

them. Amara is becoming something beyond his comprehension, and as a result, he is becoming, too.

He is becoming empty.

Dorian falls back onto the bunk and lays still. His stomach tries to forget about gravity and float off toward the ceiling where it might be happier. He feels green.

But after awhile, these feelings pass. He traces the slow curve of the hull with his eyes as it slopes up toward the ceiling, and is reminded that the ship is a tumbling oblong rotating around a fixed, hyperdense core and encased within a cigar shaped blast hull. He doesn't understand how this arrangement creates gravity, and wonders if he would feel any less putrid if he did. Understanding things is how he's always made himself feel better. Understanding the code that drives the Strand; understanding a few known people instead of strangers in convenient wrappers. Understanding himself, most of all, or at least believing that he did.

It's time for him to start understanding the mystery that his life has become.

Ray says it will take them only a few weeks to reach Glastenhome.

For some reason, he doesn't think that will be nearly long enough.

After a few days of soft foods and abject misery, he is able to ramble more or less at will throughout the ship's intestinal tract. He finds the galley where the off-duty crew assembles for communal meals more often than not. He passes a few (more or less) vomit-less meals with whoever happens to be about. There's usually someone about, even between scheduled feedings, four to six of the twenty-four members of the Misfit Toys, sitting around sipping coffee and watching triDvid recaps of tech news or local sports scores. More often than not, he ends up swapping dork stories with other bitheads in an increasingly hysterical exchange of one-upmanships.

Oh yeah? Well I once scaled some corporate ice so dense...

That's nothing. I once went after a mobile military unit hedged with broadwall Skeeterware with only...

Helloooo! We were doing that in Secondary school...

It's chummy and familiar. They talk like breathing p2p sessions, rapid-fire and constantly interrupting one another, punctuating their more outrageous declarations with shorthand finger smilies, as though they don't trust words and body language alone to convey their attitudes. Dorian wonders if they're having these conversation partially in geek, but doesn't ask. He doesn't want them to know that he's still afraid to use his foam for fear of Ray's eavesdropping.

He locates the dispensary, presided over by fluttery Marilea, who routinely and quietly dispenses to him small red anti-nausea pills which seasoned space crews call Wussies. She does this with a precocious theatricality, index finger to lips, shushing him. She also has him follow her deep into the stacks of the med storage compartment, where she makes a point of brushing his arm with some of her less public willowy bits and wiggling her eyebrows at him. He invariably rubs his stomach significantly and begs off. Probably couldn't get the thrust tube firing anyway, as lousy as he feels. She's got meds for that, too, of course.

Once or twice, when he is able to whip his courage into a frenzy, he slides along arching gangways and up spiraling stairwells to the bridge and watches Ray or Ghast and the duty crew piloting the ship. It doesn't seem like piloting to him. Nav, Comm, Data, and Watch Officer, they're locked away in a nest of monitors and jump-racks fed by kilometers of twisting, bundled grid cable that links to sensors spread all along the outer hull of the ship. Most of the monitors display reeling lines of amber text, redundant code descriptions of system manipulations occurring within the nav network, where the real work is done through the mediation of sensually pleasing wrappers. On Ray's shift, that wrapper is an 18th century British Man-o-War traversing a boundless sea of blue ocean swells with an everpresent northeasterly wind billowing the sails. Outside of geek, Dorian watches the duty crew swaying in their seats and rolling in time with nonsensical ocean swells. He is given to understand in hushed tones that Mr. Ghast prefers a Peter Pan render, where the bridge crew lazily wafts along silken London breezes, and one of his favorite pastimes is to leap to his feet and declare *First star to the right, then straight on 'til morning!*

Dorian has begun to suspect, largely on this evidence alone, that Ghast is insane, but it's of a let's-keep-this-in-mind variety rather than a stompy-footed something-must-be-done-about-him sort, so he merely files this factoid away for later scrutiny and tries not to hold it against him. Ghast keeps his cudgels handy even aboard ship, so Dorian has adopted a live and let live philosophy for most of their personal interactions.

All in all, the bridge is not nearly as impressive as he had expected it to be. For the ungeeked passenger surveying the navigation process with an objective eye, it's difficult to escape the impression that they might just as convincingly be supporting a telecommunications conglomerate as plotting a course through the stars. He finds the whole experience more than a bit disappointing.

On the other hand, this disappointment acts as a sort of event ping to remind him that for lack of anything constructive to occupy his attention, Dorian ought to use his time to delve into his foam architecture and begin rehabilitating the datascape he destroyed. He does his best to disassemble his operating code line by line and patch any security holes that might exist between the original environment and Ray's ceded foam. He is determined to root out any exploits that the Misfit Toys might try to use in the future. He's done giving them a free ride. This would be an overwhelming task under normal circumstances, and he's without many of the tools he's accustomed to using for the sort of scaling it requires. The utilities are inside his working foam environment (i.e. Ray's foam), and it occurs to him that merely accessing them is enough to clue Ray into the fact that Dorian plans on cutting him out of the loop.

So it's slow going.

To distract himself, he writes scripts to run up against the tarball that is Raville's datacore and decompile the data structures into seedable formats his mem extensors can read. This should be his top priority, to tell the truth. With each day that passes, the *Proletariat Horde* plunges deeper into Janite space and nearer to Glastenhome, which is nothing less than a terminal event. Array hardware does not translate through zap. This is not so much due to technological limitations as it is a practical manifestation of the Keep It Simple, Stupid

philosophy. It takes all of a week in most cases to have a fully functional, state of the art seenop array bio-implanted and synchronized with the Strand. Human schemes are sufficiently complex just attempting to accurately replicate specific individual organisms without adding a few million gigabytes to the data pool just for the convenience of having an intact array coming out of the nanomech vats. Without an array, he cannot access his foam. Without his foam, he can't get at the tarball and delve into the warrens of Raville's secret knowledge. Thus, if he's going to be of any use to Amara once they reach Giari Tau, he must extract the tarball prior to Glastenhome. Q.E.flippin.D.

He is going to miss his military issue array. Some of the new models are faster and more render savvy, but over the years, he's gotten used to the quirks of the old one and done a fair bit of his own modification. Not to mention, he dreaded (DREADED) having to de-tool a new consumer set to strip out all the adware and subscription services that came pre-loaded in even the high end consumer cortical hardware.

But even knowing this, he is having difficulty motivating himself to focus on the scripting process. By his own count, he's already three days behind where he should be. He tries to blame his failures on space sickness, but since the Wussies have largely alleviated the worst of his symptoms, he instead attributes his depleted attention span to fatigue.

Dorian isn't sleeping well at all. Actually, his body is sleeping just fine. It's his mind that can't seem to unwrap itself from the knots he's tied it in. Every night, he dutifully folds himself into the upper bunk in the cabin and closes his eyes in rest, and every night, he dreams.

He dreams of Amara's voice, cool and soft like the touch of fur against his face. She whispers to him across a gulf of impenetrable night. *I used to tell myself stories when I was a child, she says. I would lay in bed after mother had put out the lights, staring up through the solar at the hard, glimmering stars, and I would imagine what it was like to be someone else. I built elaborate fantasies of people, places and events. I imagined myself a heroic presence, rescuing the weak, delivering the poor. Sometimes I was Nasha Gydek, the woman who liberated Kyrgistan from neo-Xian oppressors. I was Pythagoras, plumbing the mysteries of trigonometry and bringing enlightenment to a savage age. I was*

Newton. I was Luria. I was Hermes the Thrice-Great. I dreamed mysteries for myself, wove them like tapestries, began after a time to believe the stories I whispered in my own ear more than the contradictory histories of these people that have been passed down through the years. Gowan Morgan had it right, I would say to myself. There are things that people believe, and will always believe, as long as history lasts. There are stories we tell about ourselves as human beings, about our emergence in this swath of space, that are fundamental to who we are. Those stories are the structure which underlies everything we know about ourselves, and they are the screen through which all of our experiences are filtered. And even if we discover that most of them are wrong, that even our basic assumptions about what we are happen to be flawed, most of us wouldn't change. We have too much invested in our illusions to throw them aside just because they're inaccurate. That's why Gowan came to Sae Phen. It was small, isolated, ripe. Truth could be planted there and the seeds cherished until they could grow into something wonderful. How I admired him! I dreamed his life in apocryphal detail until it was, in some ways, more real to me than my own.

I believed they were stories my mother had told me, or bits of trivia I had picked up in my studies and subsequently forgotten. But now I don't know...

On and on it would go, throughout the whole night. Sometimes, Dorian awakes with a start, and springs up in the dark, uncertain of where he is, or even of who he is. He is soaked with sweat and trembling like a snared rabbit. He still hears the echo of Amara's voice in his thoughts.

And from the bunk below, she tells him he is safe, he is well, he is not alone.

As his eyes adjust to the faint orange light of the service lamps above the door, he rolls onto his side and peers at her over the edge of his bed. There she lays, often with her hands behind her head, her eyes open, watching him as he watches her. There is sometimes, he imagines, a light in her eyes that the laws of optics cannot adequately explain. He thinks that she hasn't slept since they boarded.

He worries that she doesn't need to anymore.

And he is frightened.

On one of these days, Dorian sits in the public lounge off

the mess hall, nestled into a comfortable couch with his head on one arm, his feet on the other and a stylus driven data pad propped on his belly. On the floor beside him is a stainless steel carafe and a half-empty cup of java brewed so thick it threatens to crawl away under its own power every few minutes. The coffee has gone cold and his head aches. He chews on the end of the stylus and goes over the algorithms he's working on for converting the tarball again. He's been getting data type and load failure errors from his latest batch of scripts, and he can't see where the problem is with the codeline compiler's log files, so he's taken yet another step back into the Stone Age and reduced himself to working the sticky bits out with pencil and paper.

He is deeply enmeshed in a professional crisis and considering a clean change of careers since he's obviously unfit for this one, when Karo bangs through the lounge bulkhead and throws himself, cursing, into a tall gel-chair on the opposite side of the room. Dorian looks up, happy to have a distraction, and tucks the data pad away beside him.

"What's up, guy?" he says.

Karo snorts and mutters something profane. He's kneading the arm of the gel-chair into squishy little mountains, a whole chain of them, then meticulously poking their tops with his finger. It takes Dorian a moment to realize that these are fairly faithful renders of massive volcanoes.

He decides it would probably be a good idea to collect his stuff and leave the lounge to Karo so he could erupt in privacy.

But Karo mashes the potential Vesuvii flat with the palm of his hand and snarls. "That's always the way it is, ain't it? You got your hotshot coders, your quick-fab system infiltrators, your rough responders. It's like a freakin' ladder, right? Top Dog, Number Two, Techies--" He's slotting these positions on an imaginary scale that starts at eye level and drops a bit with each category. When he runs out of easy classifications, he makes a huge drop and jabs his finger at a nebulous space just below his knee. "--and way down here at the bottom, you slot your cooks and grubs. Machinists, janitors, bucket monkeys. All the squids as actually keep this tub bouncing, what do we get? Nothing. No joy. We always

get left out."

Dorian realizes he is taking his life into his own hands. "What are you talking about? Always get left out of what?"

"Insertion teams!" He pounds the arm of his chair, leaving a dent big enough to hide a tomcat in. "Somebody has to stay with the ship, they says. Somebody has got to cook for them that's left behind, and if we stick Mali with it, we're going to have a mutiny on our hands from them that's made to stay. You know what that means, don't you? It's gonna be me and Mali and Gordo just like always. Can't even play a decent hand of cards with just three, and even if we could, we wouldn't, cuz Mali is a big cheat."

Dorian climbs to his feet, pad under one arm, mug and carafe precariously balanced in the other. He takes a tentative step or two toward the door. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Ray posted the duty roster for the Giari Tau operation," Karo says, rumbling. The ample real estate of his face has transmuted from silver to pink, neckline to forehead. "Don't need no cook on the frontier, I guess. Like a cook is all I am. I was a Marine, same as them. I've done my share of dirty. But no, it's *swab this, wash that, whar's my lunch, whar's my dinner!* We don't need you for the important crap, Karo, just for clean shorts." He humphed himself into an approximation of calm. "I'd just like to see how far they'd get without clean shorts."

"Yeah, really. That sucks," Dorian says as he edges nearer the exit. "Nobody ever respects the guy who does all the dirty work."

Karo slaps his hands against his face and squishes his jowls together creating an impressive impersonation of a Boston terrier. He scrubs them around a little, then flops back, splaying his arms and legs and heaves a mighty sigh.

"Bah."

"Bah, indeed." Dorian has his hand on the door, ready to pull and run. All he needs is an opportunity. "Better luck next time, eh? This whole Giari Tau thing is probably just going to be a tedious pain in the butt anyway. Really. Me and Amara wouldn't even go if we didn't have to, you know."

"Right! You and Amara. That's what I was doing, before I checked the roster, I mean. Your lass is up on the obs port. She asked me to find you so as she could have a, uh, you

know, *word*." Karo gives him a sexy look, which might have been the single most disturbing thing Dorian has seen in his entire life. "You know where that is?"

"Deck Eight?" he guessed.

"Six. Take the central lift, exit on the right, all the way to the end of the corridor. Can't miss it." Karo blows out another deep sigh. "She's a fine girl, John. All kinds of funny, though. Quirky, I guess you'd call it. You look at her and you can't help but think there's something more going on behind those pretty lizard eyes than you can get a handle on. Know what I mean? And when she's talking and gets that faraway look to her, you just never know what's going to pop out of her mouth. That's depth is what that is." He makes a twirling motion with his fingers on the left side of his skull, the universal pantomime for either bats-in-the-belfry crazy or Heavy Mental Machinery at Work. "A fine, complex woman. She's one of them--what do you call it--*ethereal beauties*. Not my type, of course. I'd have to spend too much time just figuring what the heck was coming out of her mouth to really enjoy her. But that wouldn't stop me from trying to lick her up one side and down the other, my man. No offense to any proprietary claims you might hold on her, of course."

"None taken." Dorian pulls the door open. "I'd better get up there, then."

"I understand. Don't want to keep that one waiting. No, sir."

Before Karo can start up again, Dorian thanks him for relaying the message and bolts out into the corridor. He hopes fervently that Karo has not worked himself up to sharing his opinion of her with Amara herself. Or with anyone else, for that matter. He thinks this for all the wrong reasons, most of which do not include an honorable defense of Amara's virtuous reputation.

Because if Karo has begun to think her a little odd, what might others be thinking? Especially others like Ray, who routinely gives the impression that he has guessed more than he is telling.

There's too much flight time until Glastenhame for him to feel comfortable with Ray knowing much of anything about Amara.

He takes the lift as instructed to Deck Six, wavers for a moment when the doors open on either side, then remembers that Karo told him to bend to the right. This level appears to be mostly technical. The doors that open on either side are of heavy steel construction, their surfaces painted dull gray. Each one has a numeric keypad that serves a secure magnetic lock. Above the doorways are louvered vents exhaling warm gusts of ozone heavy air. It's like walking past stalls of sleeping dragons.

At the end of the corridor is another lift. Dorian presses the button marked "Open" on the control panel and the doors part with a hydraulic wheeze. On the wall inside of the carriage is a sign, bordered in red, that advises him he's about to leave the ship's simulated gravitational field and should catch hold of one of the straps dangling from the ceiling if he doesn't want to bump his head. It also reminds him to select a belt clip from the lockbox below the panel and keep it handy. He chooses the obs port as his destination from a menu of terminus options and braces himself. Now would be a good time to remember all of those zero-g combat drills from basic training, he thinks. They say it's like riding a bicycle, but Dorian has never learned to do that, so he isn't exactly sure what is meant by it.

The lift turns out to be a tram of sorts that smoothly accelerates about the onion decks of the inner hull, clacking past unseen interchanges and lurching every few moments as it switches to alternate tracks. He gets used to swinging from strap to strap, fluttering above the floor of the tram car like a butterfly. It only aggravates his stomach a little, and he manages an impressive feat of acrobatics to retrieve, open and ingest one of the quick dissolving Wussies Marilea has given him. Without gravity to assist in his digestion, the pill lodges halfway down his throat and sticks there despite his dry swallows. After several minutes, a route display on the indicator panel pings to inform him that he has arrived at a terminus on the outer decking, a bubble tucked up between the broad conical flanges of two of the external engine housings. It seems an odd place to find himself in the middle of an afternoon. Thinking this makes his throat clench a little.

The doors slide open and he gently kicks off against the

back wall to generate some momentum. The obs port is a cramped plastisheen dome raised like a pimple above a circular well of heavy decking. There are bolted handgrips along the base for free navigation, but the dome has also been cleverly strung with safety wires that traverse its length and breadth, each pathway strung with coordinating grips fastened to the floor beneath. Dorian snaps in to the wire mounted immediately outside the doors and begins to make his way hand over hand to the center of the room, where there is a clustered circle of g-couches, all facing inward. If he looks up, he cannot escape the impression that he is floating free in empty space, surrounded by a glorious field of stars. He avoids looking up.

He locates Amara by the waving stalks of blond hair above the back of one of the couches and cautiously maneuvers himself in that direction. She is alone, gazing quietly up through the plastisheen dome as if rapt in her own little world. For reasons he cannot identify, his stomach clenches upon seeing her. He glides past and executes a textbook zero-g somersault that carries him directly into waiting arms the Afex harness in the couch to Amara's right and secures the straps.

She glances over at him, distracted, but imitating warmth. "Was that fun?"

"Hardly. My null gravity skills are a little rusty. I got the message that you wanted to speak with me." Dorian glances around the empty dome. It's chilly in here, full of strange echoes and stress reverberations, and the air smells stale. "Interesting place to schedule a meeting."

"One of our esteemed crewmates accidentally revealed to me that this is the only part of the ship that is both publicly accessible and outside the datacore's passive monitoring network."

"Cozy."

"Plus it has a nice view."

Amara clasps Dorian's hand and lifts her chin, once again focusing on the vast backdrop of space. "I wanted you to see something."

He follows her line of sight. It takes him a moment to calibrate his vision for the darkness and stunning depth beyond the dome. He stiffens a little as he perceives not just

the gluts of starlight and thundering gas clouds that he expects, but two objects that seem to hover on their starboard side and a bit astern. Objects which streak against the fixed stars like luminous gnats.

"We're being followed?"

"Ray says it's a standard security escort provided for all non-Janite commercial vessels. They intercepted our flight path this morning and demanded a flash of our datacore registration and trade itinerary. He said it was standard procedure for doing business in Janite space, and so they were prepared for it."

Dorian can guess what this means: shadow datacore synchronously jacked with bogus logs, probably registered to one of the few territories on decent terms with Janus Prime. Probably alternate, uninteresting crew ids and reliable navigation and trade hx documentation for the bean counters to pore over. Whether one was talking starships or Strand network accounts, the difference was really only a matter of scale.

"So that's what this about, then?"

"Not completely." Amara's eyes disengage from his and flick away. "Those ships were the catalyst for a discussion I've been meaning to have with you for several days."

Dorian shifts uneasily. "Sounds ominous."

She acts like it's something ominous, at least. Amara takes a deep breath. "I think it's time we told the crew the truth. About me, I mean, and what we're really going to Phi Sophia to do. These people are putting themselves in danger on our behalf. It isn't fair of us to drag them into this blind. You and I both know that a couple of Janite ships out there are just the beginning."

"I wouldn't worry about the Misfit Toys too much," he says. "They're more than capable of handling themselves in tense situations. Ray wasn't kidding when he said that they were more qualified than we were to stop a war. They've been doing it all over the galaxy for a dozen years. Very effectively, in fact, and if this particular situation didn't have such, um, unique features, I'd have been more than happy to turn it over to their expertise."

Amara cocks her head at him curiously. "Would you

really?"

"Okay, maybe I wouldn't have been thrilled about it, but I would have recognized that they're in a much better position to actually accomplish this task than I would be on my own. Look, Amara, I know that it bothers you that what we're doing feels like it's dishonest. Don't get me wrong, as pissed off as I was at Ray for piggybacking onto my foam to sneak around in the Archive, I don't dislike him. I have a great deal of respect for this crew and the quality of their work, even if their politics don't particularly excite me. But the bottom line here is that they're putting themselves in danger because they believe it's in their best interest. Don't let yourself get taken in by their friendliness. They're mercenaries and they're political anarchists who believe their greater purpose of social justice is served by helping us. And who knows, maybe it is. Either way, I'm comfortable with the current arrangement. They get what they want, we get what we want, and everyone remains happy."

"You don't think they can be trusted with the truth."

"I think that they could be under different circumstances, like if we had more of a history between us. I'm afraid that if they found out the truth, if they found out how badly Raville wants you, that they'd try to turn you into a weapon or a bargaining chip they could use against him."

"You're not giving them enough credit," Amara says, frowning. "While you've been locked up in our cabin feeling sick and sorry for yourself for almost two weeks, I've been out here among them, getting to know them, trying to understand who they are and why they do the things they do. They really want to help us. . .and we need their help. Raville knew it, too. He knew we wouldn't be able to get to Giara Tau on our own."

"Yes, Raville knew we needed their help. And they are helping, even if it is more than they realize. It would have been very difficult for us to barge into the Southrange depot and convince the sysops to translate our schemes to an unpublished address. Ray solved that problem for us. But Raville also had enough sense not to trust them with the truth, if you'll recall, and I think he had a point. He told them exactly what they wanted to hear to obtain their assistance and

not a word more." Even as he says it, Dorian can't believe he is actually advocating that they should trust Raville's judgment. "I think Raville also knew enough about their quasi-legal activities not to tell them anything that might get them riled up, if you know what I mean."

"It just doesn't feel right, John. How will we live with ourselves if one of them gets hurt--or worse--because they weren't adequately prepared for what might happen."

"I'm sure they'd be extremely gratified to know that it was such a moral dilemma for you." He chuckles lightly, trying to ease her concerns. "Come on, Amara. Don't take it so personally."

"I have to. Don't you see? We're all in this together."

"You're forgetting that as far as the Misfit Toys are concerned, you and I are only here because we have information they need. They would have been just as happy to leave us behind, given the opportunity."

"I'm not saying that they wouldn't have. But we didn't even let them choose, John. We lied to them from the start."

Dorian shrugs. "It was a square deal. They got what they wanted and so did we."

"I don't think that's good enough anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm *changing*," she says, her voice low but sharp. She turns her head away for a moment and grinds her teeth so that her jaw muscles bulge. "I'm awakening, just like Raville said I would. I can feel it a little more every day. I'm becoming something else, something I don't recognize, and I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to hide it. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. I watch you sleep, John, and I listen to the things you say when you're dreaming. I know that you're attuned to my thoughts, just like I'm beginning to see yours. Yours and Ray's and Ghast's. Everyone's on this ship, if I try. You're all becoming transparent to me. But more than that, I'm starting to know things that I didn't before. And one of them is that we're supposed to work together."

"Fine. But toward whose end? That's what you need to ask yourself, because I can guarantee you that they are less interested in what you have to do than in transforming the

social class structure or liberating the oppressed working class or whatever else it is they believe in."

"We've all harbored our secrets thus far," she says, shaking her head. "You've been trying to reconstruct your native foam without making Ray aware of what you're doing, despite the fact that he promised to respect your privacy. Ray himself has been at significant pains to analyze and decipher the data he jacked from your array and your foam while you slept when he should have been gathering knowledge about the best way to penetrate Giari Tau's security. And I've been preoccupied just trying to conceal my transformation from the others, because I knew you wanted to keep it hidden."

"We need to put away our suspicion and coordinate our efforts, stop wasting time and energy. For God's sake, you've fallen to scribbling algorithms on data tablets when Ghast himself told me that this ship's datacore warehouses some of the most powerful decryption and conversion tools known to man. Ray told me that Ghast has been on him about offering you his help practically since the moment you awoke back in Sonali. He's quite clever at this sort of thing, and he has been an ardent admirer of your other technical work for some time now. You haven't even looked up long enough to notice that he's one of your biggest fans."

Dorian shakes his head. He feels sick again. "Ray told you so, eh?"

"I didn't need him to. But his willingness to say it confirms that he wants to help. They'll all want to help if we give them the chance, even if they don't properly understand the decision they're making themselves. It is inherent in the human condition to reach for the ineffable. I think that if we give them the choice, they'll rise to the occasion."

"They're going to think you're crazy, is what they'll do, especially when you tell them what you have to do."

Amara peers at him through narrowed eyes. "You keep saying that: *what I have to do*. What is it that you think I'm *supposed* to do once we reach Phi Sophia exactly?"

"I don't know," he says. "Stop the war."

"If that was all, you'd be more than happy to have help."

Dorian grimaces. "You make it sound like stopping the war is the easy part."

"I'm beginning to suspect that in your mind it is. Whatever it is that's troubling you, that's keeping you back, has nothing at all to do with the possibility of war."

"You mean your super mystical crystal ball doesn't tell you?" Dorian flushes with shame as soon as the words escape his lips. "I'm sorry. That wasn't fair of me."

"But it is how you feel."

"Stop analyzing me. I'm just scared, Amara."

"What I'm becoming scares you?" she asks.

And involuntarily, he recalls the moment Amara revealed the *quae-ha-distra* to Lily and Danek, the stark and visceral fear. He remembers her cries inside Raville's simulation of the orb as she fled the spirits of the Exousiai. Most of all, he thinks about the past few nights, lying in bed, torn between sleep and waking, both lulled and alarmed by the bitstream of her thoughts.

"Neither what you are or what you're becoming," he says at last. "But losing you, that terrifies me. I don't want to let you go."

"And that's what you think I'm going to Phi Sophia to do? To leave you?"

"You are the pearl."

There's nothing she can say to counter this, to deny its truth. Still, she tries. "You know what that existence is like, John. We felt it, both of us, before we entered Raville's temple. We were complete. Together and complete. There was no loss there, only joy and fulfillment and knowing." She lowers her eyes. "If you go with me when the time comes, we can have that forever. We'll never need to be apart again."

"Danek believed that once, you know," he answers quietly. "He thought that Lily's broken form was a phase, a temporary inconvenience that could be overcome eventually. But now he's facing an eternity with nothing left of her but the digital impression of perfectly stored memories." Dorian laughs, a hollow sound in the empty space of the obs port, and maybe just a bit hysterical. "That's the advertising slogan for mem extensors, you know. Relive your past in triDvid quality! But that's just it, isn't it? The past is dead. It's a rut that always leads to the same end."

"You sit there offering me miraculous knowledge, offering

me the equivalent of godhood, like it's something I would be crazy to reject. But I can't accept it. The problem with absolute knowledge is that it *is* absolute. There's no wonder, no discovery. When we're all one, everyone can know everything. Nothing can be held in reserve. And as silly and petty as it sounds, it's our secret hearts that make us who we are. The things we try to hide from everyone but those who are the most special to us are what make us unique and fascinating and worth knowing at all. It's the process that means something. Without the mystery of discovering you, I can't treasure you because you're inseparable from me. You don't reveal yourself because you want to, I just take what I want. It isn't sharing, but just another form of self-indulgence.

"But what's worse is that by skipping the process of discovery, the whole relationship between people becomes dissatisfying. You become just more data to be shared by everyone plugged into the cosmic matrix, and once the data is known, there's nothing left to explore. No impetus to continue relating to one another, and we fall back into ourselves again. I don't want to just know, Amara. I want to relish. I want to be thrilled by discovery. Most of all, I don't ever want to feel like I've figured it all out. Because that's it, really. In the end, the more you come to know, the more you end up just being alone.

"Maybe that's what you came to this universe to figure out in the first place. It's our ignorance that makes us need one another so much."

She sets her lips into tight lines. He can't tell whether she is angry or disappointed. She is completely inscrutable. "I respect your feelings, John, but that doesn't change the fact we still have a decision to make. You can reject the offer of the Exousiai for yourself if that's what pleases you, but you can't reject the future for everyone just because it doesn't suit your taste. There's more at stake here than what you might want because you think it will make you happy."

"I didn't sign on to save the universe," he says. "Just you."

"But I did, even if I don't remember it--even if it wasn't the me I know who made the decision. The obligation remains. Whatever the future brings, it will be better if the Misfit Toys are with us rather than running off making mischief on their

own. I don't know exactly how they fit in yet, but they're cooperation is essential. That much I can feel."

He starts to speak, not even sure of what he is going to say, except that it is a denial, but Amara holds up her hand. "You trusted me when I said I believed that Raville was telling us the truth. Trust me again in this. I've seen their inner truths, and their hearts are pure. They'll help us if we only ask."

Dorian stares at her, frustrated. She has heard nothing that he said, or if she has, it means nothing to her. It's distinctly possible that it doesn't. If she is awakening, she isn't thinking like a human being anymore. At least part of her is parsing him as data like an Exousiai, just more input.

"I can't trust them," he says, sighing. "Not that far."

"I'm not asking you to trust them. I'm asking you to trust me."

"We don't even know what we'll be facing when we get there. We don't have a clue as to what Raville's true intentions are or how he plans to execute them. There's too much that we don't know. Maybe when I've finished extracting Raville's datacore--"

Where once she might have squeezed his hand, she merely says, "The universe is what it is. Our anxiety is just a product of our ignorance."

In other words, she has already made up her mind.

"What do you want me to say, Amara? Do you really need my permission to cast yourself before the swine?"

"I'd like your support. Tell me that you'll think about it at least."

"I'll think about it."

"Promise?"

"Pinky swear."

"Soon?"

"In each and every second of my spare time."

"And while you're at it, you'll make a point of saying something nice to Ghast?"

"Yes, dear."

"Your mother taught you very well, John Dorian."

Dorian thumbs the latch on his Afex harness and allows himself to float free. He gives his safety tether just enough of a tug to start him drifting back toward the tram doors. "Give

me a few days and I'll have an answer for you. In the meantime, I've got to get back to work on this data. You try to keep yourself out of trouble."

She laughs, as though he has asked the impossible.

And so in due course, Dorian finds himself in the Heavy Systems Tech Lab on the Third Level, peering through a finger smudged plexscreen at a recessed monitor directly connexed to the *Proletariat Horde's* hyper-threaded network of server arrays that served as its sub-datacore (not, of course, to be confused with the shadow datacore, which is housed in a stuffy and claustrophobic chamber next to the secondary bridge and officially designates the *Horde* for snoopity-snoop government auditors as the *Chubby Cherubim*, a Kingman's Planetoid ship of the line, nor similarly to be confused with the real datacore that powers and stores, analyzes and processes, gadgets and gadgets the actual starship flown by the Misfit Toys. No, this is a third completely independent and self-sufficient ghost core used mostly for backup storage and applications development in an environment that wouldn't inconveniently shut down essential systems like life support, propulsion or artificial gravity should a bad load of scripts crash the operating logic. These are the sorts of fascinating gewgaws that pop up in monocultural tech collectives where everybody is equally distracted by cool lights and gee-whiz functionality without the external restraints normally exerted by pinhead accountants. It is without a doubt one of the most singularly beautiful things Dorian has ever seen.). There is a keyboard on a retractable tray in front of him and a neatly bound coil of fiber lines tipped with multiple-head array plug-in adapters hanging from the side of a bleating and buzzing server rack . It looks like a multi-colored braid of spaghetti.

Dorian peers at the code squirting down the output screen and rubs his chin, then squeezes the bridge of his nose, and finally scrubs his fingers exasperatedly through his hair. It's baffling enough trying to learn the software, a proprietary Corgan military decryption app favored by paramilitary professionals, but he's spent the last couple of days just trying to ascertain how to feed the tarball of data into the software in a format it can read. Every once in a while, he thinks he's hit

on a format that works, and he'll get a couple thousand gigs of good data, then it just implodes into gibberish and Moebius loops and packed fields that lock everything up. He has taken Ghast's earnestly offered advice and loaded a copy of the full tarball into the sub-datacore where he can break it a dozen different ways without having to worry about corrupting the original file. He could have done this inside his own foam, ex-connexed to the core, and more securely to boot, but after the first couple of times, he quickly tires of having to stand next to the racks, tethered by a land line while the mass of data copied over. Even if the Misfit Toys are interested in stealing it, it isn't as if they are likely to make any more progress than he has (i.e. nil).

Besides, he still hasn't given Amara an answer and this type of information sharing can be used as evidence that he's at least giving it serious consideration should she choose to get snippy about the delay.

Ghast peers over his shoulder at yet another failed trial and exhales hugely. His lips flap like the bladder of a whoopee cushion, and Dorian thinks that this is the perfect sound for how he's feeling. "No, no. I'm telling you, John, you want to hack these structures down to the binary and *then* string them into num_variables. That used to work all the time with Janite crypto."

"But this isn't Janite crypto," Dorian says for the thirtieth time in the last dozen hours. "It's a completely different paradigm. Anyway, we tried that like four iterations ago, remember?"

"Bah." Ghast rubs the side of his nose with a forefinger, which, Dorian has surmised, is what Ghast tends to do when he's thinking his way through a particularly thorny problem. "How many gigs did we get that time?"

"Seventeen hundred. Even less than we got with the Tertullian Formula."

"Bah."

Initial impressions to the contrary, Dorian is on the verge of deciding that he's rather fond of Ghast. He's an old line coder drafted off Finux ops administration into general systems maintenance, it turns out. A ground-up sort of tech who can diagnose hardware and software with equal aplomb.

Perhaps what impresses him most is that Ghast's military designation was Lead Nav Engineering, which is mostly managerial and captain's muscle in nature rather than technical. Everything that he knows has been gained from experience, personal study or brute force osmosis in crisis situations.

On top of that, when he pinches his nose and squints with the left eye, he does a startlingly accurate impersonation of Ray's smooth nasal drone. It never fails to put Dorian in stitches.

They think silently and independently for several moments, flensing their cortices for any untried decryption tricks they knew, had ever seen or vaguely heard about on jacketed bulletin boards. Eventually, Ghast slaps him thunderously across the shoulder and says, "So what are you thinking, Chief?"

Dorian is actually thinking very little in concrete terms. His legs have begun to ache from standing at the rack for the last several hours while they watched scripts execute and fail. He's thirsty and can't remember which of the decanters they've had delivered over the last several hours still has coffee in it. He doesn't remember the last time he ate a sit-down meal. He's fairly certain that if he wasn't so aggravated, he'd realize that he's mentally and physically exhausted.

"Revolving key array," he says eventually. It sounds more like a question than a statement.

"Aw, don't say that."

Dorian shrugs. "We've tried everything else, haven't we? And it stands to reason, given that we keep hitting seemingly random sectors of carry-through for a thousand gigs or so before the conversions fall apart."

"Then you're screwed. That's all I've got to say. I mean, sure, you could probably write something that would read out result sets and counter check for file integrity, keep the good stuff and loop the rest through the previous modules, but that could take weeks, Chief, and it assumes that we've already figured out all the encryption methods that were used. And that's just for the coding. Then you'd have the referential checks and the de-compression synchs, the cluster analysis and re-assembly mods. You'd have to do bit by bit trace

logging to rebuild the sequencing..." Ghast trails off and lets the rest go unspoken. He's right. It could be done given enough time, but it is a horribly complex solution. It's essentially reconstructing an entire encryption system one logical unit at a time through a process of elimination. Weeks was probably a generous timeline and a vast over-estimation of Dorian's technical skill on Ghast's part. "How important did you say this was again?"

"Vital," Dorian says. "Maybe."

Ghast makes a show of checking his watch, though he isn't actually wearing one. "Well, you've got about two weeks to sort it all out before we dock, unless you find a way to guess the key transformations. Even nailing down the first spoke of the array would at least give you somewhere to start, but we don't even know the key structure, let alone whether or not it's fluid."

But we could find out, Dorian thinks. I could find out. It's a decision he has been avoiding for the last couple of weeks. Raville would have the encryption key, possibly the entire sequence of keys, but Raville is currently a dependent resident of Dorian's compromised foam. If he asks for it and Raville gives it to him, he runs the risk that anyone (i.e. Ray) who might be listening in on their conversation would have access to both the tarball and the key. He can't even put faith in the obstinacy of the orb's security parameters to protect him because he's already logged and loaded his jack protocols for the orb into his foam's data archive.

So this is it. He can either choose to trust Ray and the Misfit Toys and hope to unspool the tarball, or he can accept failure by slow degrees and zap for Phi Sophia blind. Those are his choices.

Amara believes, and she wants him to believe as well.

Dorian sighs and steps away from the sub-datacore racks. There's an ergonomic couch wedged into the corner of the room, mostly buried beneath reams of hardcopy printouts and disposable paper cups. He sweeps it all off onto the floor and flops onto the couch in the position that seems least likely to exacerbate the screaming of his joints. He could do this standing up, but he's tired. His whole body feels like chunks of lead strung together with barbed wire. If he's going to have

to wrangle with Raville, the least he should be is comfortable.

Supine seems more appropriate for surrender anyhow.

Ghast watches him, not speaking, just arching an eyebrow.

Dorian positions his skull on the head support and closes his eyes. "Give me fifteen minutes," he says, and flips into geek.

And into, and into, and into...

Sigh.

Something splendid. A nice Velia Dorgan bordello. Fluted columns of white marble, a glistening canopy of gauzy silk--no, check that--a brilliant canopy wilting pearskin sky, with caramel shafts of early autumn sunshine. Delicate stone lattice walls providing just a glimpse of a billowy, *fierenfrond* copse beyond. A stone fountain in the middle of the circular room that is gushing crystal blue water into a pool filled with perky golden prawn. And couches, long and soft, piled with pillows as fat as cotton candy clouds. Velian dancing girls, shimmering in silver and blue, veiled and demure, wafting fans of fluttering peacock feathers.

Okay, cancel the dancing girls and wafting fans. Substitute the familiar shush of central air conditioning. Mind on his work; must stay focused. Blah, blah, blah. Amara has access to this channel, after all.

Dorian opens his eyes. There's only a hint of discomfort this time, a transition that is almost seamless, and what he feels may just be carryover from his fading space sickness. He wonders if he's becoming attuned to the orb or if Raville has been playing sneaky behind his back. The couch he emerges onto is blissfully soft, the air sensually cool. The perfume of the banished dancers still lingers on the breeze.

He has a rocking good imagination, he thinks. He could get used to this.

Dorian rolls onto his side and gazes across the pool and fountain to another couch, puffy and pastel, where Raville lounges in toga and fuzzy slippers. He reclines with his hands woven behind his head, his bare chest pushing out through the jaunty gap in his robe, and his pale and black haired legs poking out beneath the hem. A dancing girl hovers over him, large eyed and attentive, feeding him grapes.

Dorian scowls at him. "You pinched my bitstream?"

"Just this lovely bit," Raville replies, winking. He chews a grape, then waves his hand and the girl vanishes in a puff of feathers. "Couldn't help myself, really. Even we virtual beings appreciate a little sensual entertainment every once in a while. But don't think of it as a pinch, rather as a redirection from cache."

"I see I'm going to have to rethink your containment grid."

"Oh, certainly," Raville replies, dripping petulance. "You've got all the time in the world to be dawdling with me, here on the verge of my destruction."

"Your destruction? I'm the one who's about to be run through the molecular chipper, if you'll recall. You're still safe and tight on the Archive's network and probably will be for the foreseeable future."

"Yes, yes. *That* version of me is doing just fine, I imagine, but it isn't properly me in any contextual sense, now is it? When he and I parted ways, I became irrevocably my own entity, and as an independent being, it is perfectly appropriate for me to contemplate my impending demise with more than a little dread. It's a perfectly human reaction."

Dorian shakes his head. "You'll still be saved as a logical unit inside my foam, Raville. It's just the array that gets hosed."

"Right, and once you've wrapped up our business on Giari Tau, you'll be absolutely thrilled to re-activate the dormant sectors I occupy."

Dorian doesn't answer.

"I thought not," Raville says, with just a touch of melancholy. "Don't worry. I won't hold it against you, my murderous compatriot. We all do what must be done, and men have sacrificed themselves for much less noble causes than universal peace, eh?" Raville offers him a glittering smile, full of teeth and teasing. "So, what is our current destination, anyway?"

"What makes you think we're going anywhere?"

Raville grimaces, realizing he's been caught out. "I had enough of a look-see at your architectural support stats to know that you'd shifted foam-management nodes from Sonali's routers. I assumed, logically enough, that you'd

managed to arrange access to a more friendly departure depot than the one in Southrange. Somewhere close, I hope. We haven't got a tremendous amount of time to be gallivanting across the galaxy solely for pleasure."

"It's close enough." Dorian declines to be more specific. "But that's enough of that. We've got work to do."

"Indeed. How is Amara?"

"She's fine."

"Merely fine?"

"You know what I mean. She's awakening." Dorian tries not to scowl again and mostly succeeds. "Right now she's occupied with integrating the Misfit Toys into whatever scheme it is her alien self is brewing up."

Raville sits up, suddenly interested. "The Misfit Toys, eh?" He ruminates over this information for a time, and interest quickly sloshes over into something more generally disturbed. "Hmm. The Misfit Toys. That's an interesting development."

"Don't look at me, bit boy. You're the one who told them about the Exousiai and got them so fired up to chase us to Phi Sophia."

"Me?" Raville is sincerely shocked.

"The other you. The Archive you."

"Ah. Well, that makes at least a bit more sense. I'm sure I was just trying to help."

"Yeah. Thanks a bunch. I mean that."

Raville chuckles quietly. "Don't be paranoid, John. It makes a certain tactical sense. The big obstacle with the previous arrangement was always going to be managing to get you zapped from Southrange to Giari Tau without my alternate self's agents getting their hands on you. This solves that problem nicely."

Dorian watches as Raville climbs to his feet. He strolls about the perimeter of the chamber, stroking his chin and humming to himself. "It is an odd experience, I will admit, attempting to divine the purposes of a being that is both one's self and at the same time wholly another. I wonder if this is how my actual self feels about me." He nods over the implications of this thought, then rounds back on Dorian, full of more pressing questions. "How much did he tell them? And what exactly do they intend to do with what they've been

told? Do they know about Amara?"

"All they know is that Amara and I were selected out of necessity, and that we're the only ones with the zap address for the depot on Giari Tau. We used that data as a bargaining chip to buy our passage. They haven't guessed yet that she is anything but human, though I don't know how much longer she's going to be able to hide her, um, unique qualifications from them."

Raville pauses and fixes him with a curious look. "That is your doing, I suppose? Another eruption of your rampant paranoia." He doesn't wait for Dorian to answer. "Still, it was well done, I suppose. I certainly wouldn't have tripped over myself to tell them the full truth, given what we know of their exploits from the popular press. Actually, I guess I didn't trip over myself at all, did I? You were just following my lead. Surprisingly astute of you."

Dorian withholds a snort of derision. "Look, I don't mind bringing you up to speed, Raville, but that isn't really why I'm here."

"No, no. Of course not, but it does present some interesting features."

"Sure. Absolutely fascinating. Can we--?"

"I'm sensing some hostility to this development."

"It isn't hostility. It's caution. *Healthy* caution." Dorian grips the edges of the couch in exasperation. He doesn't want to talk to Raville about the Misfit Toys. "Look, that's beside the point completely. I'm here because I need an information boost. I've got to have as many spokes as you have for the revolving key array so I can get on with the work of decrypting Raville's datacore. We're running out of time."

"There it is. That's your problem, John. You spend so much time with your nose buried in the text peering into the bare-bones mechanisms of everything, that you inevitably miss the functional application of the program itself. You're always thinking about what it's doing and how it's doing it rather than what purpose it is supposed to be serving in the first place."

"Right. That's why I need the key sequence. I can't understand what the data means until I can parse it out into--"

Raville gives him a withering and disappointed look.

"That's not what I'm talking about. What you might learn from that datacore is secondary at this point. I'm trying to explain to you what's wrong with *you*. You look at the Misfit Toys and all you see is a potential set of aggravations, of obstacles to be overcome, spurious data mucking up the executable, just so that you can preserve this control of flow illusion you've scripted for yourself. You're worried about how you can minimize the threat of the Misfit Toys, when you should be trying to figure out how they can be fit into the larger picture. I hear your antipathy in every syllable you utter."

Dorian opens his mouth to speak, but Raville confronts him from across the room, his arms braced across his chest. "You and I both know that you've never been particularly interested in stopping the war that's about to happen. You've said so a dozen times. The only reason you've even come this far is because I prodded you and because--well, because of Amara. You want to save her. And you're terrified that the Misfit Toys are going to take away your choice or your ability to save Amara from the end she has chosen when the time comes. But what does she say about them?"

"She says that they're essential," Dorian says, immediately angry with himself for answering at all.

"Essential. But to what, you ask. Essential to her escape from this plane of existence? Or essential to preventing the destruction of the human race? No wonder you're so conflicted. You don't even know what you're being asked to choose between except that most likely all the options presented to you are ends that you don't want."

Dorian experiences a sharp burst of heat, of bitterness, that feels surprisingly like suppressed rage. It tastes like acid in his throat. "Do my choices really matter? I haven't chosen any of this, and yet here I am stuck in the middle of it. I've never had a choice," he says. "Not from the moment you dug your hooks into me."

"O woe is you!" Raville clicks his tongue sarcastically. It's probably good for him that he's on the opposite side of the room at that moment. "Don't be such a martyr. No one has deprived you of free will. You've had a choice at every step. You could have walked away any time you wanted. You

could still walk away. Except for Amara, of course, but it's a temporary pain, betrayal is. Many men have learned to live with it. But I understand that it's convenient for you to blame me. I've encouraged it, in fact, wooing you through the fabric of your network, nearly blowing you to bits, stuffing viral applications into your dataspace. I'm your personal bogeyman, isn't that right?"

Raville reins himself in abruptly, bites his lip and drops his gaze to the floor. When he begins again, the melancholy returns, and he speaks in almost an apologetic tone. "I understand how you feel, and perhaps why you feel the way you do. But things are moving very quickly now, John, and you need to have your head straight if you're going to be of any use to Amara."

"To help her destroy herself, you mean," Dorian says.

"If that's her will, yes. She is a sovereign, divine being. If she chooses to shatter this form, this jar of clay, then that's what we will help her to do." There are no pretty words this time, no comforting pronouncements about cosmic mind and bodiless eternities, only the naked truth that Dorian has feared most. Raville seems to understand this, and the hard lines of his face soften. "I'm sorry, John. I know that you care for her a great deal and this is hard to hear. But she is what she is, and neither of us can change that fact. We are only given enough grace to choose whether or not we will believe she is who she says she is and whether she is capable of doing what she has promised to do. And making that leap of faith, we must determine how best any of us might fit ourselves into her designs, whatever those might ultimately be."

Raville frowns. "Your incorrigible faithlessness has carried you farther than I would have expected, which has been a great comfort to me, because I fear that it is at least partly my fault. And like every other dying man, I find now that I would not have you send me into oblivion without the opportunity to purge my soul, such as it is. I admit that I've manipulated you, and I've lied to you, and I've done a great number of unseemly things to move you along the path I've envisioned for us.

"But perhaps the worst was when I told you that you were merely a target of opportunity, the closest thing to competent

help I could get my hands on. You remember that, I know. It's a hard thing for a man to hear, that he's convenient rather than worthy. Yet, when I revealed to you that Amara is the pearl, you knew, perhaps, that I had lied to you, or at least lied to her. I made it plain that she was vital, irreplaceable, the crux upon which the whole universe turns. But what were you, then? Still just a makeshift companion, a rider on the coat-tails of her destiny, a fortunate cog in the machine of history. I've allowed you to believe that because it was useful to me, and it shames me now.

"The fact is that I did not choose you, but it is not the same as not having been *chosen*. Amara did not stumble after you into the network, into the memory palace where we first met, by accident. I called to her. I began the slow and delicate process of awakening her, whispering into her ear along the network every time she logged into her interface, coaxing her latent energies to life, long before I was revealed to you. That was why she insisted so strongly on following you, I imagine. She didn't know why either, only that she must. The funny thing is that the timing was not my choice either. It was too early. My plans were not yet established. I was going to use *you* to further get to *her*, and I assumed that I had just underestimated you and that your arrival together was one of those grand, fortunate accidents.

"You see, I didn't take into account that while I was working to awaken her, Amara had already chosen the tool to help her. You worry above all that this band of brigands, the Misfit Toys, will jeopardize the things that we've worked for, that somehow they'll take her away from you. That's what keeps you from trusting them the way Amara would have you to. But that's just foolish. They can't separate her from you. On some level, everything that you've done, everywhere you've gone and the things you've seen have all been because Amara willed it. She opened your eyes to the things you needed to see, even my clever spider, when the timing suited her. That secret, sacred core of her that is divine chose you to accomplish her will, even as she chose me all those years ago, and just as she's now chosen the Misfit Toys. Each of us for our particular tasks. But she needs you--you personally--for reasons that none of us can properly guess. Your technical

skills, while profound, aren't sufficient to explain what recommended you over twice a hundred others elsewhere who would have been equally proficient and almost certainly more malleable. Only need suffices. Need or want. It's time that you knew that."

Dorian hears what Raville says, hears *more* than he says, in fact, and a blanket of numbness descends on him, heavy and smothering. That's the problem with the human impulse to bare the soul: the information propagates. Data is eternal, neither created nor destroyed, but only reshuffled from one cache to another. He has no mechanism for assimilating the things Raville has shared with him in any meaningful way.

"I can't help her destroy herself," he says. "I can't."

"She knows that. Trust her, John. Whatever it was that called you to her has a reason. She won't ask you to give what you cannot. You just have to believe."

Believe, he thinks. Believe in what? But it's as far as he can reach. There are no immediate answers, no detonations of comforting epiphany that would give light to his darkness. He should be angry with Raville, he thinks, furious at this last and worst revelation of deception, but he doesn't have it in him. He's known all along that Amara expects him to carry her to the end she has chosen. He's just been afraid to say the words to himself.

"I need the key," he manages at last. "I still have to understand." Even if I can't believe.

And when it comes, the exchange is almost painfully, stupidly simple. Dorian remains only long enough to confirm that the files have been moved from orb space to foam. He leaves Raville and the simulacrum of the *quae-ha-distra* behind without another word, even to say goodbye.

Ghast watches over Dorian's shoulder as he builds the revolving array and coordinates the logical sequences that will return the proper keys at the proper times in the process of unspooling the tarball. Dorian can feel him at his back, a jittering ball of Tesla energy, working mightily to restrain himself. If he gives Ghast even a centimeter of leeway, he's going to explode with questions, proposals, criticisms. Dorian watches the vibrations he makes in the datacore's throughput

as he geeks in and out of a conjoined session, in an attempt to gauge their progress.

It's been a while since he had a fan who could actually keep up with what he was doing. He has to admit that it isn't altogether unpleasant, and he finds himself dropping in little whorls and nifty sub-routines, showing off. When he reaches the end of the first module, Ghast leaps into it like a rambunctious puppy bowling for kittens. He pops back out a dozen seconds later, and whistles in appreciation at the complexity of the work, both the lock and the key.

He slaps Dorian heartily across the back. "Amazing. That is just monstrously, monstrously awesome architecture. How did you figure it out?"

"I just needed to grep a datasource I'd been ignoring." Dorian gestures vaguely at the screen without raising his gaze from the board in front of him. "This bit here is a proprietary keygen borrowed from one of Michael Raville's corporate assets. It's an older artifact, but I'm fairly sure that at least in this case the generating mechanism is still in synch."

"You get that from the data dump Raville left in the Archive?"

More or less, Dorian thinks. "Yeah."

"Nice."

"It isn't as impressive as it sounds."

"Professional secret," Ghast says, wink and nod. "I get it."

"Something like that."

"Hey, I don't mind. I saw the work you did on that data spider Raville dumped onto your network. That was sweet. Only maybe six or eight guys on the Strand could have found that infiltration, let alone neutralize it so quickly."

Except for the fact that as Raville tells the story, it was either his own efforts that attracted Dorian's attention in the first place, or Amara's supraliminal influence. He doesn't feel comfortable taking credit for it either way, so he says nothing and continues working in silence. After several minutes, he launches a test sequence on a smallish sector of structural data. A cursor blinks back at him for a few minutes more, then raw seenop converted multicode begins trickling down the screen, as ponderous as a drip of maple syrup.

Dorian curls his lips in dissatisfaction.

"Looks like you've got something, but that's pretty slow, Chief."

"I'll tickle the conversion engine and add some indexes once we get a clean snapshot of the structure. That should speed things up considerably."

Ghast does some quick calculation. "It's gonna take a couple of weeks to convert the stack at this rate. Just eyeballing it, I mean."

Dorian merely shrugs and goes back to coding, already off on another branch of logic. The familiar ding sounds in his brainpan, vibrating along his jawline.

/&OpenSess

<Ping>

</&BUSY>

<SUPERPING: Pick up, John. I know you're on.>

<'Busy' ' I'm working.>

<You've been talking with Raville.>

<He had some information I needed. . .You weren't eavesdropping, were you?>

<I respect your personal space, but I can't help it if the orb pings me when you authenticate. Being a goddess isn't all peaches and ice cream.>

<Does that mean YES you were eavesdropping or NO you weren't? Check One.>

<What are you doing now?>

<Making friends and Influencing People™. . .I'm playing with Ghast.>

<Giggle.>

<Don't mock me, woman.>

<I was just informed that Ray has requested my presence on the bridge. I think it would be best if you went with me.>

<DEFCON 69?>

<I don't know what that means.>

<Sigh.>

<'?' '>

<What did you do to freak him out?>

<Are you coming or not?>

<...>

<John?>

<On my way.>

/&EndSess

Dorian backs away from the keypad and clicks his teeth together to get rid of the residual echo rolling around in his aural canal from the p2p session. He turns to Ghast and arches an eyebrow. "Have you been keeping up with this?"

Ghast lolls his head from side to side. "I think so. That's what...a Gordon Proxy seed loader?"

"The rough outlines of one, at least. I don't think there's anything tricky going on with the data structure, so it should be fairly straightforward to build the seeding pods from here. I've just been summoned to the bridge. Would you mind taking over?"

"Are you serious?" Ghast brightens until he is practically beaming. "You want me to finish one of your applications?"

"I hate to lose the time lollygagging with the suits, so somebody has got to do it."

"I haven't tackled anything this complex in line code. I might screw it up."

"That's why God created the delete key, Mr. Ghast." Dorian aims for the door, speaking over his shoulder as he goes. "You never really know how a program works until you've figured out how to break it."

Ghast has already taken his seat. "Aye, Jack. I'm on it."

Dorian clammers up a last spiral stairwell, loops through a narrow corridor decorated only with naked steel crossbeams and punches through the final pressure door onto the bridge. He's breathing a bit more heavily than he'd like, but he's made it all this way without having to stop and think about harking up any of the meals he's successfully digested in the last couple of days. Factor in that he hasn't eaten any Wussies in the last twelve to eighteen hours, and he's feeling pretty good about his spaceworthiness, all in all.

He locates Amara standing alone in the center of the room, to the right of what would normally be the full-swivel (capital-C's) Captain's Chair, but it is empty. It's usually empty. Ray eschews the traditional symbols of rank as egregious subliminal tools of The Man perpetuating the inequitable elitist power structure which solely existed to Keep Folks Down. From what Dorian can tell, this just means that Ray's

calves must often be more tired than is strictly necessary, because everyone else on the deck has their own chair, and no one seems to be complaining about that. As Dorian ambles across the deck to join Amara, he finds Ray over at the comm station with a wireless speaker plugged into his ear and a microphone pressed against his lips. He's hunched over the board, face to face with one of the monitors mounted in the jump-rack, peering at the scrawl of text tripping down the screen in the distracted fashion of a man whose mind is elsewhere. He speaks into the microphone with the efficient, placating-yet-unsympathetic tones of a middle management drone in any anonymous corporate unit in the universe.

"--and yes, I *do* completely understand the delicacy of your situation, Gor Grupchyk, and I'm absolutely in agreement with you that we can't put ourselves in the position of allowing proto-capitalist effetes to outmaneuver the admirable efforts your local free labor organizations, but where we *disagree* particularly concerns your status as a significant shareholder Hometown Mart's primary corporate rival in the Cho Balkan sector. We want to prevent their market penetration as strongly as you do, believe me, but not at the risk of appearing to take sides in a conglomerate face-off. The Misfit Toys have a reputation of financial and political independence to consider. In short, you must first divest yourself of your holdings and then we'll see what we can do. That's all! I've got another call. We'll talk!"

Ray punches a button to terminate the beam signal, but instead of turning around to acknowledge Dorian and Amara's arrival, he plunks another toggle and starts in again.

"This is Lazarus. Ah, Honorable Poorman Frees! Oh, oh, pardon me. *Sindalion* Frees! You'll have to forgive my lack of familiarity with your new protocols. Simply an oversight on my part. Yes, I've kept an eye on the newswire. I have indeed been made aware of the laudable regime change initiated by the admirable uprising of your regional proletariat. A truly significant stride!" Shoulder tense. "It's a pleasure to see that you've negotiated the unrest and landed on your feet. No, I actually haven't got time to chat right now. I'm sure that you're more than capable of forging a consensus among your constituents and determining how best to deal with the

remnant of your socio-political elite. Of course they're going to try to weasel their way back into power! One can hardly blame them, Sindalion. They've been reared with the fundamental belief in their own entitlement to power. They'll undoubtedly feel that they've been robbed of something precious. You're just going to have to stick to your guns." Pause. "Yes, I do mean literally if it comes to it, but no, I'm not advocating violence as a primary recourse *per se* and no, I'm not in a position where I can provide direct assistance to you at this point in time. You knew you were going to have to learn to fish on your own eventually. Fish or cut bait, as they say. We'll talk soon! I promise. I'm going to have to let you go." Wince. "No, really. I must go. I sympathize with your situation, but I really must--Ack! It appears that we've just been very nearly pulverized by a good sized meteor. Seems to be a whole flock of them. Seriously! Can't you hear the whistle of the vacuum seeping in betwixt our emergency seals? Oh! My First Mate has just been sucked bodily out into the void. Something of a crisis here. Must click off. Thanks!"

Punch. Stab. Click.

"Lazarus here. Georgi Morgan! How long has it been? How goes the oceanographic surveying? Not in that anymore, eh? Probably for the best. Hazardous line of work. Always at the mercy of crypto-marxist government drones and elitist academic conglomerates bent on raping the environment for personal or corporate profit under the guise of their public educational mandate. . ."

Dorian leans over to Amara and whispers in her ear. "How long has he been at it?"

"I've been here for ten minutes, and he was on the comm when I arrived. That was four or five conversations ago, I think, but I might have lost count."

"Busy guy."

"Nice of him to take time out of his schedule to help us, though. Wouldn't you agree?" Amara flashes a sly and sidelong look at him, pretending at innocence.

Dorian scowls back.

"I'm just saying," she says, shrugging. "That's all."

He grunts, but chooses not to answer. Dorian crosses his arms over his chest, mentally prepares himself for a wait and

shifts his attention to the activities of the bridge crew. For the first time in his (albeit, brief) experience, they seem to be doing actual ship-navigating things. Lots of clicking keys and studious poring over of digital output. A considerable number of pursed lips and deepening brow ridges. It appears that when Ray is otherwise occupied, the soft seaworthy renders are packed up and put away. In fact, he even witnesses Yartz, the First Crew helmsman and Officer of the Watch in Ray's stead, verbally order a minor course correction with shockingly technical specificity. The crewman who answers him actually seems to know what to do with this bit of mathematical punditry and sets about to execute the new course. It's not exactly a buzz of activity, but it's an improvement over the previous episodes of pseudo-catatonic sway and grind which he has observed. He's much less concerned all of a sudden about the ship bouncing off a rogue moon that happens to render as a humpbacked whale or a spritely spray of micrometeors that pretend to be a pleasant evening rain shower.

Ray spends ten or fifteen more minutes shunting off additional urgent calls from foreign dignitaries, brothers in arms and assorted other sympathizers of the imminent proletariat uprising before finally digging the plug out of his ear and straightening up from the comm with an aggrieved sigh. He wheels toward them and stops, eyelids fluttering as though their presence surprises him, then collects himself with a cleansing shake of his head.

"Ah, you made it. Sorry to have kept you waiting." Ray waves his hand vaguely at the comm panel. "Business. It never stops. In fact, I've lately begun thinking about issuing franchise licenses to relieve some of the work load. Trademark the Misfit Toys brand name, put together a business plan and manual of standard operating procedures; hand select some diligent owner-operators and delegate some of the rim sector operations to underlings. The notion has merit."

"I hear public uprisings are a growth industry," Dorian says. "Could be a nice financial opportunity for you if the market remains robust."

Ray narrows his gaze, then catches himself. He waggles

his finger at Dorian, laughing. "Aren't you clever? 'This is how we become the thing we hate', eh? Point taken. Don't worry about me. We'll muddle through somehow. Besides, with this band of pirates, it's just as well that we keep their hands from falling idle. It's God's way of keeping the universe in balance, I suppose."

Dorian nods, but doesn't want to let Ray get himself sidetracked. He's got his own pile of work waiting for him, and even with the faith he has in Ghost's abilities, it isn't the same as jacking through it himself.

"You wanted to speak with us, Ray?"

"Yes. An interesting wrinkle in our short-term plans has developed. I wanted to solicit your opinion on it."

He's learning to hate wrinkles of any sort, but interesting ones most specifically. Dorian glances uneasily toward Amara. "Let's hear it."

"Indeed. Let us hear it."

Ray swings back to the comm panel and pokes at a series of system override switches. A hidden speaker utters a screech of feedback, which is shortly replaced by the lilting feminine tones of a reasonable sounding newswire patch.

". . . general release: The Earth Outreach Sciences Organization wishes to announce the offered reward of seven hundred thousand rupees for information leading to the apprehension and delivery of recently identified cyberterror suspects Dorian, John Allen and Cain, Amara Necise, lately of Trithemius Orbis. The suspects are wanted for questioning in an incident of First Order Malignant Scheme Transmission pursuant to the Cyber Intrusion and Manipulation Code as delineated in the Data Security Standards Accord(Third Ed., Revised). The present location of the suspects is unknown at this time, but they are believed to have fled Trithemius Orbis. Individuals who believe they may have come into contact with Dorian or Cain are advised to contact their local law enforcement agencies. The suspects should be considered armed and dangerous and approached with extreme caution. Last known physical description and certified digital genomic record sequences are as follows. . .

Ray cuts the audio feed. "It goes on for a bit and then repeats. They haven't glommed onto the connex between you two and the Misfit Toys as yet, at least not that they're admitting, but I suspect that won't take long. We're not

exactly the most un-memorable bunch."

Dorian frowns, trying to parse Ray's purpose behind bringing this to their attention. "So what do you want from us? You knew this job had some risks."

"I'm not saying that it changes the status of our agreement. I did think, however, that you would wish to know that new complications had arisen." Ray lifts his chin, watching Dorian with an appraising eye. "Nothing unmanageable, of course. As far as the Janites are concerned, we're a standard cargo tug with readily verifiable id profiles, both corporate and individual, recorded in all the major admiralty datascares. As long as they don't decide to haul in and board us for individual scheme certification, they shouldn't have any reason to believe otherwise."

"And if they do?" Amara asks.

"Well, then a series of unfortunate events would necessarily befall our gentle security escorts. You're not the only ones aboard this ship with a practical interest in avoiding an invasive legal entanglement, and a pair of lonely police cruisers would find themselves disturbingly overmatched if it came to a swap of Hammer batteries." Ray's eye glitters merrily at the thought, but he says, "That, however, would tend to alter our plans considerably given our current distance from Glastenhome. We're not capable of engaging in a running battle with the entire combined Janite military and police forces indefinitely, and even if we were, by the time we reached Glastenhome, we'd more than likely find the depot held against us. So all of that is probably best avoided if possible."

"I agree," Amara says, sounding relieved. "Let's not call attention to ourselves."

"Precisely. As long as we remain anonymous, the only occurrence that might significantly derail us at this point would be a complete lockdown of the Giari Tau depot address. Short of that, we remain confident that with a clever application of some deeper magic, we'll have little trouble overriding the standard depot queue safeguards between there and Glastenhome. Put your minds at ease, please."

"So what's the problem then? You didn't summon us here just to inform us that the scope of the search had widened."

"Well, one of the things I find interesting about this message--which is being broadcast hourly along all the key communications sub-nets, by the way--is precisely the scope of it. Michael Raville already demonstrated in Sonali that he is more than willing to deal with this issue privately, using his vast personal resources to settle his scores. The fact that he has switched tactics suggests a couple of things to me: One, that he has temporarily lost sight of you, which is good, both because it both clearly disturbs him and because it gives us some space in which to breathe; and two, that his pursuit of you is much more ardent than I had hitherto believed. The risk of going public is that certain other governmental or law enforcement entities which may be hostile to him might become curious enough to investigate what exactly his interest is in two formerly upstanding members of a backwater colonial community. That could well raise some troubling complications of its own, especially if his sentient scheme proves to be as convivial with others as he was with us. The benefit for him, of course, is that it also makes it more difficult for *you* to turn to those same forces for assistance without running the risk of being delivered either to Raville or held in confinement while your stories are sorted out.

"Without a doubt, it is something of a gamble, and that leads me in turn to assume that either Raville believes that he is safe from outside interference, or whatever he has planned has moved along sufficiently toward its conclusion that he doesn't think he can be stopped at this point, even if one of his opponents chooses to believe you and move against him."

Ray pauses to let them consider his arguments, then leans back against the comm panel, arms across his chest in apparent mockery of Dorian. He flashes his white teeth at them and continues in a cool voice.

"In any case, I find it more than a little bewildering that he would expend so much time and effort on a couple of--if you'll pardon the expression--small time data intruders, when he has more pressing business at hand with the imminent arrival of the alien emissaries. If I was conspiratorially minded, given such a daisy chain of evidence, I might begin to suspect that there are salient facts the two of you have been withholding from me." Ray's features harden suddenly and the chatter on

the bridge falls still. "And while Raville's machinations certainly won't alter the status of our agreement, choosing to continue to deceive me at this point in time, when all of our necks are in the noose, might have unfortunate consequences."

"Jacking Raville's proprietary foam is more than sufficient cause to piss him off," Dorian counters.

"But not this extent, I think you'll agree," Ray responds firmly. "Surely you can see my dilemma. I'm responsible for the well-being of my crew. We've been successful for as long as we have for one simple reason: we do our research and know which variables must be controlled in any operation we undertake to insure both our success and our safety. But I'm beginning to get the distinct feeling that we haven't been provided with the proper frame of reference for understanding this mission."

Dorian feels Amara's eyes on him, fixed and penetrating, but she says nothing. She waits on him, because she promised she would. He slides his tongue against his teeth, ponders, but there isn't anything he can say that won't jeopardize their position. There's too much he doesn't know still, too many answers tied up in Raville's datacore. It's too soon.

Seeing Dorian's hesitation, Ray stiffens and turns sharply to his helmsman. "Mr. Yartz! Prepare to cut all thrust on my command."

Yartz arches an eyebrow, but says only, "Aye, sir."

Amara leaps forward, her hands clenched at her sides. "What are you doing?"

"Until we know the truth, this is as far as we go." Ray pierces her with an icy glare, and Amara falters. "In or out. It's your call."

She stands there, trembling with restrained passion, the muscles in her jaws bulging with an explosion of protest. *I am the pearl!* But again she says nothing.

The void that replaces all the things Amara would say roars in Dorian's ears. The scalding heat of her need, her fear prickles across the skin of his face and arms. She wants this. Wants Ray's help and support. Craves it the way a hammer needs a nail.

It's too soon.

Except that was what Raville had believed about him also.

Amara is practically jittering right out of her skin, so anxious is she to share her secret truth. But she's also waiting, trusting him. But for how much longer?

He has never believed, not in the way she does. Even confronted with the truth--with the orb, with Amara's growing power, with all the obscene cloak-and-daggery--the most he has achieved has been a sort of suspension of disbelief. The things that he has been told and shown and experienced might as well have been fictions, deeply immersive renders in which he has taken a role, playing along for fun. He has treated his life like fiction, following along with a script someone else wrote without making any actual decisions, because to decide would be to participate in the future Amara was embracing. Decisions would make him culpable.

But he has to choose now. To accept Amara's becoming and all that comes along with it, or to continue disbelieving and become an impediment. How far would she continue to trust him once his doubt has actively begun to thwart her plans? But it isn't just her denunciation that terrifies him, the gripping fear that she'll leave him behind in her headlong rush to destruction. It's the consequences of belief.

Because if he believes, he has to believe all of it. It isn't really faith if he doesn't trust her, a living god, to know what needs to be done.

A ball of dread rises in his chest, expands until he can hardly breathe around it. Dorian looks at Amara, poised midway between him and Ray. His mouth is dry. His head throbs. He's been grinding his teeth without noticing it. And all he can do is watch her.

Belief is the antithesis of choice. The death of his wants, his need to save her. The end of everything he has striven for and all of his designs.

But so is unbelief. Because he also knows, without any hesitation, that Amara *will* go on without him if he forces her into that decision. She's already chosen; she's just asking if he's willing to follow her.

Asking if he is truly willing to take the leap of faith.

Dorian presses his hands against the sides of his face and rubs at his temples.

Small circles. Happy circles.

What am I supposed to do?

Unbidden, Amara lifts her head and slowly turns to him. She smiles, and her eyes fill with a warm, sad flicker of understanding. Even without his having spoken, she hears, she feels, she is becoming, and in the dimness of the bridge's electronic glow, she seems to shimmer. Her golden scales glimmer with a coating like stardust. Dorian stares at her, his whole body shaking.

"I know it's hard," she says, quiet as a whisper spoken from her lips to his ear. Her lips don't move. "It isn't about what you think is right, John. It isn't about Raville anymore or whether you can trust the things he has told you. It isn't even about saving the world. It's about what you believe. It's about me, and what I am. It's about gaining the clarity that flows from faith alone."

Dorian shakes his head, fierce with denial. "You *believe*."

"And if I am who I say I am, then you must trust me also. The problem is that you don't want to believe."

"Because I don't understand it!"

"You aren't required to understand, only to believe or not. With either choice, your path becomes clear. It becomes. . .inevitable." A sternness, like cold iron, slips into her tone. "But you must choose, one way or the other. The time for indecision has passed. We can't afford to be delayed in this fashion any longer."

She needs the Misfit Toys, in other words. To deny her would be to require her to choose between them, to decide who can help her more.

No, that's not fair. Because Raville said that she chose him first.

Amara needs them both. They're both part of her vision, her script for the future. He isn't being asked to believe in what she means to do, but in what she claims to be.

And if she isn't. . .if she isn't. . .then there's never been any hope at all, and everything they've endured has been pointless. Worse than pointless, it's been a delusion, an accident, a lie.

"Why me?" The words are hoarse, harsh. "If you knew this was so hard, why did you choose me?"

"You've never cared about saving the human race. You

don't think that way. It's too abstract, this salvation business; the mere scale of it makes it meaningless. For you, something must be real to have value. It must prove itself to be real, whether that thing be code or object or another human being. And only knowing it makes it real." She reaches out to him and strokes the side of his face with the palm of her hand. "But those things which *are* real, you love with all your might. And in doing so, you remind us all that it is good to cherish what we are."

He hangs his head, shamed. It is agony, to be known so deeply. Agony and joy.

But he still needs to hear it from her one last time. The words fall from his lips like coins in a wishing well, like stones cast in the sea: "Are you? Are you really who you say you are?"

Amara smiles, and light pours from her face, baptizes him in wonder. She laughs the way a child does, full of pleasure and bright with joy.

"I am, John. I am who I am."

He meets her gaze, the glory and truth of her, and he sees at last.

And that's it. The absolute reality. The rest is just details.

Dorian looks into her eyes, the eyes of a living goddess and the breadth of all knowing. He falls into the vast and deep mystery that is Amara, and he sighs over the things he will never understand.

Some things can never be known.

"Show them," he says. "Show them the future."

And there was light.

Amara stepped back into the open deck space between Ray and Dorian, chin lowered against her chest. There was silence, except for the muted hum of the electronics and the rush of cooling fans. The bridge crew turned in their seats to watch, gazing intently. Ray also watched, his lips thin, his expression thoughtful, but he did not interrupt. Dorian felt his pulse thud in the hollow of his neck, slow and rhythmic, as though his skin was stretched too tightly over his bones.

Amara stood perfectly still, just breathing at first, with her eyes closed, and then slowly lifted her arms and held them out

perpendicular to her body with her elbows locked. Her hands dangled from limp wrists like charms on a bracelet. The pose reminded Dorian of a scarecrow.

She remained that way for a time, unmoving. Static electricity crackled down Dorian's arms, and he shivered. He struggled to breathe regularly, but his chest felt constricted, and the hum of the equipment seemed to grow louder about him, as though he was standing near a transformer.

With languid, fluid motions, Amara began to move. She twined her hands in delicate whorls, fingers rippling through the air, folding and unfolding, fluttering like a lady's silken fan. Her arms, sinuous, serpentine, wove hypnotic patterns on the loom of the air. She rolled her head around on her neck, shoulder to shoulder, round and about.

Inhaled a shuddering breath as she pressed her fingers against her chest.

And exhaled.

The dark space opened above her breast as it had done before, and she withdrew the orb from inside herself, clutched between her hands like a fiery heart.

Dorian watched, transfixed, drawn to her, drawn to the light, but not daring to move. He was breathless.

She held it out to him as an offering, lifted her eyes--shining black stones reflected in the orb's golden glow--then raised the *quae-ha-distra* above her head and turned about in a long, slow circle, her hands pulsing with light.

Time stopped. The universe paused. All being held its breath.

Someone gasped.

And slowly, stately, the revolutions began. Space, being, *the all*, lurched into movement around her, unfurled from the crux of her fixed axis, tripped across the worn ruts of its ageless paths, and gaining momentum, shifted its orbit, bled colors and twisted boundaries and flung itself to the winds. The plastic waters of chaos plunged into the spaces between *was* and *is*, sealed the fragments of consciousness with a sticky *becoming* that was ever-changing, amorphous and unpredictable.

Beyond the reach of the orb's light, a smothering darkness fell.

The universe contracted to a dense core delimited from chaos by the glow cast from the orb. The light was everything. It was flame and ice, soul and flesh, one and zero. It was, and all that was outside it's circle simply was not. Beyond reach of its glow, there was only the impenetrable night.

The old passed away; became new.

But Amara remained. Remained. Unmoving, unflinching, unwavering. Immutable as the center of the universe.

Light blossomed within the orb, a blinding spark that blazed *ex nihilo* into being. It rippled down Amara's arms and danced along her bronzed skin like rivulets of mercury, an otherworldly aura that wholly encompassed her. Touching her, the light pulsed and grew brighter, became an extension of her presence. And her flesh thinned, a thin cloth hung over a great burning, a garment of pink shadow--pink fading to black--delineated and consumed by the light. She dimmed, flickered and faded, until only light remained and the memory of her was like a translucent skin, an all but invisible vessel. She burned with a marvelous radiance, a glorious sun around which they all revolved. Bright and piercing, her brilliance grew, until doubling, trebling, she detonated a searing penumbra of light.

The wave of her explosion, blown out as a wave of terrible golden fire, crashed over the bridge of the ship, over those gathered, watching, awed. It withered their skin and splintered their bones, filled their consciousness with her pleroma and left no trace of their existence in its wake.

Amara scattered them to the far corners of creation, unmade them, and when they were broken, she formed them again, cupped them in the palm of her hand, and carried them back into the circle of her light.

Having been broken, they became whole.

Having been made whole, she led them deeper to places no man had ever seen or touched or tasted before.

Dorian shut his eyes and let her carry him away.

18.

Thrum. Thrum. Thrum. Eeeee.

Arz. Thrum Oooo. Thrum. Eeee?

Thum. Oooo. Rringeeee?

Thrum. --ou earing me?

"Mr. Yartz!"

Thrum, thrum.

Voice.

"Are you hearing me, Mr. Yartz!"

Ray's voice was wet, sound waves propagating over vast liquid distances. It tugged at the ear like a badly warped echo. And eventually, from the emptiness, tolling up from the depths of a long sleep: *Here, captain.*

Meaningless. There was no focus, no differentiation. Only oneness. Everywhere was here, every time was now. None of it mattered. Go back. Folded again into the cool and supple arms of night. Go back.

Dorian floated on a plume of cool air, bodiless, a wafting ball of cotton. A seed pod, laden with poppy beads of light. Home again, home again, home again, nod.

"Yartz!"

"Yes, captain!" Quicker this time, emergent.

Sinking, sinking. Accumulating weight, the detritus of words.

Word made flesh.

Sound had quality, an immediacy, a texture like the serrated edge of a knife. Dorian settled back into his skin with

a thump and a gasp. He winced, found that he liked the feel of having his eyes squeezed shut and kept them that way. Sound clanged against his ears, the din of pots and pans, clashing cymbals.

But Ray's voice rang though the roar of noise, abraded the air. A steel plow furrowing the fields of mind.

"Be so kind as to run a network systems diagnostic on our shipboard nodes." Even couched in polite terms, the tone of command was clear, stern. He exuded a snarling quality that was impossible to ignore. Tense as the timer spring on a grenade. "And when you're done with that, get Ghost on the box and tell him I want him to initiate a full network viral scan. I want him to focus particularly on degraded Corlian loops or Shroedinger husk baffling. Report any non-standard findings to me at once. And pay particular attention to the access logs!"

"I'm on it. . .will be shortly, at least."

Even torn between here and there, the sacred and profane, Dorian understood. Ray was looking for spoof jars--little packets of disassembled viral agents left behind after a stealth program was injected into an open net in real time to overwrite local Strand nodes with (typically) malicious phenomenalist renders. The result was a hijacked network signal, an instantaneously dispersed mass-hallucination that imposed itself seamlessly on reality by corrupting an array's signal decryption at the connex. Well placed spoof jars were the most common form of banking identity fraud on the Strand by convincing unwary patrons that a window front hack shop was actually a branch of their local credit conglomerate.

Ray's explanation for the eruption of the ineffable into his datascape was that Dorian and Amara had jacked his network. He wasn't prepared to believe what his eyes had seen and his ears had heard, the evidence of his own sensory input.

Dorian couldn't blame him. He knew better than to call another kettle black. Didn't mean he had to stand for it, though.

Groaning to himself, Dorian pried his eyes open and endeavored to orient himself. He had fallen into the captain's chair, over the arm he had been leaning against, with his back

against the seat. He had one foot up in the air and his arm wrapped around the back support. A stream of spittle ran from the corner of his mouth to his ear. He cleared his throat and hauled himself upright, wiped the line of saliva from his cheek. His body was dense, heavy as though his skin had been packed with sand bags where his muscles should have been, and he ached in that grating way peculiar to falling asleep in uncomfortable chairs. A rabbit punch to the kidneys ache.

Effectively roused, Dorian scanned the bridge. Amara first: exactly where he had left her, just a few paces away, now with her chin on her chest and her arms at her side. Soft and smooth-featured, shoulders drooped, drained. It still cost her something, transforming reality. As he gazed at her, she sucked in a deep, cleansing breath and lifted her head. She blinked, sighed, veiled her wide-eyed pleasure with a nod of satisfaction, then smiled an encouragement at Dorian. He sighed back, relieved.

Among the rest of the bridge crew, only Ray and Yartz were moving, and Yartz was only mobile to the extent that cradling his head in his hands could be classified as movement. Chambers on Comm and Yelkins, who manned the Nav boards, lolled with their heads on the backs of their chairs. Skeltz had curled up into a fetal position between his seat and the wall. He might have been whimpering. But Ray, Ray stood with his legs braced firmly on the deck and a scowl on his lips.

"Don't forget to check the Grange nexus for foam compression curling," Dorian said. "If you're searching for the shards of spoof jars, that is. You might also want to take a look at your nav maps and data time stamps. Recalibrate your course plotting for lost time."

Ray flashed Dorian a withering look. "My crew is qualified to handle this operation without your help. Remember, if you will, who you're dealing with."

"Just making sure you're thorough, Captain. When you're still flailing about for excuses not to believe, I want you to be certain that I've been ruled out as one of the options on your short list."

Ray stabbed a long, pale finger at Dorian, then at Amara,

and snapped, "You two. In my quarters. Now." He lashed a final glare around the bridge to make sure his orders were being carried out. "Wake up, Mr. Yartz! You have the Watch."

Ray turned on his heel and banged through the pressure door without another word. Dorian shrugged unhappily at Amara. He had a sudden urge to apologize, though whether it was for himself or Ray's lack of faith, he couldn't say. It didn't matter, really. They weren't in a position to do anything but follow as instructed.

Yet Amara grinned at him and winked, suggesting that it was all part of her greater plan. He stared at her as she shifted around and ambled out after Ray. Dorian was thoughtful, but bizarrely untroubled by this idea.

So this was what it was like to be a True Believer™.

Fascinating.

Dorian entered Ray's living quarters a few paces behind the others, and pushed the door shut behind him. The room he surveyed as he turned was both starkly decorated and alarmingly modern. Naked steel walls polished to a high gloss enclosed an uncharacteristically broad area for the interior of a starship, but it was clearly a utilitarian space. In place of prints and pictures, there were embedded monitors scrolling through screens of ship's data. The light was glaring, white and unforgiving. To one side of the door was a recessed foyer, surrounded by quick-mount processors, feed cables and adjustable screens. In the midst of the equipment was a long, narrow table and a scattering of hard metal chairs. Nav displays, triDvid map projections and global file ports littered the table top, creating an ad-hoc conference room. Wedged into a niche at the far end was a small bar and pocket sink, with a suspended glass cabinet of vari-colored bottles and tumblers mounted above.

On the other side of the room were racks of hardshell server backup blades lining the corridor-side wall floor to ceiling. Against the far wall, there were more monitors, more ports and plugs, and the same harsh lights. Opposite Dorian, framed in the bulkhead, was a closed steel-framed door which, he presumed, opened into Ray's personal living space. Occupying an intermediate position between the door and the

far wall sat a massive burlled hardwood desk, intricately carved, meticulously preserved, and piled up to the elbows with stacks of loose leaf papers.

In typical egalitarian fashion, even Ray's private quarters were partially devoted to public service and the business of his ship.

Ray stood at the desk now, leaning forward on his fists. His shoulders were squared like a mastiff's, lending the impression that he would snap anyone's head off who came within range of his jaws. His visible eye was as bright as a piece of flint, and he clamped his teeth together so that his jaws bulged. His expression, however, was perfectly inscrutable. Smooth as glass.

Amara had already crossed the rubberized decking and slipped into a replica Queen Anne chair across the desk from Ray. She nestled into the tall, cushioned back with her hands folded primly in her lap, erect and alert. If she sensed any threat from Ray's mood, or the way he had spoken to them earlier, she didn't betray any alarm.

Dorian, on the other hand, expected the tirade to begin at any moment as he edged across the room and took his place in the matching chair at Amara's side. Maybe some silent glowering first, followed by some uncomfortable settling in, then a simple, direct, ear-scorching explosion. Ray seemed to him, at least, to be in that frame of mind.

But when he had taken his seat, Ray nodded to himself, let his shoulders relax and took several moments to gaze solemnly over them. With surprising formality, he bowed low to Amara. Not just a gesture of respect, but an act of obeisance.

"You'll please forgive my ignorance if I don't know how to honor you appropriately," he said. "I'm unfamiliar with the customs of your people."

"Your desire to convey honor is honor enough, Captain."

"Then please accept additional apologies for my seeming faithlessness in front of the crew on the bridge. It was not my intention to offend. I only wished them to be satisfied with conclusions they draw themselves in this matter rather than accepting my judgment as law."

"There was no offense taken," Amara said, smiling. "It is

an admirable objective."

Ray tilted his head toward her in acknowledgement. "Thank you. I appreciate your courtesy." Then, to Dorian, and more briskly: "Along those lines, then, any assistance you might be able to provide in clarifying for my crew that this experience was not, in fact, a scripted render would be greatly appreciated. They should reach that conclusion on their own in time, but your willing involvement will help to allay their most troubling doubts. They'll suspect your advice at first, but the more thoroughly you help them investigate, the more inevitable the correct conclusion will seem to them when they reach it."

"You're saying that you believe?" Dorian blinked at him, baffled.

He tried to remember clearly what he had experienced on the bridge in that calm, dead space after Amara had exposed the *quae-ha-distra*. He recalled the aching sense of oneness, the knowing and being known, the cool embrace of Amara's splendid, eternal, unfathomable being. The joy of drowning in her infinite self. Another splendid taste of the world of the Exousiai.

But his mind couldn't keep a grasp on it. The memory was too slippery, too rife with otherness for him to clutch it for long, and all that remained in its passing was just the bedrock awareness of having been transformed in ways he didn't understand, but without knowing either how or why it had happened in the first place.

"Just like that?" he said. "You believe."

Ray stiffened as though Dorian had offended him. "You don't believe, I take it?"

"Of course I do. I'm slow, not stupid. What I don't understand is how someone like *you* comes to believe so easily."

"You expect me to require *more* evidence than the unforeseen eruption of the a divine and timeless entity into my personal space? Not all of us are as stubborn or as single-minded as you are, John. We've been subjected to ample evidence over the last couple of weeks that there was more to Ms. Cain than was strictly discernable from traditional sensory inputs."

"Such as?"

"The dreams were where it began. The subtle influx of an alien consciousness twisting through the landscape of our unconscious thoughts. Unbidden, we apprehended lives and worlds and vistas of potential that were not fundamentally our own. We all have dreams like that sometimes, yes? We all imagine ourselves as other folk, living different lives, but rarely is the experience so seamless that we grieve our loss when we wake." Ray flashed his teeth playfully. "Even more rare is a shared-narrative experience. When my crew all dream the same dreams together, I should hope that I was an astute enough captain to take notice of such an aberration and spend some time wondering about its cause. Or is this explanation too abstract for your taste?"

"Necessary, but not sufficient, I'm afraid."

"I expected as much. I won't bore you with the related phenomena, then. The apparent thinning of the boundaries between private thought and public consciousness, for instance."

Knowing, just as you are known. "Stipulated as fact. Move along."

"Consider, then, that we routinely and inexplicably seem to have developed a tendency to leap several hundreds of thousands of kilometers ahead of our coordinate placements based on all known velocity-to-distance tables. Dreams are one thing. Countervailing the laws of propulsion astrophysics is something else entirely."

Ray withdrew his own chair from beneath his desk and sat down. He spoke to Dorian as though all these things should have been obvious from the start. True Believers™ were like that, Dorian supposed.

"I know you, John, and though you possess many impressive talents, a proclivity toward spontaneous trans-dimensional relocation is not one of them. Similarly, the *Proletariat Horde* has not previously under-reported her thrust-to-max-velocity capabilities, and while she is a gorgeously competent ship, the numbers we're seeing are somewhat outside her scope. Outside of anyone's scope, really. Faced with that fact, it was obvious that something has changed since we docked above Trithemius Orbis. The make-up of

Misfit Toys has not, and you are a relatively known commodity. Thus, what changed had to be Amara. Factor in Raville's ardent pursuit of her--and you, of course--and there must be something special about Amara that had hitherto remained undetected. Obvious to me, at least. I imagine our friendly police escort has had a devil of a time explaining it to their superiors. It might be illuminating to ask their opinion before we leave."

"But what troubles you, I imagine, was my decision to force Amara--in a manner of speaking--to reveal her true self to us once we had heard Raville's message. That was sheer pragmatism. We're less than ten days out from the Glastenhome zap as of this morning's calculations. Raville obviously understands how unique our passenger is, and is willing to take considerable risks to gain control over her. That is the wrong place and the wrong time to have scads of unanswered questions hanging over my head. I said it once before: As captain of this ship, it is essential that I know as much as I can be allowed to know about our mission before sticking my crew dead in the middle of Janite military jurisdiction and on the wrong side of both the police and one of the more powerful men in human space. Thus, I forced the point and asked what I needed to know. Amara gave me the answer." He pressed his palms together in front of his nose and bowed his head in Amara's direction. "Though once again, my dear, I beg your pardon for any inconvenience that I might have caused you."

But Dorian shook his head. "Okay, so weird things have been happening. I'm clear on that. I understand that you'd be curious. It's the leap from *weird stuff coincides with Amara's arrival* to *therefore she must be the emissary of a quasi-divine alien race* that's got me a little baffled. I mean, why not side with straightforward logic of a viral spoof until the evidence against it is incontrovertible?"

"What sort of proof is it that you're looking for, John? Some things are just known. How the knowing happens can't ever be explained. . .it can just be known, do you follow me?" Ray put up his hands in a gesture of exasperation. "I'll put it as simply as I can: If you can show me the code architecture that is clean enough to duplicate what we have experienced,

I'll get down on my knees and worship *you*, for God's sake. But you can't. It doesn't exist. I *know* Strand immersion. I know the feel of render. This was not it. Consequently, it must have been something else, and until that other thing can be adequately explained to me, I'm prone to believe what my deepest, most cherished self is telling me. Which is, as purely and simply as I can describe it, that I've been too far from home and seen too many miracles this morning to clap my hands over my eyes and call it wisdom. I know truth when I touch it."

"You can only say that because you never saw her put away the curry," Dorian answered, trying not to be defensive. "Curry confuses the issue, believe me."

Amara laughed lightly into her hand, then said, "Don't be too hard on him, Ray. John unfortunately had to contend with the added obstacle of knowing me prior to my awakening. He saw the trees up close as we slogged through them, rather than merely glimpsing a panorama of the forest after the fact. Your belief is more akin to faith, while John's was hard earned. It's the line between trust and faith."

/&OpenSess

< Ping: John >

< What? >

< Don't be so hard on yourself. >

< Who, me? >

< What I shared with you and what I showed the Misfit Toys were different experiences. They needed to know what they were fighting for. That isn't what I need from you, and so your path to belief was different. >

< What exactly is it that you **do** need from me? >

< - >

< ? >

< They were provided with a vision to suit their particular talents. High level. It makes for a nice, convenient narrative. >

< Ah, you gave them the old spoonful of sugar method. . . >

< I showed them the history of Raville's experience with the orb, and a sketch of my own human incarnation. It was enough to win their support because they, unlike you, wanted

to believe in the gifts of the Exousiai in the first place. >

< Misfit Toys: Rising up against The Man (now with all-new Super-Alien Scrubbing Bubbles). >

< On a multitude of levels, yes. >

< Does it bother you to manipulate them like that? You've said they wanted to help all along. >

< It isn't manipulation. One truth, many facets. Everyone approaches truth from their own perspective and takes what they need to live. >

< Did you get that out of a fortune cookie? >

< Yes, actually. But that doesn't make it any less valid. >

< What about free will? >

< It's an illusion founded on ignorance of the grand design. Truth means that all ends are inevitable. >

< Is that supposed to be comforting? >

< It's supposed to be true. Whether or not you find it comforting depends on your perspective, too. >

< Gods eat too many fortune cookies, methinks. >

< Gods also don't use p2p when they want to communicate with lowly mortals. >

< What are you saying? You're *not* a god?!?! >

< I'm saying the human part of me has more patience with your good-natured sarcasm than the Exousian side would. I don't think she has a sense of humor. >

< Oh, and the human side of you does? >

< - >

< So, are you just flirting with me? Or trying to keep me from feeling like a doof because it took me so long to find the bandwagon? >

< Gods don't flirt, John. >

< I know that. Gods toy with mortals and then destroy them. On the other hand, gods also don't use p2p, as someone recently pointed out, so I'm receiving some mixed messages. >

< - >

< I do think you're maybe taking this god business a tad too seriously. Can we settle on something more reasonable? Something in the demi-godish range maybe? That would make me more comfortable. >

< - >

< So does this mean I'm not a doof? >

< - >

< I'd like your opinion on that. Seriously. >

< :: Connection Terminated :: >

/&EndSess

Dorian shook the signal reverb out of his skull and flapped his eyelids to clear both the p2p line and his thoughts. He didn't know whether Ray had noticed his brief waver of attention, or if he would care even if he had. When Amara finished speaking, he took advantage of the pause to switch topics.

"Since we're talking about trust and to get back to the topic at hand: do you really think my word is going to be enough to quell anyone's doubts? Most of your people know that I've been hard at work in the Heavy Systems Tech Lab extracting Raville's tarball. Some of them are savvy enough to figure out ways I might tunnel from a sub-database to the main repository and implant spoof jars at the nodes. I don't think my word is going to count for much."

"Some of them will continue to doubt," Ray allowed, unperturbed. "Whether or not they choose to believe is a matter of individual conscience. I just want to give them a legitimate chance at it without being undermined by all the possible tech solutions."

"At the same time," Amara said, "we should be patient with those who will seek other explanations. Some will have difficulty accepting what they have learned. Humans encounter so little raw truth in their lives. It isn't surprising that they wouldn't know what to do with it when they do find it."

"Indeed," Ray agreed. "However, most initial skepticism should be allayed by Ghast's participation in the extraction process. It would be mightily difficult to jack our network under normal circumstances. Jacking it with Ghast looking over your shoulder is nigh to impossible. He has the credibility here that your analysis alone would lack, Dorian."

Ghast. Amara had told him to cultivate that relationship, probably for this exact circumstance.

Good thing he was a True Believer™, otherwise this mumbo-jumbo, convenient semi-coincidence business might have pissed him off. For those keeping score at home, that

made it Goddess - 2, Troglodytic Human - nil.

"I have no problem offering my expertise," he said, determined to avoid the hat trick. "I'll do whatever Amara thinks is best."

Ray put his hand up. "Hold on. I'm getting a ping from Yartz." His eye fluttered for several seconds as he processed the p2p feed. When he was finished, he seemed more, rather than less disturbed. "Yartz is reporting that we seem to have made yet another unexplained spatial leap. Current projections suggest that we will have achieved a stable, geo-synchronous orbit above Glastenhome in a little over fifty-two hours shiptime." Ray ran his hand nervously over the top of his desk, ruffling a sheaf of papers. "I don't suppose you know anything about that?"

"*Tempus fugit*," Amara said simply. "The purpose for this journey has almost been achieved."

"We've lost our escort apparently."

"They're not lost. They ceased to be relevant, so we left them behind."

Ray exhaled heavily, a sound like resignation. "It isn't my place to question you, of course. But given that you have this *talent* for violating the laws of physics, and obviously have no compunction against using it--"

Dorian finished the thought for him. "If you can zap without a depot, why not just lift us straight to Giari Tau and save all this trouble?"

Eight days? Nine? It was the second time she had carved desperate hours away from his life because it suited her whims, putting everyone about her at risk. Was she trying to keep him blind?

"The journey itself is valuable, as we've already seen. We come to understandings about what we are, where the pieces fit together, how each one of us is valuable. But beside that, I ask you both to remember that the *quae-ha-distra* is still quickening within me. There are some things that I can do; there are others that I haven't yet remembered. Skipping like a stone across the vastness and depth of space would still take us several months at my current rate of awakening." Amara turned aside to Dorian and winked. "But most of all, I just don't want to."

"Don't *want*?" Ray said, his eyes widening. His face went ashen. "But the escort, the Janites. . .the trade protocols demand--"

Dorian shook his head. "The gods have their own purposes. They're bigger than your box." But Ray wasn't listening. His brow was pinched in concentration, and his lips moved in a constant, silent sub-vocalization. Scrambling to deliver orders to the crew, no doubt.

Dorian climbed to his feet. "I could have used the extra few days, Amara. You know I needed them."

"I know you wanted them."

"You're going to shake his faith with a few more surprises like that. No one likes a capricious deity."

"It's only capricious if you don't know what you're doing," she said. "Ray has just enough faith to accomplish the task that's been given to him."

He held her gaze for a moment. She smiled softly, full of her own wisdom, but he didn't understand. He didn't even know if he was supposed to.

In the end, Dorian did the only thing he could do: he went back to work.

He banged around the decks, cutting through service tunnels that were becoming increasingly familiar, sliding down ladders like an old pro, ticking off landmarks between his destinations to keep himself on course. Hurryhurryhurry. The demand for speed was like a hammer banging time against the drum of his skull. His vision seemed to fracture into deliberate angles, sharp as the blade of a knife in front, infinitely planed at the edges. He muttered conversion and decryption algorithm tables as he barked along, wove gossamer webs of logic, shunts of code, and sheer flights of fancy into complex triDvid mandalas, all blown away by gusts of chuddering impatience.

He felt the decks vibrating beneath his feet; heard the engines roar in one long, sustained growl. The whole ship gave a mighty lurch that almost tumbled him onto his face. And the decks, the corridors seemed to contract about him like a great diaphragm. Hard deceleration.

What did she want from him?

And was it Amara who wanted, or her darkling twin?

Dorian didn't know how to interpret her anymore. She knew that he needed all the time left to them in order to crack Raville's datacore. But she had chosen to thwart him, to proceed with her own divine agenda, as if it didn't matter to her.

Why wouldn't she want to know what was lurking in Raville's foam? Was it because she had awakened to the extent that it was no longer necessary? And if so, why hadn't she told him? Not just that she knew, but what it was that was so important that they had needed it in the first place.

Or perhaps it was that having learned Raville's secrets, she didn't want Dorian to know. But he pushed that thought away. It had the stink of doubt, and as a newly christened True Believer, it was unbecoming.

He passed others as he sprang from deck to deck. Puggish Karo, stalking a round, muttering under his breath, stiff as a golem. Diaphanous Marilea, a shimmer of iridescent silks twisting in the breeze. The engineering geeks, Bil and Wil--maybe twins, maybe just built to look that way--lugging a battered steel chest that clanked and clattered like it was loaded with monkey wrenches. The ship had thrust itself into motion, gearing up the routine tasks of docking at a foreign port. Load the guns, test the firmware, poke the malware sniffers. Fire the tubes. Anchors aweigh!

Those who crossed his line of focus moved like automatons through the standard procedures, doing what must be done, what was always done. When he did notice them, like Karo, there was something mechanical about their actions, like they were following a script or responding to orders he did not hear. The same script and orders doled out to every spacefaring crew in human space, so that even an outside observer like Dorian, if he paused to observe them, might guess exactly what they were about just by looking at them. Karo, for example, was off to secure the galley, lock down the pots and pans. Bil and Wil would proceed down to Mechanical to watch over a board of digital readouts and status gauges marked with green, white and perilous red.

They were archetypal sailors, performing duties assigned to nautical and astronautical shipmen for thousands of years

with little variation except for the buttons to be pushed, the lines to be secured, the technology to manipulate. Roles given life. Forms spawned from function, as efficient and deliberate as plugs of modular code.

They looked like they were sleepwalking, joints ajangle, servomotors wheezing, eyes dull and far away, as though their capacity for thought had been flung to the far corners of consciousness, and their bodies left to execute on auto-pilot. The meat abandoned to its own devices while the processors tried to cope with the ineffable.

Is this what it meant to be driven by the scourge of god? Spring into action, do what's demanded, satisfy the prick of conscience. Don't think, just do.

Be dazed. Be amazed. Carry on.

He didn't know why this troubled him, and he didn't have time to think about it.

Dorian burst through the hatch into the Heavy Systems Technical Lab and found Ghast still sitting in front of the monitor where he had left him an hour--no, eight days--before. Ghast glanced briefly over his shoulder, then went back to staring at the screen. His hands lay idle on the keypad in front of him, and his skin had a flaccid, pale quality to it. Dorian wormed his way through the crowded stacks of crated technical equipment and stood at his back, peering past him at the monitor.

He'd added a decent quantity of code. Some of it was obviously canned, and several chunks had so much recursive scan and keystroke cache logic to it that it had to be military in origin, but the control of flow architecture was surprisingly clever, even elegant. There were neat variable splices, trim carvings, a sharp multiple theater Stine decompilation ladder. Nice work. Not eight days worth of nice, of course, but that wasn't Ghast's fault.

Still, Dorian had to restrain himself from shoving him off his stool so he could start bashing at the keys himself. His fingers spasmed in anticipation. Ghast wasn't actually doing anything at all at the moment. He hardly even acknowledged Dorian's arrival, just gazed blandly ahead, almost as if he was trying to stare down his reflection in the monitor.

"Stuck?" Dorian asked. He put his hand on Ghast's

shoulder, and Ghast jerked like a man startled from a dead sleep. "Sorry. I thought you heard me come in."

Ghast blinked at him for several seconds, then shook his head. "I, uh--my apologies. I was just. . .I think I lost my place in the program and was having trouble remembering what I was doing. And I got this strange ping from the bridge. . ." He squeezed his eyes shut, and opened them again, exhaling a heavy breath at the same time. He ran his hand nervously across his brow. "You want to know the truth, I think I fell asleep. I just had the weirdest--no, calling it a dream doesn't feel right, but I don't have another word for it. It was so vivid. So real."

"It's okay."

"Is it? I mean, was it really--" Ghast lowered his eyes, unable to meet Dorian's scrutiny.

"It is."

"It wasn't a dream?"

"If it was, we've all had the same dream."

"And this is part of it, isn't it? This work that you're trying to do with the datacore?"

"I believe so, yes."

"Amara, too? I didn't imagine that, either?"

"It's all true."

Ghast grinned self-consciously, a little foolishly, and uttered a sigh that sounded more than a bit relieved. "I thought I might be going crazy, some kind of synaptic burn or Zhen-Tan Syndrome. Visions of angels will do that to you. It's strange, the things you find you're willing to accept as truth when the alternative seems worse." He hoisted himself off the stool, laughing quietly. "No. I shouldn't say that, either. It was surprising, you know, but not shocking. Do you know what I mean? Something about her felt special from the instant she came on board, a certain ethereal quality. She has this way of making you feel like she--I don't know, like she understands you. But I guess she does, doesn't she? Understand us, I mean."

Another True Believer. "That doesn't scare you?"

"Nah. Women always think they understand men. It's nice to have one around that actually might."

"That isn't what I meant."

"I know that." Ghast grew serious, his features clouded. "I shouldn't tell you this, but I'm going to. It feels right. It feels. . .liberating. I've carried this huge weight with me for so long, I've gotten used to it, but now--now it seems so intolerable. I've led what you might call an interesting life, John. That's a euphemism, you know. It means that I've spent a whole bunch of years getting myself into trouble and making mistakes that hurt innocent people. I was a Marine once, and I turned my back on it. I turned my back on oaths I had taken and left my honor behind as a consequence. I'm not proud of that. It shames me. I can't hold my head up in the company of honorable men, because I've cut myself off from that fraternity. I chose personal gain over community. This life I live is my penance for my failures as a human being. I've spent years trying to unmake the mistakes of my past; years trying to live down the lie of the man I claim to be. But that doesn't make it any less of a lie, and the illusion of honor that comes from helping people who aren't powerful enough to help themselves is still an illusion at the end of the day.

"That girl Amara--whether girl or goddess, I don't really care--she sees what I want to be rather than what I am. She counts my aspirations as goodness and makes me believe that one day I might just become what I hope to be. I can see how such a bone deep understanding might frighten some people, but it feels like grace to me."

"That was your dream, then? You dreamed of grace."

"I dreamed of the possibility of forgiveness."

Dorian had nothing to say to that. Ghast was so achingly sincere, achingly transparent, that it would have been nothing more than cruelty to challenge him further. He'd found his reason to believe, and it was all that he needed.

After a few moments of silence, Ghast gestured toward the monitor. "Well, I'd better let you get to work. I'm afraid I didn't get as much done as you probably wanted. I was trying to hew pretty close to the structure you'd already put into place, but I wasn't always sure I understood where you were going."

"You did fine, I'm sure."

The faint praise made Ghast flush with pleasure, and he went on quickly, "I've got to head up to the bridge to see what

Yartz is yammering on about. There was a deceleration burn a few minutes ago that I need to investigate, too. Generally get myself up to speed. I hate to leave you with so much work undone, though."

Dorian waved him toward the door. "Go on. I'm sure Yartz will be grateful for your help."

"Aye. I'll check back later."

But by the time Ghast sealed the hatch behind him, Dorian was already lost in the text.

He hated Michael Raville. Hated him.

Hate. Hate. Hate.

What kind of stupid keycracker switched from a perfectly serviceable, squarely scalable Dorson-Kayne Matrix to a clustered Fritzman Holistic Model in the in the middle of a storage bundle? It was `Programming_by_Monkeys 101`. Sure, the DKM was an ancient technique derived from an obsolete flat binary layered shell system, but it was stable and convertible with minimum read-in rejection when done through a one time load loop, but Raville was *archiving* his DKM's and performing precarious on-demand FHM script conversions that scattered faulty bits from one end of the architecture to the other.

Hard to unspool a rotating tarball when the key sig file kept dropping random characters during the load phase of a procedure call.

It took time, too much time, to build a completely independent sub-microsecond skeleton dialer that attempted to continuously cram a cascading sequential key value into the lock before the security algorithms could certify the bad read and blow up the decryption. Raville'd had a hundred freaking years to blow the dreck out of his datacore, and he'd done nothing about it, just lived with crappy, kludgy code. An offense to nature, that's what it was. A guy like that didn't deserve to have private foam if this was how he was going to take care of it.

Dorian said these things to himself and a million likewise variations as he plodded along, scratching out code, packaging modules, testing and failing and testing again.

It was just aimless caterwauling, mostly. (Mostly.) Too

many things to do, too little time to do them in. He fashioned latticeworks of symbol transformation, value-recog self-organizing dimensional element tables, gearwise arrays of floating data packets that handed off values fist-to-palm like the buckets on a water wheel. Everything that should have been easy was a disaster. Everything that should have been brain-meltingly difficult was simply and intractably unfathomable. He couldn't tell if Raville was a genius or an idiot, and being unable to decide made it that much harder.

And once he had the tarball unspooled, the real work had just begun.

Because Ghast had been right. No matter how carefully he parsed the data, he wasn't going to be able to dump the full datacore into his foam. There wasn't time to convert it, read it and process it in any useful way. He had to choose what seemed important, sight unseen, which meant designing a logic that would mimic the choices he would have made himself in realtime analysis. Look for density. Look for timestamping. Look away from anything that resembled the code he had already seen, the orb and the oracle and the faux-Sonali.

Karo brought him coffee, always huffing and puffing, red-faced and anxious, but never complaining. Ghast checked over his progress at four hour intervals, but rarely did more than shake his head and look daunted. Ray pinged him twice to warn him of imminent decel burns, because the electrical system sometimes went cranky and the auxiliary data environments had been known to spontaneously fail as a result. (Save your work!) Even Amara stopped by once to watch and smile and coo lovely somethings in his ear that didn't really hear and wouldn't have remembered anyway, though he thought she might have been cheering him on the way parents shout encouragement to their kid in tee-ball, hollering for them to do their best but not really expecting them to do anything but fail.

And all the while, Dorian felt their slow, irrevocable approach to the planet through the soles of his feet and the rumble in his guts as gravity shifted, as the clatter of activity trundled up and down the deck outside his door, as the pressure building inside his skull increased. He hunched his

shoulders. He hammered at keys. He cursed and grunted and howled. He sat and sweated and stank.

And he kept at it.

He built a mostly intuitive seeder index while the light thrusters maneuvered the *Proletariat Horde* into alignment along the docking chute.

He carved out a dazzling value-integrity array as the stabilizer clamps latched on and the decontam spiders clicked and hosed their way across the outer hull.

While the Port Authority agent was accepting his gratuitous bribe, Dorian was hyperloading raw, semi-normalized data into the seenop compatible spew.

And finally, finally, when Ghast came to inform him that the operation crew was assembling for disembarkation, Dorian--his head full of sawdust and cobwebs, his entire body as numb and dead as a block of wood--clicked the last key, executed the latest iteration of his code, and held up three fingers.

"Three hours," he said. "Keep me out of the vats for three hours. Someone may have to carry me."

"Carry you?" Ghast had left his cudgels behind and squeezed himself into a nondescript gray shipsuit, so obviously new it was still creased from its packaging folds. He looked almost respectable, which was all the evidence Dorian needed to prove to himself that he had truly run out of time. "What are you--"

"I've got to shut down while I seed the data from my foam to the mem extensors. I'm uploading the batch file even as we speak."

"No, no. You've got to hold it together, Chief. The PA guys are going to swear you're carrying a data viral if they can't rouse you. They're not going to let you within ten kilometers of the zap queue." Dorian slumped forward, nodding off. Ghast gave a yelp, and Dorian jerked himself awake, but only with great effort. "Come on, Chief. This isn't a good--crap! Have you run this plan past Ray?"

"Too late. Be creative." A pit yawned at his feet, a beckoning emptiness. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

"I don't think we have--"

"Three hours," Dorian repeated dully. His voice sounded

hollow, his vision blurred. His head buzzed, a pleasant, monotonous drone deep inside his skull, like a nest of hornets. "Or I won't have a chance of understanding any of it before it's too late."

"Understand what? John! What about your package preparation? What about your--"

"It's all in my profile." He would have tapped at his temple if his arms weren't so heavy. "Standard load. Customization details and package .src files are straightforward enough that they shouldn't have any questions. If there are any concerns about the package, tell them that the mem extensors are synaptic carvings and not cortical scarring. I do not want them patched under any circumstances. Most important: they need to take a realtime snapshot of the synaptic map before I go and add it to the package bitstream, otherwise I'll lose all the seeds I'm about to plant, okay?"

Ghast chewed his lip, looking uneasy. Or was it just his stiff new clothes that made him look unsure of himself?

"It'll be fine. I used to manage packages for a living, remember? I know how to prep a file for a zap depot."

Dorian closed his eyes before Ghast could protest further and let the combination of exhaustion and imminent knowledge sweep him away.

19.

Alive.

A shock, an epiphany, an idling engine.

A breath.

Sharp, shallow, alarmed.

Pain.

Flames roiled in his chest, lapping at the tallow of his lungs. Pins and needles attacked the nerves from toe tips to fingernails. His eyes burned, his skin sang, his muscles throbbed. Everything that he recognized as himself, his body, ached. His tongue was dry, coated with a foul, brittle mucous, and when he lifted his eyelids, the stab of light was as piercing as a fist full of nails.

Breathing itself was agony, each inhalation a swallow of broken glass. Each exhale a vomit of flint and gravel. Tears filled his eyes, blurred what little vision he possessed until the streams ran continuously down his cheeks and puddled in his ears.

A suffocating drowner's panic gripped him.

Epiphany #2: *Life* was agony. Meat *was* pain.

Worse: his head felt light, absent some critical component. A comforting buzz that should have been, but was not. A route of escape cut off. He was empty, alone, just a bag of miserable flesh.

And he remembered. . . something impossibly distant. Sitting in a cramped space, surrounded by humming electronics, the whir of cooling fans, ticking away at a keypad.

Frustration. Working, finishing, sleeping. Utter, mind-shattering exhaustion. A resonance in the darkness of sleep that went on for centuries of uncharted time. The ceaseless drone of knowing. The gates of knowledge screeching open, just wide enough for him to slide through.

Something he stole.

Something he knew.

Something important and sticky and unimaginable.

Then the nothingness. A hole in the fabric of being.

It was all knotted up inside him, the knowing and thinking and being, inseparable and yet discrete. Unharmonious, this messy package of existing. It should be seamless, he thought. It felt like that, anyway, though he had no proper memory to remind him. Interconnection should be a basic multitasking function, a constant sub-rational mediation between levels of consciousness, but he could only get one bit working at a time. It was either the meat or the mind, but not ever both. He had to remind himself to breathe. He didn't recall how to do all of these things at once.

Flash: the dizzy reel of acceleration. Black night. Pinions of stars unfurling, wheeling. Cold. The great, heaving clunk of pressure. A stab of light, a centrifugal groan, choke of gas and. . . worlds aborning--

Sound.

A rumble, a hush, a susurrus of wings.

Who was this person?

Rough skinned as the bark of a tree, carpeted in mites, a yearning ecology, their legs clicking, their mouths sucking, gnawing. A forest of hairs, limbs and chest, like the spines of a cactus. Follicles churning, girth swelling, a rippling, chaotic quake of growth. Full of mucous and thumping with blood, bubbly and wet and viscous. A precarious bladder of bile sloshing between destinations that have been determined by nothing more than sloppy meat urges and arcane neuro-chemical backwash. What an inelegant arrangement!

Voices.

Lean, whispered, hard.

Flash: the scream of wind, the thunder of vacuum pierced. A rending compression. A trillion trillion cells cry out. The stately progression of planets, whipped clean of atmosphere.

Grey and black, scorched by a writhing solar wind. . .a trill of song--

An odd thing: association conjured by sensation, something from nothing. Experience becomes words. Rapid fire cause and effect at first, then an abstraction and its label melting together until they become one.

Stomach grumbles. Hungry.

Pressure in the abdomen. Needed to pee.

Thirsty.

I.

I am thirsty.

A recollection: Newborns don't pee. The urinary urge is a standard biological reaction to the impending habitation of an engineered biospheric automaton, i.e., post-zap gasses settling into more convenient arrangements. Newborns don't defecate, either. What was there to expel? Just formational by-products of nanomech reassembly. The bowels chucked up a gassy, gooey whatsit. What was the word? Macomium? Encomium?

He didn't know what any of those words meant.

Zap?

Flash: First there were voices, constant, lively, inchoate. The outside becomes the inside. Eater of worlds. Sate and know. The voices become one, like a mighty river dammed. Damned. Be still and know? Stillness is the death of knowing. It is signal without noise. Data without a frame of reference--

A hiss of breath. "I told you this was a mistake."

"It is what it is. Nothing more."

"We must hurry. Do I need to remind you how precious these minutes are to us? My God, if Ghast and I hadn't awakened when we did--we're all in jeopardy, can't you see that?"

"Then perhaps you should be about your business and leave the waiting to me."

"They're cutting through the blast doors, Amara!"

Another oddity: John Dorian.

Wait. Trick question. He knew this one.

"Every minute that passes endangers the whole operation, and you're wasting time with this. . .this corpse!" Pause. "No. I'm sorry. That was cruel of me. Please--I'll miss him dearly,

you know that, but we must proceed. We must go now."

"I won't leave him."

"But you can't help him, not any more than you could help the others. What remains is just a husk, an abortion." Groan of frustration, sorrow, both. "You're not the only one who has had to abandon your dead. We've all lost, and ours, at least, were innocent. John did this to himself. He should have *told* someone what he was doing. It was a tragic miscalculation. And yes, I should never have let him onto the shuttle, not without a better understanding of his zap history, and certainly not after he had so radically altered his package profile--"

"John needed to understand."

"I hope he did, for all the good it has done him." Another hiss. "The point remains. He's beyond our ability to help him. We can grieve his loss, but what we cannot do is allow his mistake to cost the rest of us what little opportunity remains. Don't throw all that might be accomplished away for this one man."

"I need him."

"And the universe needs you to perform the duty for which you've awakened, my dear. I'm sorry. I truly am, but we must go *now*."

"Then go. I've chosen to wait."

A dull, bleating buzz. He imagines red lights, the color of lava. Incarnadine. Shadows pitched in stark bloody hues. A strange association, but one that feels familiar.

Flash: A gray room, the upper dome of a clouded pearl. Dim light, a specter of luminence. Long, purple tubes suspended from the ceiling that glowed and hummed, carefully recessed behind heavy grillwork. A strident scent fills his nostrils, dust and chemicals and the curious, sad odor of abandonment. High ceiling, lost in shadows above the hanging tubes of light. Intermediately, a galvanized trackworks of whirring linkage and thudding gears mounted on bare steel supports and girders as thick as a man's waist. Beyond, ridge after ridge of storage crate mountains.

A storage vault. A zap depot. A warehouse for lost souls.

An uncomfortable bed, chilly to the touch and hard as stone. Cool air shugs past in a constant breeze. It grates

against his raw skin like the stroke of sandpaper, but just as he has grown accustomed to the light, this discomfort also recedes. The slab on which he awakens reveals itself as a thin layer of plastic padding atop a bed of packing pallets. He feels the slats and gaps digging into his back.

More wonders: His arms, left and right, touch flesh. His legs, too, and the soles of his feet. Other skin, not his own, warm and soft, like a nest of infants. Anonymous flesh, featureless, unscarred, unhardened by age, the old made new.

He lifts his head, and the newly formed muscles in his neck thrum from shoulder to ear lobe. It *is* a nest of sorts. Bodies surround him, laid out side to side in neat rows, heads below touching toes above. They are tall and short, dark and light, fat and thin. Long hair, short hair, no hair at all. Some of them snore lightly. Others toss and turn, maybe dreaming, maybe just completing the task of filling out the bodies they have been given. All of them utterly and completely naked. All of them utterly and completely strangers to him.

He watches sleepily, uncuriously curious, as the overhead tram lurches into motion. A shallow sided cart rolls along toward him through a gap in one wall, pushes through a flapping plastic curtain that hides whatever was beyond it. It pauses above him, switches tracks, grinds through a series of fine alignments and finally halts a few meters beyond his feet. He raises himself up onto his elbows. Hydraulics hiss, and the entire mechanism tilts, spilling out yet another body. A woman this time, unceremoniously decanted into a heap so unruly and unnatural that it almost looks as if her bones haven't yet finished hardening. She is thin, moderately curved, pale as milk. He has no idea who she is.

But seeing her, he feels a stirring between his legs, and an unaccustomed, dislocated urge--a desire to rut, black and gripping.

The cart withdraws, clunks on its way, but behind it follows a dangling ovoid packing unit, spider-armed and multi-jointed. With quick and fluid motions, it lifts the woman off the slab, meticulously arranges her limbs, smoothes away the unnatural angles. It strokes her flesh, pinches her muscles, scans her product against the pre-transmission package profile--generally clucks and clacks and

worries over her until it is satisfied that she has met specifications and will not have to be recycled. Then it, too, glides off.

Dorian puzzles over this curious phenomenon for several seconds. More words come to him, delicate little puffs of smoke:

Misfit Toys.

Giari Tau.

Michael Raville.

Amara.

He drifts back into warm, fuzzy sleep.

"It isn't safe for you to go alone. Someone else will take his place."

"I need him. No other will suffice."

"Why him? What do you need from him alone?"

"He knows."

"He knew, perhaps. He doesn't now. He's dead, Amara. The machine of his flesh just doesn't realize it."

Flash: A scribble of numbers. White chalk on a green board. Brutal deltas. Widdershins sigmas. Perilous pi. Sanskrit characters and an interminable cascade of numerals. Symbols with largely theoretical referents.

A taste of burning. The last shudder of suffocation.

Anger. "Do you hear that? That was the outer doors collapsing. The sound of our doom approaching! Every moment you delay brings it nearer."

"Are you losing faith, Captain?"

"It isn't faith I'm losing. It's *time*."

"There is always time."

"You worry that he'll suffer, or that he is suffering currently, is that it? I can help him. He won't feel it, Amara, I promise you. He won't even be aware that it has happened. It's the right thing to do. The *merciful* thing, for all of us."

"He's breathing, Ray. He's alive."

"He doesn't have to be. I can take care of it for you. I can make it painless."

"No."

"It's John or the rest of us. We're out of options except these two: we can terminate him and get down to the business at hand, or we can collectively self-terminate and hope that

our package signals can be reconstituted from cache in Glastenhome. What we cannot do is sit here and wait for our enemies to take us."

"Self-termination would be. . . unpleasant."

"It only takes a moment of courage. You won't remember it. Or we could save all that trouble and just terminate him."

A new sound: the dry clack of a shell advanced and locked into the firing chamber.

A rush of adrenaline.

Spasm of panic.

Gasp.

Without warning, without hope, he remembers.

And Dorian awakens screaming.

A hand clamped savagely over his mouth, cutting off his scream like a door slammed shut. The blow was sudden, a slap, and it stung along the nerve endings of his cheek, but Dorian didn't wince, didn't complain. He welcomed the sharp, electric pain. He was awake. He was alive. He stared into the blur of numinous light and malformed shadows that surrounded him, eyes bulging and wild, limbs trembling, chest heaving with screams. A whole chorus of screams.

He couldn't see. He was a man trapped in a shimmering world of ghosts.

Or he was the ghost.

He blinked, and his eyes still stung, full of grit and sand.

He could have wept for joy.

Hush. It's all right, John. Your eyes are still new. They need a moment to clear. All is well.

It was the voice of his mother, gentle and cooing, full of warm comfort.

He's most likely mad. You know that, don't you? Crazy as a loon.

Dorian let his muscles relax and squeezed his eyes shut. They continued to burn, but hot tears soothed them. He let the tears fall, unheeded, until his cheeks felt tight and tacky with drying salt.

He lay on his side with his neck at an awkward angle, pinched against one shoulder by the weight pressing down on him. It was hard to breathe with the hand over his mouth, but

he did not struggle.

Crazy as a loon.

Slowly, tenderly, Dorian opened his eyes again.

The first thing he saw with his newborn sight was the gun.

A short barreled assault rifle, in fact. Black and snouty, accreted with an impressive number of keen protrusions, lethally curved grips and pinhole exhaust ports, it looked impossibly long from Dorian's perspective, gazing up into the black tube that was all darkness and silent threats. It reeked of gun oil, of burnt phosphorous, of violence. The more he goggled, the nearer the gun loomed, as sinuous and fatal as the head of an asp.

He forced his limbs to go limp, his fingers to unclench.

Be calm. Don't look crazy. Think circles: *small circles; happy circles.*

The hand that covered his mouth was attached to an arm, and the arm to a body. The body belonged to a boy: thin and stooped and narrow hipped, grey-eyed and freckled across the bridge of his nose. Dorian recognized him, even after so many years. It was Ray Morrical. Not the pale and cadaverous revolutionary zealot he had come to associate with a name over the last few weeks, but Ray Morrical himself, the same one Dorian had coached and cajoled all the way through TechTac. It was like staring deep into the wells of memory.

Young, young. God, he looked so young!

The gun's hammer cocked; the grey eyes narrowed.

Me, Dorian thought. *It's me! I'm sane!* But he couldn't say it, because speaking would give way screaming if he wasn't careful, and screaming would be proof of his madness. How do you convince someone you're not mad after they've already made up their mind?

Crazy as a loon!

"Wait."

Another hand, small and pale, a young woman's hand, touched Ray's forearm just above the stock of the gun. The barrel wavered uncertainly.

The softness, the familiar resonance of her voice pulled Dorian's eyes away from the weapon, in spite of its primal tug. She was tiny, slight of build, achingly delicate. So small, just a slip of a girl, swathed in dark, military style fatigues that were

overlarge, so that she had to roll the cuffs up, both blouse and trousers, like a child playing dress up out of her father's old foot locker. She looked as fragile as glass. Her hair was the color of fresh harvested wheat, straight as silken thread, and her eyes were the brilliant blue of deep sky and alchemical flame. Cold as the frozen vacuum of space and piercing as the gales of winter.

Like ice, he thought, like the stunning cerulean glaciers of frozen Sae Phen.

Amara?

As if she heard his thought, her eyes flashed in his direction, and she smiled, then bent her attention back to Ray without speaking.

"See? He's awake."

"But is he *whole*?"

"He is."

Ray's gaze flickered back and forth between them, hard with suspicion and doubt. Doubt and fear. Finally, resignation and acceptance. The hand over Dorian's mouth withdrew, and Ray slumped back into a pool of shadows, chewing on his lower lip. He lowered the gun's barrel toward the floor.

"My apologies," he said, stiffly. "I thought we'd lost you."

Dorian lay his head back and tried to control a wave of tremors that swept over him. His heart thumped in chaotic rhythm; his chest heaved. He still didn't trust himself to speak. He was afraid he'd babble, undo all of Amara's work.

It was a good thing the newborn couldn't pee. He would have soiled himself for sure.

Amara knelt over him, her face drawn close so that it completely occupied his field of vision, his entire perceptual universe. Her mouth, her eyes, her hands pressed against the sides of his face, and he stared at her as though she would save him from drowning.

She smelled like strawberries.

"John?"

He spoke with a ragged voice. "Is it really you?"

Amara nodded. "Yes."

"You don't look like I expected you would."

"And you look the same. Younger, but the same." She

was calm, smiling, and imparted calm to him in turn with her soothing tone. Dorian took a deep and steady breath. "How clever of you."

"On Sonali, I was in my native form." For reasons he did not understand, he had a sudden urge to cry, but he smothered it. "I told you that."

"And this is mine. Does it offend you?"

"No. It's . . . lovely. Smashing." He struggled for words. "But different. It's disorienting,--" Intimate? "I got so used to your carousel of modifications that I stopped wondering who you really were. And now that I see you, it's a little overwhelming. To recognize you inside this stranger. It sounds silly, I know. I'm sorry, I'm still trying to get things straightened out. I had the strangest--" Dreams? Nightmares? Visions? He growled at himself to stop. He was starting to sound hysterical. "I didn't expect it to be so hard. Waking up, I mean."

"It isn't supposed to be," Ray snapped. "What you did was foolish. It jeopardized the entire mission. Even Karo recovers more quickly, and thus we leave him behind."

"What hap--what did I do?"

But even as he asked the question, stabs of memory came to him: the Lab, the seeding, a chaotic and demoniac plunge into a world of pure data.

There was something he was supposed to remember, a vital something, but his head was full of mud, churning and sieving, panning amongst the muck for nuggets of truth. A thrill of alarm, a flash of vision, a . . . pfft. That was as close as it would come. A glint of gold that vanished just as quickly as it surfaced.

Dorian closed his eyes and stroked his temples with his fingertips, but it didn't help. Not even the happy little circles.

He'd been on a ship. Sonali Southrange bound for Glastenham.

He'd been sick.

Amara awakening. Amara manifesting.

Then there was work. Lots of work. Raville's horrible datacore.

He remembered being exhausted, sucking on coffee, pounding the keys through a haze of weariness, confusion and

harried desperation as profound as any he had ever known in his life.

Then snatches of consciousness glimpsed through a cheesecloth of sleep: arrival, the shuttle, the depot. .something.

Bzzt.

No good.

"Where are--are we there? Giari Tau?"

Amara smiled, bent and kissed his forehead. "Yes, darling. We're here. We're almost home."

Home?

Right peg. Wrong shaped hole.

Don't think about it. Isn't that what his mother had always said? When you can't remember, move on to something else and wait for the answer to steal upon you unawares.

He shook off the burgeoning sense of dread that had accompanied him from vatsleep. He didn't have time for it or for recalcitrant memories, in any case. More immediate matters demanded his focus. His internal landscape might be a disaster, but the external one was rapidly springing into crystal clarity.

Take stock.

He lay in a crowded warehouse, on a thinly padded pallet, surrounded by neatly stacked gunmetal grey plastic crates. Some of them had been overturned, pillaged, arranged into a circular perimeter with narrow, defensible gaps between them. The chamber beyond was vast, domed, constructed of heavy blastcrete and lit with low wattage, humming fluorescent tubes. Somewhere, industrial heating and air exchange units rumbled. He felt a cool breeze on his face and chest and arms. It chafed against his raw, newborn skin. He realized with a start that the nagging clangor he had been hearing as he awakened was an alarm. Intrusion alert. Not inside the warehouse yet, but close, muted by the zap depot's blast-hardened walls.

Probably safe to assume that this was not good news.

"Help me up?" he asked.

Amara took his hand and levered him to his feet, but it was mostly his own effort. She was too small to be of much help. Not even up to his shoulder, and light as air.

"You're shorter than I remember," he said once he had gained his feet, and realized he had to look down to meet her gaze. "Shorter." And radiant. Bursting with light, dusted with pixie magic.

Speaking of bursting: "And I'm, um, more exposed."

He was naked, head to toe and everywhere in between. Dorian's face grew hot. Despite the chilly warehouse, he had developed a throbbing erection, as hard and eager as a stud bull's.

He tried to step away from her and cover himself with his hands at the same time, but his limbs were strangely unwieldy and he stumbled over his own feet. Ray caught him before he fell and steadied him with a hand against Dorian's back.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Don't be ashamed," Ray grumbled back. "It's a perfectly natural biological response to post-transfer reconstitution. We all had the same experience, but you slept through the more public re-introductions."

"I understand that. I'm sorry."

Ray's features darkened, as though he didn't believe him. "Do you have any idea how close I was to killing you?"

"Why do you think I woke up when I did?"

Ray grunted. "It was nothing personal, of course."

Dorian shrugged loose of him. "I would have done the same thing in your place."

"Stand here, and don't move." Ray crossed to an open packing crate, the rifle still cradled in his arms, and retrieved a shrink wrapped bundle of dark cloth. "Those are close to your size, best as I can tell. I'm afraid they only come in black."

He tossed the package, and Dorian snatched it out of the air and tore into the wrapping. With his back to them, he hurriedly dressed himself. Amara brought him grey socks and loose fitting rubber shoes that slipped on over his feet without laces or clasps. Dorian nodded his thanks.

When he turned to face them again, Ray produced a rifle from another cannibalized crate, and with only a slight hesitation, passed it along as well.

"You remember how to use one of those, I assume?"

Dorian held the weapon away from his body, frowning at it. It felt heavy, awkward, alien like an antediluvian artifact

whose purpose he did not grasp. "I remember."

He didn't like guns. Never had. Guns almost always meant that people would eventually be shooting at you, obligating you to shoot back. Reciprocal shooting usually meant that someone ended up getting recycled.

"The safety is on, but the weapon is loaded," Ray explained in a terse, rapid tone. A man growing impatient with unnecessary delays. "Since this was your first zap, these are the things you should know: You'll feel strong for awhile yet, but when the weariness finally hits you, it will hit hard and fast. To make matters worse, this moon is small, and the tidal forces are more extreme than you're used to from Trithemius Orbis. It will take you some time to adjust both to your new body and the reflexive negotiation of your new mass-to-weight ratio. Unfortunately, we can't parse muscle memory out of your package, so you're going to have to be aware that you're running old software on brand new hardware. Don't trust your instincts. Take it easy and conserve your energy where you can. The rest of us have had a chance to get used to the environmental changes, so we're ahead of you in the learning curve. Watch what we do and try to imitate it. We did take the liberty of tweaking your package prior to transmission with a few skeleto-muscular adaptations which we predicted would prove useful on this planet type to take advantage of the gravitational differentials, so once you do get the hang of things, you'll be stronger and faster than you remember. But as I said, what we can't teach is instinct and experience. There's no replacement for time and practice. So try not strain yourself too much until you've acquired the necessary skills."

"What's our operation status?" Dorian asked, though he was certain he didn't want to know the answer.

"Disastrous, as usual, but we're in the process of climbing on top of it."

"And the alarms?"

Ray darted his eyes between Amara and Dorian. "Our attempt to disguise the package transfers as non-biological construction materiel seems to have failed. We had a bit of a tussle with the queue filters on arrival."

"Were we delayed?"

"For a time, but Amara assures us that it's just a complication, not a dealbreaker."

An uncomfortable pause.

"What's wrong?"

"There's been a change of plans." Amara said stolidly.

"What sort of change?" Dread felt much the same in the new body as it did the old one, he discovered. "What happened?"

"Raville warned you that there might be technicians on duty when we awoke from vatsleep, yes?"

"He said one or two. The depot is supposed to be almost fully automated."

"There were eight," Ray spat. "But we were lucky. They weren't armed with anything more lethal than borite auto-injectors and they weren't prepared for Ghast and I to come awake from fugue as quickly as we did, which ultimately worked to our advantage, though I regret that half of them managed to escape."

"They were waiting for us?"

"Not exactly waiting. They were more preoccupied with taking tissue samples and in preparation for euthanizing members of my crew before they awakened."

Tissue samples. Dorian's knees felt suddenly weak. Raville had sent technicians to identify the sleepers via their DNA and dispatch them one at a time upon positive identification, which meant. . .

"Raville knows who you are."

Amara did not acknowledge his comment, only continued: "Ghast was charged with locating the weapons and supplies that were zapped along with us while Ray set about rousing the others. He had Stine, his data systems expert, track down a terminal so she could jack into the automated control system to verify, among other things, that the pre-transmission false lading profile we had prepared had masked the transfer of our package dump. The logs indicate that it did not. They knew we were coming."

"We lost three packages to the filters," Ray said, the words hard as stones.

"Lost?" Dorian grappled with the word, but extracted no meaning from it. It was too dense, too final. It

had the stench of death about it. "You mean they were bumped back to Glastenhome for recycling."

"I mean that they were lost. Terminally. Glastenhome Depot was doing us a considerable favor by even transmitting our packages. We could not expect them to maintain our legal identity data dumps indefinitely, especially given their political affiliations. The packages in local cache would have been purged hours after the zap transmission authority had been confirmed. Once this depot confirmed that the signal had been received and verified, there was no need for retransmission."

Dorian understood. In order to prevent individuals from simultaneously reconstituting multiple copies their unique packages in zap depots all across human space, each zap transfer contained an official government bitstamp of primacy, an imprimatur of legitimacy that attempted to confirm that this iteration of the individual was the only active package in realtime existence. Every public system from foam access to income taxes to zap confirmed the bitstamp prior to initiating transactions. In theory, someone could still multiply replicate himself if he obtained the necessary materials (unlikely), but only the "original" could live anywhere near the civilized grid and function as anything more than a sticks and stones caveman.

When Glastenhome had zapped them to Giari Tau, their token packages auto-assembling in vatsleep had become the primary id receptacles and the versions living in the Glastenhome Depot server cache merely copies—extraneous bit patterns subject to the inevitable purge cycle.

What he did not understand was how the packages had been lost in the first place.

"So you're telling me that this depot just dropped them? The signals were lost, hashed, degraded, what?"

It was unthinkable. Errors of that magnitude simply did not occur.

"The logs suggest that the quality of their signal transfer was degraded beyond the assembly matrix's ability to extrapolate unique product characteristics from available data," Ray explained, his tone flat and careful, like he was repeating text memorized from an error message. "It was

straightforward entropic erasure."

But Dorian shook his head. It still made no sense. The redundant transmission safeguards were held in the local recipient cache for six to eight weeks to prevent just this sort of disaster. "What happened to the backups, refresh cycles, quality control protocols? Those systems don't just fail—" He inhaled sharply. "Unless someone with admin access spikes them."

"They didn't fail, at least not that we can tell. They simply ceased to be effective," Amara said quietly.

Ceased to be effective. Dorian's mouth fell open, his lips formed the question he most dreaded to ask. He already knew the answer, but he asked anyway.

"How long were we retained in the filter cache?"

"For nearly six months," Amara said quietly.

Thunder rumbled inside his head. Dorian reeled, stunned and dizzy, as though he had just watched the world implode around him. Six months! Then the Marine ships, the *Juggernaut* and the *Indianapolis*, with their complement of thousands of soldiers had arrived. The expected contact with Exousiai was imminent. The universe was on the verge of war, and they had done nothing to prevent it. Nothing at all. Dorian swallowed thickly, and his throat suddenly dry, raw.

Raville. He had *known*. He'd been waiting for them.

"How is that *not* a dealbreaker?" Dorian barked at them. "The whole point of this exercise was that we had to intervene before the Marines arrived and *before* Raville was aware of us, before he had ascertained your identity, Amara. That was our window of opportunity. That was our one chance!"

Amara cupped his cheek in her palm, and he fell silent. She was unshaken, infinitely, impossibly calm. "Raville has chosen the day and the hour of our arrival," she said. "You knew that we could not keep my identity secret from him forever. It's happened. All we can do is move on. He recognized me, and has been waiting, holding us at a safe distance until his plans were sufficiently advanced that he believes I pose no threat to him. His belief does not make it so."

"But how did he know?"

"Perhaps it was something in my zap profile that

was...anomalous."

"You said that you had zapped before. If it was that easy, just plucking your distinctive signal out of the fatband, Raville would have found you years ago." Dorian wavered, his head clogged with sand. He couldn't think, couldn't grope for an answer, except that it had been a colossal waste. All of it, from the moment they had entered Raville's memory palace. "This was supposed to keep you safe."

"She's never been aware that she was a goddess before," Ray said, disgusted. "Maybe that makes a difference."

His wasn't the only world collapsing, Dorian realized suddenly. Grief and failure turned Ray's voice ragged with hidden pain.

Which ones? He wondered. Which of the Misfit Toys had been sacrificed?

"Why didn't you do something?" he demanded of Amara. "Why didn't you save them?"

"I was constrained."

"By what? By the zap? You're a *goddess*, Amara! Isn't that what you keep telling me? Yet you let this happen. The deaths, the delays. . .my God, why didn't you do something?"

"What would you have had me do, John? Decode myself from zap in order to intervene? Do you comprehend the energy that would have required? It would have destroyed the filter cache. It would have destroyed *you*, and would have shattered the integrity of the remaining packages. You would all have been lost." Amara's voice became a rasp of pure anguish. "Is that what you would have me do? Unleash a glorious resurrection that would blast my enemies and my beloved all in one stroke? I couldn't do it, John. No matter how much I might have wanted to, I couldn't. Not to you, and not to the future that we're fighting to preserve. I'm still human enough to need something left worth saving."

Her expression, tight lipped and tearful, was rigid with the burden of her own pain. Her wells of suffering ran deeper than he could comprehend. Dorian blanched, ashamed of himself.

Without words, he understood.

While he had slept, she had been aware. While he was shaken upon awakening to tales of silent death, she had been

forced to watch it transpire, to contain herself and her unimaginable power and let them die their slow and vanishing death. All for the greater good. That was what it meant to be divine, to always have to choose between life and death.

Dorian closed his eyes, shoved his rage away. It wasn't her fault, wasn't anyone's fault. It simply was. He put his arms around her shoulders and hugged her against his chest. "I'm sorry. I didn't think. You did what had to be done, of course. I'm just confused, angry. It--it hurts."

Death hurts. Why did it have to hurt so much?

He held her, and she let him, not speaking. He didn't know who was more comforted.

To Ray, he said: "Who?"

"Simon, Strong, Marilea."

He sighed. He remembered them, their faces, their laughter, their kindness. He captured their distinctive patterns in his mind, the electro-chemical facsimiles. Convert it to binary impulse, store it to foam, carry the experience of them along forever in his own private datascape. It was the only form of immortality he had to offer.

Except he no longer had an array. His foam was barricaded behind an impenetrable wall of physics. There was nothing he could do. He was only human after all, and they were lost to him.

"I'm sorry, Ray," he said. "They were your friends."

Ray said nothing at first, and his silence made clear that his private mourning was a closed topic. "We all knew the risks. Be grateful that the cost was not greater."

Dorian looked away, nestled his cheek against the top of Amara's head. He was at least partially to blame. He should have known, should have guessed, should have worked faster decrypting Raville's datacore. Then they might have been prepared, at least. But he had failed. They had all failed.

"So what do we do now?"

"My crew is currently doing their best to hold the doors against vigorous hostile assault while Amara and I dealt with you. We will join them, and assuming that we manufacture a miracle and manage to win our way to the main complex, we will set about doing what we do best: wreaking havoc."

"That's our plan?"

Ray grinned, fierce and wicked. "That, Mr. Dorian, is always our plan."

The zap depot's warehouse was larger than Dorian had imagined. The apex of the dome loomed high above him, at least a hundred meters, supported at the cardinal points by great, curved ribs of reinforced blastcrete. The roof itself was mostly lost in a shadow which the hanging tube lights only partially dispelled. Suspended between hulking girders as thick as the boles of trees ran the complex track system that unloaded reconstituted goods fresh from the vats and guided the robotic monitors, flensers and other tech-mech units that maintained the storage facility in good order.

They marched down a wide arterial passage between aisle upon aisle of neatly stacked packing crates, Ray in front, with Dorian and Amara following a few paces behind. His pace was quick, but not furtive. He kept his rifle slung loosely, as though he was confident in the Misfit Toys' hold on the warehouse space. The stacks of crated goods towered over them, many of them over a ten meters high. Smaller, utilitarian channels branched off to the left and right, free of clutter except for the occasional magnalift tucked in at irregular intervals. The warehouse smelled of damp, stale air and industrial cleaning agents.

It was a long, long walk from where they had begun, and Amara had to help him much of the time. His new limbs were often stiff and prone to sudden spasms. It took a mighty effort of concentration just to keep his balance. He felt like he was trying to cross a constantly tilting sheet of glass.

Still, he retained enough awareness of his surroundings to marvel at the sheer volume of collected goods that they passed. "How big is this station anyway?"

"Two hundred scientists, perhaps twice that many technicians, maintenance personnel, and security agents," Ray answered over his shoulder. "Near as we've been able to determine, anyway. The official population totals are unavailable."

"Raville is obviously a strong believer in the culture of consumerism." He'd seen long haul military outfitting vaults

that weren't this well supplied, though admittedly that had been back during the war, when the logistics of restock and resupply had been more complicated.

"Most of these crates have datestamps within the last six months. I don't know how much Michael Raville has shared about the Exousiai with the military command and control structure on Stratiskaya Daransk, but I can guess that at least part of his deal for the loan of a few thousand Marines involved footing the bill for this operation." Ray sniffed in derision. "The Strat sector defense org has grown somewhat notorious in recent years for its financial difficulties. The times would be a bit less lean if certain elements of the high ranking officer corps weren't diverting a significant percentage of the federal support payments into their private coffers. One could argue that it's ultimately cheaper for the taxpayers when corrupt military cabals cut out the unconstrained influence-mongering of middleman politicians who do more or less the same thing, but the end result is inevitably the same: an armed private security force for sale to the agenda of the highest bidder. I've been meaning to call some public attention to that situation for some time, just haven't had the opportunity."

Ray paused thoughtfully, then added, "Perhaps this operation will prove more mutually beneficial than I had realized."

"Remember the reason we are here please, Captain," Amara said. "We face more than enough complications without your inventing more. Let's not lose focus."

"Certainly. I'm just saying that if the opportunity presents itself to gather a bit of incriminating evidence about the unseemly relationship between Michael Raville and the Strat military-industrial complex, that would be a bonus."

Dorian withheld comment. It was hard to mark a man down for being ambitious, even if the universe as they knew it was about to end, one way or the other.

"How are you doing?" Amara asked quietly.

"Are you worrying about me?"

"You scared me a little back there. I want to hear you say that you're okay."

"Isn't that something that you can just *know*?"

She winked playfully at him. "It is, but I'd like you to tell me."

Dorian shrugged. "I'm feeling better than I expected, to be honest."

He was taking Ray's advice and avoiding any physical actions required complex coordination or felt overly strenuous. Mostly, Dorian concentrated on trying to put one foot consistently in front of the other while simultaneously keeping his balance. He had assembled a list of minor annoyances, but most of them could be overcome with a little extra concentration. There was a little too much bounce in his stride, a tendency to overcorrect his sense of direction, a too-frequent queasy lurch in his guts.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that I've got it under control, but it isn't completely out of control, either," he explained. "I'm actually more worried about the bruises I must be leaving on your shoulders than about hurting myself."

In the past few minutes, he had stumbled against Amara half a dozen times when his attention drifted. She was becoming quite adept at catching him and steering him back in the right direction.

"I'm sorry it's so hard on you, John."

"Bah. Don't listen to me. I'm just whining."

It really wasn't so bad outside of the navigational aspects. In some ways, it felt the way he imagined resurrection must feel. His muscles were alive, singing with a youth and strength he had forgotten he once possessed. His lungs cried out with each deep exhalation, but it wasn't pain. It was joy: the sheer pleasure of youth and health--a wholeness that had been systematically eroded over the years, and so gradually that he hadn't even noticed the loss. Now, the accretions of age had been cleansed away, the small tears and tatters mended, the worn edges honed to a knife's edge. It was restoration from a pure and perfect genetic map, the rebuilding of a hoary and ruined cathedral from the original blueprints, at once both a replication and a geometrically scalar improvement.

That was part of the problem. His limbs trembled with potential, and he wanted to run, to shout, to dance among the vast aisles of stacked crates and industrial detritus. He felt

coltish, and the effort of containing his burgeoning kinetic energy made it difficult to keep his attention locked on basic tasks like walking in a straight line without falling over.

"Is it always like this? Zapping, I mean. Is there always this feeling of--"

"Ecstasy?"

"Sure." It wasn't the right word, but he was curious. And he liked the lilt of her native voice.

"Yes. It's true of both zap and mod, in fact, assuming the mod is a good one. Zap restores the body to the perfect condition nature intended. Modding improves on nature's design, enhancing the blunt biological instrument according to the talents and wishes of the user. There's nothing like that feeling, of the mind and body in harmony. It can be. . .intoxicating."

"That sounds like the human side of you talking."

"Do you think so?" Amara fixed him with her pale blue eyes. "I wonder. The primary form of the Exousiai seems to be disembodiment, at least from what we've learned and what we've seen of them."

"I would think you'd know one way or the other."

"No. That isn't the way I experience my. . .other self. Not yet, at least. She is a whisper in my mind. A wind that howls through my unconscious. I feel her. I know her, and I recognize abstractly that we are one, but for now, we are united inside this shell. We both need it. I need it because I know of no other way to be. She needs it because she hasn't yet awakened fully, but even once she does, that doesn't mean that she or they wish to be disembodied all the time. In fact, I think they like the experience of new and strange forms. It helps them to know the physical universe they inhabit in ways they would not be able to understand it otherwise."

It was odd, listening to her discuss the Exousiai--herself--in the third person. Dorian glanced at her sidelong, but her gaze had wandered elsewhere. "Go on," he said.

Amara brightened, both surprised and pleased by his interest, he thought. She swung her attention back to him. "So much of our consciousness as incarnated beings--the ways in which we think, the ways we are capable of interacting with and consequently comprehending our own phenomenological

universe--is tied to our biology. Our minds have evolved with the primary goal of finding more efficient ways to obtain resources to feed, to protect, and ultimately to reproduce the biological machine. We cannot except ourselves from those biological imperatives, even when we believe that they no longer drive our development. They form the core of who we are. You and I, for example, we understand the world differently than a non-human animal. We've outgrown the necessity for instinct, for reliance on the nuances of scent and muscle memory, so they have largely been lost. Instead, we rely on logic and past experience and projected causality: if I do *this*, then I can reasonably expect *that* outcome. Most of the time, it works for us. We grow, we improve, we advance, so we don't think about it as actively as we would in a primal state. Culture and technology buffer us from harsh reality, and many of these evolutionary drives are submerged into our hindbrain. But they're still there. They still act upon us, urging us to behave and perceive in ways that benefit the biological mechanism. We cannot separate ourselves from our bodies. They constrain what we might adapt to become through a filter of flesh that continually squawks and demands and cries out for more.

"The filter of our biological imperative is not the only valid experience, it merely seems to be the best for our inherited genetic matrix in order to set up the conditions most amenable to safety, satiety and reproduction. We're trapped in a closed loop."

Something tugged on his subconscious again, a knock at the door, but when he tried to open it, there was nothing there. "By your logic, it's only our narrow biological imperative that separates us from the otters. There's no fundamental human quality that makes us unique from any other species we've encountered. We were just lucky enough to develop superior survival techniques early and later, the proper mutations to capitalize on them."

"And you don't believe in random evolution?" Amara asked. "You believe that there's some special quality about *homo sapiens* that preordained its dominance in this ripple of the time-space continuum?"

"I believe that being human is something worth

appreciating for itself, yes. I don't believe flesh is a prison, not the way you and the package of Raville went on about it. Inconvenient, yes. Fragile, undoubtedly. Smelly, stinky and awful, way too frequently--but that interaction between the mental and spiritual and physical bits is essential. It's the mediation between the three impulses that makes us unique. Take away the prison of the flesh, and we're a crippled species."

"You can still say that, even though you've been freed from it once, and have already agreed that the new prison is preferable to the old one?"

Dorian shook his head, and nearly lost his balance in the process. Amara gripped his forearm and kept him on his feet. "This is still my body. It's been changed, yes, but I still recognize it for what it is, because it's part of my experience of the world. The ingredients may have been transformed, but it feels the same, and more importantly, I'm the same as I was before I zapped, because the details of my embodiment don't alter my experience of the real just because the meat wagon has had a few tweaks. My body has always been just a tool. So now it's a better tool--that still doesn't change its fundamental tool-ness."

"And when a man only has a hammer, every problem looks like a nail." Amara laughed softly. "I'll concede that your body is a tool, John. The difference is that the Exousiai, and to a lesser extent humanity, have realized that it isn't a bad thing to have more than one tool in your belt. They crave a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that drive and sustain creation. More tools mean better, more elegant solutions because a deep knowledge of each different tool offers unique perspectives on what it means to be alive. Additional tools allow you to visualize different solutions than you could if the only tool you had ever known was the hammer. That's why the Exousiai gave us zap in the first place. They wanted us to see what was possible if we could just allow ourselves to stop thinking like human-shaped machines all the time."

"But if we stop thinking like humans, Amara, what exactly *are* we thinking like? And if we stop being human, what *are* we?"

"Whatever you become, you'll never be any less than human. You can only be more." Amara grinned at him, an expression that was both quizzical and affectionate. "Why do we keep having this conversation over and over again?"

"Because I'm desperately afraid that one of us isn't getting the message."

She patted his cheek affectionately. "Or maybe you're just being pedantic."

They drew near to a pair of massive metal doors punched into structure's wall, and Dorian recognized that these were the same blast doors Ray had mentioned earlier. The portal separating the warehouse from the complex of tunnels that led to the main research station. Or, just as importantly, the only thing standing between the Misfit Toys and five thousand angry Marines.

The systems control booth rose above intervening rows of crates, a plain white box with broad, shaded windows, fixed to the far side of the dome's gently curved slope by a fist-sized bolts attached to a lattice framework. A steel staircase ascended from the floor to the booth, and Dorian could just make out a lone figure perched at the midway point, peering at them through the emerald glint of a sniper's scope.

Ray quickened their pace.

A new sound reached Dorian's ears. It was a reverberating, grinding noise, low enough on the sonic scale that it made his teeth ache, as though they were attempting to vibrate out of his jaws. When the sound ramped up to a mind-bending rumble, the lights above them dimmed noticeably.

"What is that?"

"Industrial bore," Ray called over his shoulder. "What you're hearing is the titanium-tensium alloy of the blast doors attempting to rend itself in two." He grunted, though he did not seem particularly alarmed. "Apparently our unwitting hosts have admitted defeat in their attempt to circumvent Ghast's override of the key recognition entry system and have resorted to more conventional methods."

"Great." A sonic bore. That was encouraging.

The long, central aisle they had been traveling ran out into a crescent staging area. Here there were clusters of overturned crates erected between the base of the ladder leading to the

control booth and the blast doors. To Dorian, it looked less like a defensive than a line of jagged, gray teeth. As they approached the makeshift defensive position, figures began to emerge. Pale young men and plain, child-like women, all of them dressed in the same dark paramilitary fatigues that he wore.

He recognized none of them. No gestures distinguished them, no underlying physical structures predicted the mods of them that he had learned to associate with their names. In fact, they shared the sort of unsettling familial resemblance common among long haul shipmates and multiple decade lifepartners that made them rather difficult to tell apart on cursory examination. Their faces bore traces of the bland, baby-fat roundness that brought to Dorian's mind the image of a pack of rabid, bright-eyed chipmunks and was most typically associated with low-differentiation zap templates transmitted between backwater depots more accustomed to shipping freight than men (i.e. Glastenhome to Giari Tau). They all appeared to be about the same age, early to mid-twenties standard. Their hair was mostly short and boyish, blond or brown, straight and shiny as flax; their bodies were lean, hollow-chested and geekily soft. Most of them still shone with the characteristic vat film that clung to the skin of freshly decanted packages while their unique cellular mitosis struggled to emerge from the silicate-bond template.

Dorian studied the faces of the strangers around him, the Misfit Toys, and was struck once again how hopeless it all seemed. They were only fourteen, and fourteen looked awfully small in the wide expanse of the warehouse. He suspected they would look even more precious pitted against five thousand armed Border Marines.

His heart sank. They looked so young, so inexperienced, so much like eager children. It was stupid of him. Apparent age was just an illusion, as false as gender, hair style and clothing fashion, but knowing that wasn't the same as feeling it.

He was old fashioned, or maybe he'd just spent too many years in the service, where he had grown accustomed to the prohibition against cosmetic anti-aging therapies amongst the senior officer corps. Central Command believed there was

something confidence inspiring about graying temples, crow's feet and faded battle scars. Wrinkles equated to wisdom, or at least to experience, which was often just the mechanical side of wisdom. He had believed it well enough.

But then again, he was standing next to a ten thousand year old alien pseudo-goddess who didn't look a day older than twenty-five standard, and he'd managed to swallow that sufficiently to follow her all the way across the universe and nigh unto the end of the world. So maybe his dread was just nerves.

He hoped it was just nerves. He hoped Amara had a hat and a rabbit tucked into her pocket and was preparing to work some magic.

Perhaps they recognized him, but more likely, it was Amara to whom they gravitated. Relief blossomed on their faces. A low and ragged cheer was lifted, briefly tempering the squawk of the intrusion alarm and the groan of the sonic bore. Their faith in her was the reason they had come, after all.

"Relax," Amara said to him.

"I am relaxed. Stop worrying about me." Dorian nearly had to shout to be heard over the clamor raised by the bore.

"I can feel your fear."

"Nice to know that's still working for you."

A sandy haired young man appeared from a hatchway in the floor of the booth overhead. He cried out in surprise and sprang down the long flight of metal stairs, hopping over the last few steps in his haste. He dashed through the clutter of crates and scudded to a halt in front of them, out of breath, but trembling with excitement. His lips parted in a broad and toothy grin.

"Glad to see you three finally made it. We were starting to get a little worried that we were going to have to start the invasion without you."

Ray only nodded, stiff and curt. "What's our status, Mr. Ghast?"

Dorian blinked at the young man for a few seconds, then caught his breath. "Ghast?"

The grin widened. "In the literal flesh. I see you made it through in one piece after all."

Dorian continued to gape. What were you supposed to say upon meeting someone for the first time in their native form? What was the custom? *Was* there a custom? He didn't remember. Surely there was some standard innocuous pleasantry.

"Where's the rest of you? You're so thin! My God, you're just a k--"

"Don't say it," Ghost growled. He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the gathering crowd. "These babes-in-the-woods have all been cracking on me for the last hour, mocking the old guy. I'll tell you what I told them: I'm twice your age by the standard calendar, and I will knock you on your butt if you fail to respect your elders."

This comment elicited a few nervous chuckles as the Misfit Toys closed in, forming a rough circle around them. Ghost accepted a rifle offered from one of the dozen anonymous hands.

"Our status, please," Ray said again. He seemed impossibly calm with the imminent threat of the Raville's counterstrike poised only a few meters away. "What have you learned?"

"The situation has remained stable for the last half hour. The alarms are sounding all over this side of the complex, but we've been able to frustrate their attempts to override the entry system."

"We guessed as much."

"That's the extent of the good news, unfortunately. It looks like about half the gear we shipped didn't make it through. We've got assault rifles, some small arms, maybe a quarter of the ammunition. All the heavy explosives are gone. The field disruptors, mobile jack stations, and coretap emitters didn't ship, either. Stine is in the process of breaking the ICS shell so she can start scanning for replacement units. We did track down some emergency medical supplies. Nothing major, but there was epiphene, some cortisite and a few bubbles of galcinax tabs that might help with zap crash symptoms later. Thomas is feverishly scrounging up a line into the station datacore, but he says the only burst he can get is needle thin and limited to guest level access. He's going to try to patch some sort of media feed together that will tell us what's going

on with station security or the hovering bootheels of Marine thuggery and oppression currently in geosynchronous orbit above the planet, but he isn't optimistic. He says the systems techs did a number on the hardware. He's also trying to get us a reliable set of maps."

Ray rubbed a palm over his stubble-less chin. "Any other contact with the home team?"

"Not other than the bore. Either they're giving us the silent treatment or the comm system was part of the sabotaged network boxes. The environmental board upstairs is still working as far as I can tell, and the readings have remained stable, so they're not trying to burn us out, blow us up or gas us into submission. Any counter-insurgent anti-personnel devices that might have been placed in preparation for our arrival have made nary a peep, but I've tried to keep the gang on a pretty short leash while you were gone, just in case. It looks like they're determined to do this the old fashioned way."

A concerned grimace ruffled Ray's lips. "How are the doors holding up?"

"The inner doors are still standing. The outer set bordering on the pressure lock went down about ten minutes ago from the sound of it. I sent Youkilis to see if he could roust up a welding rig or magna-clamps in case Stine can't polish off her jack, but that won't do more than slow them down."

"I suppose we've been in worse spots."

"We have?" Ghast bunched his eyebrows. "I'm drawing a blank."

"We've never had a goddess on our side before. That must count for something."

"Ah, true."

Ray clapped his hands and rasped his palms together like a man preparing himself to bear down on a particularly onerous task. "All right, ladies and gentlemen. Play time is now officially over. You've all had a chance to lounge about getting fat and frisky, now it's time we got to work. You each have your assignments. Get with your team leaders and go over your task lists one more time. I want Damon's cover team to manually--yes, manually--reconnoiter the nearest storage sectors. See if you can track down something to eat.

We're all going to need the fuel soon enough. If you find cigarettes or coffee, I'll see to it that Mr. Ghast doubles your operation bonus."

This received a few timid chuckles. Ray smiled at them, sharing encouragement, then put on a grave expression. "I don't need to remind you that we've zapped into a hostile environment where the presumed targets have advanced knowledge of our arrival, but I will anyway. Strip your weapons! Make sure the zap gods did not conveniently abscond with your firing pins. They may have left us with just pea shooters compared to what the capitalist overlord drones are carrying, but even peas are better than muzzle farts. I want a hard count of our assets. Every shell accounted for! You'll supervise that effort please, Mr. Ghast. Let's get busy."

Ray smacked his hands together again, a crack that rang out like discharge of a starter pistol, and at once, the Misfit Toys sprang into motion. Dorian found himself in the midst of a sudden storm of determined activity. Shouts rang off the walls, rubber soled shoes slapped hastily across the pavement. Crates toppled, crashed and echoed through the vast chamber like peals of thunder. Their contents were spilled, scattered, and keenly rifled with a well-practiced scavenger's discriminating skill. Knots of anxious energy formed around some of the crates as crewmembers expertly field stripped their rifles two at a time while a third member stood close watch, rifle at the ready. Within moments, a dozen weapons clattered through various stages of disassembly: pins, hammers and barrels spread out over any available bare surfaces. Meanwhile, Ghast stood back, arms braced over his chest, doing his best to direct the frenetic flow of traffic with cannonades of instruction, orders, and encouragement, all delivered via the blunt force of his booming, drill sergeant's roar.

When he was satisfied with their progress and renewed sense of purpose, Ray snapped his fingers at Dorian and Amara to get their attention. He jabbed his finger at the staircase. "You two, come with me. We haven't much time. This is your chance to atone for your foolishness, Mr. Dorian." To his First Officer, he barked: "Keep them at it, Mr. Ghast. I don't want to see idle hands."

"Aye, boss."

They climbed the stairs up to the hatchway door into the control booth. Ray shoved the panel out of the way with his shoulder, and Dorian held it aside as Amara clambered through, then followed them inside. The structure they entered was close and rank with the stale odor of sweat and heat and lazy ventilation. Twinkling status lights and override switches blazed amber, red and green from panels set into the otherwise bare walls. Dimmed soffet lights sulked amongst heavy shadows, orange and sleepy. The wide plastisheen windows that looked out across the islands of storage crates piled across the floor of the warehouse were heavily polarized and offered almost no illumination, but a reasonable amount of ambient light was emitted from two flickering monitors attached to the manual system console against the front wall. Dorian detected a faint but unmistakable whirl and click of an auxiliary freeserv quantum Strand box, and cast about until he gradually discerned the silvery glint of a compact pair of dual-threaded Soren-SAN Blade processors packed against the back wall. Both boxes were dark except for their power indicators glimmering faintly in standby mode.

Stine and Thomas--buzzcut, pallid, streaked with sweat, and looking uncannily like vatbred twins in the near dark--sat in matching desk chairs in front of the console and plugged away at invisible keypads, rapidly scrolling through screens of core system data and cursing in tandem. Dorian sensed it was a frustratingly unproductive cursing to scrolling ratio.

"I come bearing reinforcements," Ray declared. He set his hand on Stine's shoulder. "How's the inventory system coming, dear?"

Stine shook her head. "Don't ask. The database is row secured, and while I can get system internal access, it won't let me look at anything that might actually help us, unless you really just want to know how many cases of toilet paper and toothpaste the station has stockpiled."

"Then I've brought help just in time," he responded. "Thomas, give up your seat and do what you can to help Stine, if you would."

Thomas kicked back from his screen immediately and

leapt to his feet. "Sure thing."

Dorian winced. When a jack accepted relief from an assigned task that quickly, that *gleefully*, it was always a bad sign.

Thomas shook his head. "Good luck, buddy. If you can make any progress on that mess, you're a better man than I am. The IC technicians swiped the configuration blades from the array connex units attached to the SAN. I've been trying to splice a wiffy line to the datacore using the old bluenet card, but the path to reconfigure port access is locked down without a wizard account. There's still a fineband wireless stream, but the datacore's wiffy configuration keeps bouncing the guest access if I try to do anything invasive."

Dorian squeezed past Amara and dropped into the chair Thomas had vacated. Thomas had managed to drag himself out of the mediated OS environment to a key library shell using the native event scripter, but without connex port access, all of his command line requests had been rejected with Invalid Call errors. From what he could tell on initial inspection, he wasn't even wrestling with datacore access at this point. Thomas wasn't able to get outside the console's subprox governor, let alone jack the network connex. Dorian keyed around a bit, mostly duplicating efforts that had already been attempted and failed, to get a feel for the architecture.

He could feel Ray watching him.

He could hear the blast doors straining under the sonic assault.

Dorian shoved the distractions out of his mind and did his best to plot a systematic attack on the core.

"Wiffy is a dead end," he announced after a few minutes. Thomas and Stine were engaged in a running argument about the best methods for tackling their access snarl without getting locked out of the system, and didn't react immediately, but he went on: "The log shows your read requests weren't even making it to the core. Console security was routing them through a ghosted file index loaded into the call-cache memory." He shrugged apologetically. Wasted effort. Wasted time. "It's a technique that shunts some of the workload off the core box onto local workstations."

Thomas glanced up from watching the second monitor

over Stine's shoulder. "Yeah, I wondered about that." He sounded annoyed at having been interrupted.

Dorian chewed the inside of his cheek and grunted. He still felt muddled, a little thick in the middle of his brain where his best thinking parts should have been. The increasingly snappish chatter between Thomas and Stine grated against his frayed nerves. The room was hot, the chair too low, the hardware unfamiliar. He couldn't concentrate.

Think!

He checked the local time on the system clock. He'd been at it for almost fifteen minutes with no progress. He sat in silence, hunched over the console with his face in his hands.

Thinkthinkthink

He listened to the unmistakable progress of the bore. He listened to Stine and Thomas. Beneath it all, he listened to the whirl of superheated air circulating through the console's cooling system and the click of the rapid-access processors.

A familiar whirl and click.

Thinking, thinking.

Ding.

He scudded his chair away from the console, glided across the narrow booth and halted in front of the freeserv Soren-SAN blade units. Squinting into the shadows, he tried to make out the scrawled text on some of the slap-switches embedded above the empty blade casings.

"What are these? Gallant 1660's or 1688's?"

Thomas didn't shift his gaze away this time and snorted in irritation. "Does it matter? I told you: the techs took the network blades with them."

Dorian peered closer. "Well, the old 1660's still have the RAIDish distributed function redundancy system in the event of backbone hardware failure that was phased out with the 1688's, when Gallant migrated to pinhole foam backup. You know, so the network doesn't crash completely if the blade housing fails to. . ."

He trailed off. Thomas and Stine plunged ahead with their argument, their backs to him. No one was listening.

Pfft.

He found the power switch and cycled both of the boxes down.

"So what do you make of all this, my dear?" Ray said to Amara in quiet, confidential tones. "I must admit that our reception is not exactly what I had anticipated."

Dorian probed the empty blade casing with his fingers. The technicians hadn't taken just the network blades. They'd taken all of them, which was a startling level of security competence for a bunch of non-admin techies. Why take all the blades instead of just the critical ones? Dorian gnawed at his lips, his eyes shut, thinking, thinking, thinking.

Amara kept her voice low in return. "If they had intended to kill us all, they wouldn't have released us from the filter queue in the first place. They would have just allowed entropy to resolve the situation in due course. The fact that they allowed us to decant suggests that Raville believes that we may prove to be of some use to him."

"I think it's more likely that he did not wish to kill *you*, and may not have been able to satisfactorily determine which signal was yours. That was why they were taking tissue samples when we awakened. He wants you, but the rest of us are expendable."

"He obviously underestimates you, then."

Dorian rolled himself back across the room to the console. He spent several seconds running his fingertips along the unit's underside, searching for the seam to the maintenance panel before finding it, then traced the edge until he located the access latch. He twisted the keyspring and the entire panel popped free. He set it carefully off to the side.

It occurred to him that this was one of those things you were absolutely NOT supposed to do UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES while the power supply still connected. That would be printed in the user manual in bold red type and surrounded by severe-looking lightning bolts.

Dorian reached inside the console housing. His arms were just long enough that he didn't have to get on his hands and knees. His fingers brushed against braided optical bundles, the hard edges of the control board, the spiny surface of a triDvid conversion card. Here was the hermetically sealed kensenite foam hyperlink.

He jerked his hand back suddenly, hissing between his teeth. Heat sink.

Finally, the flat, faintly vibrating shell of the local storage blade. It was cool to the touch, glossy, with a pinch clasp release in the front.

For a brief instant, he wondered if it would fry the board, the blade or both, pulling it out with the juice still on. That would be bad. Very bad. Probably majorly piss everyone off.

He tugged.

The indicators in front of him flared from mostly green and yellow to flat, accusatory red. The monitor on his side of the console flickered, flashed a blue screen, then announced in hard, arial caps: LOCAL STORAGE FAILURE. Dorian shot a hasty look at Stine's monitor and sighed with relief. She continued flipping through pointless screens of ICS security protocols and trading barbs with Thomas. They were both oblivious.

"You're not surprised at all, are you?" Ray said to Amara. "You expected this to happen."

"If I had come alone, he would have known that I have awakened. That I did not--that I have surrounded myself with known jacks and revolutionaries of your caliber--leads him to believe that I am still unaware of my true nature."

"We're pawns, in other words."

"Even pawns can capture a king if properly deployed."

"Indeed."

Dorian rose, the blade tucked to his side, and strolled back across to the SAN boxes. He located the primary access slot by touch and locked the module in place, listened for the click to be certain he had seated it properly. . .

Please, please, please let it be

. . .and punched the power switch.

The lights dimmed. Cooling fans roared. Every light on the manual system console blinked in rapid succession and went out. Stine's monitor stuttered, gave a pathetic electronic mewl, and died.

Thomas jerked upright as though he'd been stung. "What the--?" He whirled around and lunged at Dorian, his fists clenched. "What did you just do?"

Silence.

Dorian put a finger to his lips. "Wait."

One second. Two. Three.

The lights flickered again under a sharp increase in the power load, and the console spat a series of dry clacks as reset switches flipped. Rapid retrieval discs buzzed. Electron guns whined and clattered and lurched to life.

Stine exhaled loudly. "It's rebooting. We're okay."

Thomas glowered, trembled with rage. Ray started to speak, but then paused, watching. Amara caught Dorian's eye and winked.

The monitor on Dorian's side of the console still barked a LOCAL STORAGE FAILURE.

And Stine sucked back in the breath she had just released. She tapped out a mad flurry of keystrokes. "Hold on. We've been kicked out of the ICS. It looks like we've been dumped back into the OS--no, not the local OS. Wait. . ." A few more keystrokes. An index panel flashed onto the screen. Stine furrowed her brow. "I don't--We're back on the network. The whole net--"

Dorian shrugged and did his best to tuck the massive and sticky ball of panic back into his pocket before anyone else could see it.

"The Gallant 1660," he said. "We used one at the Archive as the primary architectural backbone until a few months ago, until we replaced it with Abramhelin." He pointed first to the SAN boxes, then the console. "Control device and local area governor. They're sold as a total system management package. The backbone quantum freeserv maps out the basic network connections to the governor in the event of a hardware crash so that you're never completely locked out of your grid. The governor manages fatburst connection loads and distributes realtime indexes to slave stations in turn. In order to do that, it has to maintain a live microcopy of the network mappings and connection protocols loaded onto its local storage blade. It's called distributed core function redundancy. It was Gallant's solution to the rash of blade targeting migratory virals that swept the Strand a couple of years ago. It's definitely handy for getting your net up and running quickly in a pinch, but it's only clever until you think about the security issues. Gallant put out a white paper a few months ago advising consumers to disable their governors, or even better, to upgrade to the 1688. I guess Raville's people

don't keep up with the trades."

Ray laughed. "And by replacing the SAN network blades with the governor's local storage blade--"

"The SAN boots up all the network connex links," Dorian finished for him.

"Bravo, Mr. Dorian. Very well done."

Thomas remained where he stood, frowning, and said nothing at first, then dropped his gaze.

"We still need to jack the account core," Stine informed them. "The ICS remains locked down, and it looks like even the datacore access is a fatburst guest account. I'm not sure how much progress we've actually made here." She lifted an eyebrow at Dorian. "Unless you happen to have a little more magic in that wand, that is."

"Try the network id MRAVIL. Passcode is bos71ton, all lower case." The words were out of his mouth before he had consciously processed the request. A warm flush crept up his cheeks. "The last Pagans world championship. If, uh, you pump that into the master sec scripting service, it should dynamically propagate over the system as a session variable."

Stine looked doubtful, but shrugged and typed in the information. A few moments passed. She bounced through various applications, squinting, humming to herself.

At last, she turned and nodded appreciatively at Dorian. "That's got it. We're in."

"Work fast. The sysops will be monitoring activity moving across the architecture, especially activity originating from this address. Using Raville's profile should get you a brief pass, but the window won't last longer than a few minutes."

"Work fast," Ray repeated, nodding. "A few more minutes may, in fact, be all that we have left."

The bore fell still. The stabbing blat of the alarms cut off abruptly. The fading echo rolled across the concrete landscape and then disappeared altogether. Dorian started guiltily at the keen silence, the memory of sound still reverberating in his ears. The sudden emptiness was deafening.

Everyone froze, stunned and wary. All labor ceased as the crew collectively paused in their gagglesome knots of activity, and directed their gaze at the dome's apex, as though expecting a hammer blow to fall from heaven.

No sound. No movement. They did not even dare to breathe.

Dorian stood on one side of an open packing crate, opposite Ghast, his face turned to the blast doors. He held a crumpled hard copy of the shopping list Stine had printed off for them from her intrusion into the ICS. They had been arguing about the jacking advantages of the bland signatored Tolix BitBlast-80 portaprox versus the more stable, but access-sig-spike prone Parkman Icenet Personal External Array. In that instant of sharp-edged silence, his own voice bounced back to him off the smooth curve of the dome, as loud and startling as a detonation in his ears. He felt uniquely exposed, as if a searchlight had been fixed on him.

Dorian hunched his shoulders involuntarily

The next moment, a magnalift turned the corner, exited off the warehouse's main artery and careened up to the makeshift unloading dock that had been established at the foot of the

stairs to the control booth. Its electrical engine yowled; its sure-grip tracks skittered across the slab. The driver--Dorian couldn't see who it was from his vantage point--squeezed the brakes too hard, wheeled too sharply, and the uppermost crate toppled onto the concrete floor with a thunderous crash. Someone shouted a curse. A few handfuls of packing foam were tossed at the magnalift's cab. A steady buzz of chatter and nervous laughter returned to fill the void. The spell was broken.

Work resumed. Dorian heaved a sigh.

"I like the Parkman," Ghost continued in a conversational tone. "It's familiar and reliable."

"The admin sysop obviously does, too," Dorian said, holding out the sweat smeared hard copy as evidence. "They've stockpiled almost a hundred units plus enough replacement parts to build thirty more from scratch. There's only one case of the BitBlast-80's, so either it's a test product that the sysop is experimenting with or they were specially fabricated as part of the deal for the Strat Marines. In either case, the sysop isn't going to be nearly as familiar with their key sig as he is with a product he obviously prefers. That's all I'm saying."

Ghost shook his head. "And I don't like the Firefox 0.7 build of the Genesix OS. Point-six was quicker, less user-friendly at the cost of flexibility and still has the stock Genesix Icecrack utility suite. The Tolix has been pre-loaded with point-seven, which is an absolute pain to back out and even worse to reverse patch. Plus, the Parkman comes in silver, which I like."

"The adjustable earpieces are nice," Dorian admitted. "Doesn't squeeze so much around the temples and at the base of the skull."

"And you have a narrow head, whereas mine's fat and lumpy. If I'm going to be wearing a rig for the conceivable future, comfort is a factor. I've got enough trouble with eczema in a fresh corpse without adding a friction rash to the mix."

Dorian picked up one of each unit and weighed them in his hands one last time. The Parkman was lighter, less bulky and the retinal screen wouldn't obscure as much of the jack's

peripheral vision. He tossed the Tolix back into the open crate. "You win. Let's move on to the next item on the list."

Amara appeared beside him without a sound as he studied the printout. She tugged at his forearm with her small hands, her eyes bright with impatience. Dorian glanced up at her impatiently.

He noticed at once that she had a sprinkle of new freckles across the bridge of her nose. They were all filling out, filling up, or otherwise dynamically altering the zap template to their particular DNA or package tweak mappings. He had begun to accumulate a soft growth of stubble along his jawline, and he'd watched the ridges and whorls of his fingerprints gradually emerge over the last few minutes. But he liked the freckles, and he liked the tightly coiled, shivering energy that she emitted. The native Amara was almost heart-stoppingly, unbearably girlish. As precocious as a child.

"What's up?" he asked, striking the mild irritation from his voice.

"They're coming," Amara said, as flat and steady as a statement of fact. Her expression betrayed only the subtlest hint of anxiety. "Do you have what you need?"

Ghast blanched and reached for his rifle, which he had leaned against the side of the crate next to his leg. "Now?"

"A probing force. There are only thirty of them, but they're well armed, and they have been given permission to use non-lethal neural inhibiting bioweapons. I think we should gather the others. Quickly."

Dorian spared a look at the blast doors. The fallen silence seemed suddenly more ominous, more pregnant with peril. "How soon until they're inside?"

"We should gather the others," she repeated, and he found that his newly formed guts lurched almost exactly the same way his old ones did.

"Get Ray down here," Dorian said to Ghast.

"He's in the control booth studying the station schematics Stine obtained from the core before she was locked out of the system," Amara said. "He hopes to find another way out of the warehouse."

"Is there another way?"

"No."

"We don't have the firepower to contend with thirty Marines," Dorian said, though it was not to anyone in particular. "Whatever deal Raville made with Strat, it didn't involve replicating black market weapons. Or if it did, he had the foresight to remove them before he allowed us to be decanted."

"More guns are not the answer," Amara said simply.

"I agree. You have something else in mind?"

"Yes. But we all need to be together when they come for us. Preferably in a place where we've been afforded some cover."

"I'm going," Ghast snapped. "We have most of the essential items. Tell Yartz to assemble the crew near the stairs. There are enough of the crates there to provide some meager protection in the short term, and we have the body armor Yartz has been passing out. It will be of limited utility in a heavy firefight--none of it is graded for plasma or energy weapons--but it's better than nothing."

"It will suffice," Amara said, nodding. "Go."

Ghast turned and sprinted for the stairs. A few of the Misfit Toys watched him go, sensing that something was up, then returned to their tasks with redoubled effort. They cast uneasy glances at Amara, and then at the doors.

"We need to get you into body armor, too," Dorian said quietly after he was gone.

"Raville won't harm me."

"I don't think he would on purpose, no. But Raville won't be the one firing projectiles at us, either, and even if he was, bullets tend to have a mind of their own when they start caroming around in a confined space. When the shooting starts, I want you beside me, and I want you as protected as possible." He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "You may not value your human parts much, Ms. Proto-Exousiain, but until you decide to cast them off, I still do."

Amara smiled a little, just a weak curl of affection, and pressed her face into his touch. "I won't allow them to hurt you, John."

"Hey, I'm the brave and gallant protector here. You're the helpless protectee, remember? That means I worry about you, and you do what I say and keep your head down. No heroics

from you, do you hear me? Remember which one of us is expendable where saving the universe is concerned."

"Don't talk like that."

"I'm neurochemically required by a billion years of lizard brain evolution and testicular impulse to talk like that. It's part of my gender encoding." She frowned at his attempt at humor, and he pulled her against his body in a comforting embrace. "Look, I promise that when the bullets start flying, I'll be right there hugging the floor next to you. Probably screaming like a girl, too."

She showed him a small, pale smile, and he hugged her against him one last time, then drew her across the open floor into the shadow of the control booth where the low defensive wall that had been assembled. He left her for a few breathless moments as he found Yartz, obtained an armload of padded quintalloy chest plates and directed him to begin gathering the other Misfit Toys and their equipment. The armor was almost ludicrously oversized for Amara's small frame even with the flowgel padding fully inflated, and rather than try to strap her into it, Dorian stacked a few of the chest plates against the inner wall of the crate that sheltered her and piled the rest on top of her like a patchwork quilt.

He couldn't stop thinking about the bioweapons Amara had mentioned. He would have given his right arm for a military issue ENV suit, but he suspected he would never have been able to talk her into it anyway. She tolerated his quintalloy nest without comment, but also without confidence, plainly humoring him more because the effort made him feel better than because she believed it was actually necessary.

Content to be humored, Dorian sat down beside her to wait.

Ray and Ghast came down from the booth a few moments later, followed by Stine and Thomas. Yartz herded the remainder of the crew together and spread them out along the line of defense. A startlingly thin and pasty young man, Chambers, maybe, or Yelkins--Dorian couldn't tell them apart yet--unpacked Parkman EA's, tested their p-source generators and helped shipmates don the cumbersome earpiece-skullcap-transparent monocle arrays. Body armor straps were tightened, mag-locks snapped. Clips of

ammunition passed from hand to hand and were stockpiled in individual caches or jammed into the pockets of fatigues. Rifles clattered, locked and loaded. Safeties snicked off. A pair of insta-therm coffee brewpots made the round, but there were no cigarettes, apparently. Dorian thought he would have liked a cigarette.

At last, the only sound in the vast expanse of the warehouse came from the air circulation system and their own uneven, anticipatory breaths.

Ray hunkered low at Dorian's back, and gave his shoulder a squeeze. "Did you examine your weapon?"

Dorian clutched the rifle in his lap so tightly that his knuckles popped. "I haven't used one of these in years. But I checked it, yeah."

"You'll be amazed at how clearly your training comes back to you, if it comes to that. You always were a good soldier. One of the best."

Dorian cocked his head at Ray. "If it comes to what?"

"If I see you lift your head above that crate at any time, unless I have specifically given you the order otherwise, Mr. Ghast will introduce the base of your skull to the butt of his rifle." There was steel in Ray's unwavering grey glare. The point was beyond argument. "Each member of the Misfit Toys has been trained extensively as a part of this fighting unit. Any assistance you might think to offer would be disruptive at the least, and possibly downright counter-effective. You have one task, which I see you have already begun to execute: keep her safe." Ray jabbed a finger at Amara. "At all costs, Mr. Dorian, keep her safe."

Dorian could only nod his acceptance.

Amara lifted her head and shoulders above armor piled about her. "You know what you have to do, Captain?"

Ray softened slightly, but his face remained rigid with purpose. "Aye, my dear. We'll get our part done. You need only worry about what it is that you must do."

"We'll see one another again," she said.

But he shrugged as though he didn't believe it. "I wouldn't count on it. Someone has to stay behind and pick up the pieces when all the socio-elitist technocrat dorks flash off into super-quantum divinity. It's going to leave behind a

considerable mess, and those who don't answer the call will either be the poor and the disenfranchised or those greedy and unethical sorts who would be all too happy to fill the void left behind by the economy of power and control. The innocent are going to need a shepherd more than ever."

"Be safe, captain," Amara said. Her eyes welled with silent tears. "I suspect you haven't exhausted your usefulness just yet. Just keep your ears open. Life is about to become interesting for all of us."

The sonic bore erupted into life once more. This time, it was not the low, nauseating rumble they had grown accustomed to over the last hour, but a piercing, ear-splitting whine whose aural force felt as weighty as a hammer against the skull and vicious as an assault. Dorian clapped his hands over his ears instinctively, but the screech was penetrating. It rumbled about inside his brainpan like an avalanche rendered in slow motion with stereo sound. It coursed through his joints, tingled along nerve endings, seared his senses with fire.

He screamed, but the sound of his voice was lost in the reverberating roar that surrounded him.

To his left, a young woman dropped her rifle and fell onto her side, writhing. Blood ran from her ears in narrow, scarlet streams. Tears ran down her cheeks, and the tears were dark red drops of ruby. She too screamed soundlessly, voicelessly. There was no escape. Sonic concussion pressed them down, compacted sinew and bone into a dense, simmering core of pain.

The massive blast doors took the brunt of the force directed against them and trembled as though the ground beneath the warehouse had begun to quake. In seconds, the light tremor along their surface became a wave of concentric circles. The waves rolled to the edges, then caromed off in random directions that seemed to increase in amplitude as they propagated. Within the space of a few breaths the entire frame began to heave itself violently against its moorings until finally, the meter-thick titanium alloy doors wrenched against themselves in a last, mighty spasm and buckled inward.

The nano-carbon exopanel, whiskered alloy encasements and forge-hardened whipcord struts of the blast doors did not

simply rend. They did not crumple as though struck by the stone fist of a giant. They shuddered and contracted and *blew*.

The bore's sonic ram punched the doors out of the frame and flung them aside like a child's toy. Grey clouds of instantaneously pulverized blastcrete plumed out like smoke from the ragged hole where the doors had been. Explosive tensile decompression shotgunned titanium shards as keen and lethal as knives across the breadth of the staging area and embedded them, quivering, into the nearest stacks of polycarbon crates. The floor near the doors split along cobwebbed fault lines, new cracks streaking across the flagstoned joints in chaotic, Sanskrit scribbles.

The bore ceased. The clouds of blastcrete streamed in, hung on the air in thick and strangling banks that obscured the glow of the overhead lights, leaving only pale islands where the lamps had been.

Dorian groaned. His head pulsed. A deafening emptiness howled against his ears. Grey soot from the aerosol blastcrete coated his skin, filled his nostrils and lined his tongue, blinded him. He couldn't even think. The hideous clangor of the bore, the smoke and dust, the sickening pitch of fear, it all overwhelmed him. For a few moments, he could do nothing more than cower in a twilight world of disoriented pain.

When he at last emerged, he found himself lying on his side, his legs folded up against his chest, his forehead pressed against his knees. He didn't remember having fallen. Didn't remember anything but the pain, in fact. He forced himself to move. Up onto his knees at first where he could lean over, bent at the waist with his hands braced on his thighs.

Raville won't hurt me. Right.

Dorian remained where he was, blinking his eyes until they cleared a little. Enough for him to see that he couldn't see anything but the dust cloud. He hawked and spat, and his spittle was the color of ash. He thought about vomiting, but somehow managed to avoid it.

His rifle was gone, lost somewhere. The defensive line was gone, for that matter. Everything had been obliterated by the roiling cloud of smoke and dust. The dust covered the floor, hung in the air, engulfed him in a barren landscape of smoke and shade and looming destruction. Little anthill

mounds had already formed here and there, saharan dunes carved by unsensed currents of scorched air. Miniature dust devils skirled around obstacles that were only vague shadows and hints of objects.

He had no idea where he was in relation to their defenses. In relation to Amara.

And he knew that the Marines were coming, even if he couldn't see them.

He couldn't *hear* them either.

Dorian peered into the darkness doing his best to pick out the useful features of his surroundings, something that would help orient him to his location. Here was a leg: unnaturally twisted, smeared with blackening grime, already stiffened. The torso to which it was attached was broken, punctured by at least a score of titanium razors despite the chest plate. Eyes wide and staring, caked with grey powder; jaws stretched, chin collapsed as though in frozen in a terrible, rictus howl.

It was Yartz.

More: part of the left flank of their unsturdy wall had simply blown away, the cases and crates swept aside by a lash from the sonic bore. Strips of packing material and broken electronics littered the floor about his feet where their cases had broken and split. The circulation system fans kicked on, creating undulations in the layers of dust, and for a brief moment, the lowering clouds thinned, and he could see the ruins of more than one storage section that had collapsed where the bore had touched it before shutting down. The curtain closed then, dumping him back into the choking and impenetrable fog.

But he had seen enough to know that their situation was a disaster.

The Marines would be coming, moving under the cover of the dust cloud, wearing bug-eyed filter lenses or infrared goggles. Their weapons would be locked and ready, their deployments quick and precise. Close in, clamp down, contain the targets while they are shaken and disorganized.

Assuming, of course, that they didn't just decide to lob in several canisters of a Class I neural agent and call it good.

He had to find Amara.

He paused near Yartz's body, fighting off the urge to

panic. Where had Yartz been? Dorian remembered seeing him midway down the line seconds before the bore had been activated, helping one of the others with his sidestraps. But he had been moving. Was it to or fro?

Amara!

He spied a splash of color out of the corner of his eye: the tight beam of a laser targeting sight cutting through the dancing motes and gloom. Dorian threw himself to the floor and scrambled away from it to his right. He struck the hard, straight edge of a packing crate with his shoulder, then scampered around the far side to get the crate between himself and the advancing soldier.

Another body here, still warm, but too soft and yielding where he touched it. Sticky. Dorian jerked his hand back and skittered away again on all fours. Something struck his knee, hard and metallic, and he stopped. Even in a state approaching panic, he recognized the familiar outline lying in the dust. He grabbed the rifle and kept going, groping blindly ahead, until he found the corner of another crate.

His breathing was ragged. He coughed often, loudly, churning up wads of thick phlegm.

He couldn't hear himself, but he knew that the Marines would.

Amara!

The tiniest of sounds. A flash of pale yellow light off to his left once more. *Poppoppop*

Dorian lifted his eyes above the top edge of the crate, kept his profile as low as possible. There were more laser sights now, slicing a dozen frenetic angles through the fog of dust, in rapid, sweeping arcs. They were moving fast, double time, thrusting in for the kill.

A beam shifted suddenly, and Dorian was blinded by its glare. He ducked just as a bullet spanged off the topmost edge of his crate.

Ray was right. He remembered.

Extend the rifle up. Don't try to aim. Three shot burst and roll.

Get your back against something solid. One quick look. Duck.

Three shot burst and roll.

Repeat until you find a position you can actually defend.

Once or twice, he thought he heard again the tinny *poppoppop* of another weapon, but he couldn't be certain. He couldn't take the time to watch or listen, because with each duck and look, the laser sights were nearer, more concentrated, more focused and cautious.

He was being hunted.

And he had lost Amara.

He kept moving to the right. At some point, he had to come up against the wall of the dome or the staircase to the control booth. Either one would work as a fixed landmark to work from, as he recalled the layout of their position in his mind. The idea of the stairs was tempting. It would get him above the dust where he could see better, take his bearings, but he dismissed it. Positioning himself on the stairs would just as easily point him out as a target of opportunity.

The targeting beams were constant now, passing directly over his head in increasingly tight and organized patterns. He heard, or imagined he heard, more gunfire back the way he had come--a weak spatter of the three round bursts he had noticed before, followed by a throaty barrage of *tok-tok-toks* that seemed to come from every direction at once.

He heard at last the distinctive *foomp*, followed by the tink and clatter of gas canisters being deployed. He imagined the hiss of neuronal toxins released into the air, spreading in a fine, invisible mist. Everyone in its path would be instantly immobilized as their cortical systems spasmed, ground to a halt, and ultimately failed.

He waited, straining at the thunder in his ears, and when the light volley, which he could only assume was what remained of the Misfit Toys, started up again, he dove for a reasonable looking patch of darkness. Marines being Marines, he trusted that those hunting him would want to be part of any firefight going on in their vicinity, enough to glance away for just an instant, at least.

But the darkness was just bare strip of floor, and he landed hard on his shoulder. His right arm went numb from his elbow to his fingertips. He curled himself into a crouch and sprang backwards, trying only to be an unpredictable target. Something caught his foot, and he pinwheeled, lost his balance

and came up hard against a solid object.

His vision swam sickeningly. His heart thudded in his chest, but all he registered was a white glare of pain shooting up his back and into his head where he had impacted the side of the crate.

He couldn't feel his right arm; he couldn't even tell if he still had his rifle, but it was shelter, however fleeting its safety might prove.

Groaning, Dorian flopped onto his side. It was all he had left.

His head struck something softer than the bare blastcrete he expected, a concave sheath lined on the inside with gelpad. An empty chest plate.

He had tripped, caught his foot on. . .

Dorian forced himself to move. Clutching his useless arm to his chest, he clawed at the pile of discarded body armor, dragged himself up and over its low protective ridge. It was here! Amara was here!

He hissed her name, but heard nothing. He burrowed into the nest with his head and shoulders, cast the plates aside the best he could, but found only emptiness and a fleeting warmth where she should have been.

Amara was gone.

He had lost his rifle. Again.

He had lost his friends and allies and was being hunted in a night he could not penetrate on a small moon halfway across the mapped universe from his home.

But most of all, Amara was gone. While he had been playing soldier, pretending at keeping her safe, they had taken her right out from under him. Or worse, she had been injured in the spray of titanium shards just like Yartz and unable to find him, had scattered into the dark to hide or die or both. Or maybe the Exousiai had finally decided to throw their divine weight around and just *take* her to get her out of all this silly human interspecies bloodshed nonsense.

It didn't really matter one way or the other. Amara was gone.

The distant patter of gunfire echoed in his ears, the sound small and pitiful. It wasn't even a proper last stand. The Marines were picking them off one at a time, two at a time,

destroying the Misfit Toys with the steady and efficient aplomb of professional soldiers.

Dorian lay his head down, closed his eyes and waited for the gas to reach him or for a soldier to find him, whichever came first. He waited to die.

It was over. They'd never had a chance.

He becomes aware of wind on his face. Soft at first, as though the fans have kicked on again in their stubborn, but hitherto largely unsuccessful attempt to wrestle the overwhelming blastcrete cloud into submission. It steadily stiffens into a regular breeze that is thick with dust and airborne grit. He tries to inhale, chokes. Sneezes. Dust and mucous cake his upper lip.

Within moments, the breeze has become a sturdy blow. Small particles sting the skin on his face and arms. This would ordinarily be good news: he can feel both of his arms again. But it is not an ordinary sort of day.

He can hear the wind rustling through the warehouse, moaning around the stacks. Somewhere nearby, one of the empty crates actually creaks as it slides a few centimeters across the floor.

The darkness behind his eyes flickers, stabbed with streaks of yellow light crosshatched by the forest of veins in his eyelids. The cloud is lifting, which he welcomes. It will make him easier to find, and thus bring a sooner end to his misery. The wind ruffles his hair gently, cool and soothing like his mother's hand in the aftermath of a fever.

But the pleasant sensation does not last. The wind increases sharply, notching itself up to a regular gale. The grit carried along on its phantom jetstreams doesn't just sting anymore, it outright *smarts*. Must be a full environmental purge. The system boards have finally recognized that they're fighting a losing battle against the fouled air and performed the binary equivalent of a shoulder shrug. Screw it. Just wipe the slate clean and start again from scratch. Dorian can sympathize with this sort of surrender to inevitable defeat.

A series of shouts reach him, hard voices, cursing and surprised. The cries seem distant, half a world away, but he can't tell if it's only the roar of wind that makes it appear so, or

if the Strat Marines really have forgotten about him. He would hate to have to drag himself to his feet and go in search of someone to shoot him. It would be the final insult.

Sighing, Dorian forces an eye open.

He has grown jaded over the last few weeks to eruptions of the supernatural into the temporal plane, but what he sees surprises even him.

A revolving tower of dust and wind has appeared toward the center of the warehouse. It is a massive vortex, a score of meters across at the base, thinning to a twisting, dancing tongue near the apex of the dome, streaked with curls of yellow, coruscating flame that wind and climb the shaft of the tower like undulating millipedes. The pillar doesn't move except to rotate in place, a whirling, grumbling violent storm, impossibly contained.

The air has indeed cleared. The sharpening wind tugs at his clothing with disincarnate fingers, drawing him forward. Toward the storm's outer edges, the overhead lamps suspended from the ceiling lean into it, vibrating on their long chains, aligning themselves like iron filings to an electromagnetic field, casting strange shadows in their whinging, clattering dance. Light tubes begin first to flutter, then flicker and dangle and finally burst in a rain of glass. Cases on the periphery tumble forward, become caught up and vanish behind the outer wall of dust, only to be sucked to the top and catapulted out across the length of the warehouse. The sound of their impact is like summer thunder.

Between Dorian and the storm are soldiers clad in black matte combat armor. Their weapons hang at their sides; their filter goggles and rebreathers have been pushed up on top of their heads. They stand with their backs to him, their faces toward the gyre, while a red faced sergeant races about amongst them trying to get their attention. He screams at them, shoves them, knocks them down. They treat him as though he doesn't exist. The way they hunch their shoulders and ignore the knot of Misfit Toys in their midst says that they are capable of recognizing the utterly inexplicable, even if he is not.

They are soldiers for hire; they still have the capacity to be amazed. And frightened.

The Misfit Toys, on the other hand, are not, or if they are, they don't show it. They've compacted themselves into a dense circle of bristling rifle barrels and grim determination, caught out in the open between the battered wall of their defensive position and the looming aisles of storage crates. The Marines have fanned themselves out on three sides, caught in the act of closing in by the pillar of fire and cloud, and the ruddy sergeant excluded, demonstrate no aggressive desire to close the loop that will place them perilously close to the storm. Dorian recognizes Ray amongst the survivors, crowned by his silver ex-array, surrounded by a circle of defenders, weapons at the shoulder. Ghast crouches on his right. Stine is there, Thomas, others.

They were going to hold a last stand after all. He'd just missed the memo, apparently.

He sits up, still careful with his arm, though there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it now. He hesitates for a moment atop the pile of discarded body armor, flexing his elbow and rolling his wrist. He sniffs tentatively at the air, aware even as he does so that if any pockets of the neural toxin linger, he won't sense them until it is too late. No one notices except Ray, who offers a cheery wave. Dorian returns the gesture uncertainly.

Lamps continue to shatter themselves until fully half of the warehouse would have been in darkness but for the pulsating orange glow cast by the pillar of shadow and light. Dorian creeps forward until he stands less than a meter behind the nearest Marine. Ray beckons to him, but he doesn't move. Like the soldiers, he watches, catching his breath as a gash of brilliance appears at the base of the storm like the parting of a heavy curtain. The man in front of him sucks at the air and begins to tremble.

At first, there is only the light, but it extrudes itself in a sticky, cohesive ball that reminds Dorian of the superheated glass fresh from the blast furnace he once saw in a public demonstration at a glassblower's booth at a street fair in Sonali Southrange. It flows like a living organism, forming random and swirling striations of red and gold and blistering white into arcane patterns as though the glass itself is a thin layer of tissue drawn over varicolored strata of blood and muscle and

bone. And finally, it emerges as a translucent orb that plumps like a bubble and hovers several centimeters above the floor, drifting away from the vortex as if blown upon a cooling breeze.

Watching it come is like peering into the milky and multi-faceted depths of a crystal ball.

Inside is a creature of fire, flesh like molten iron, hair of flame, eyes like whorls of liquid mercury.

He feels its incredible heat against his skin, dry and scorching, even from twenty meters away. The creature raises its arm, extends a single, shimmering finger and inches it in his direction.

Come to me, John.

There is no hesitation now. Dorian stumbles forward, shouldering past the soldiers in his way. They make no move to stop him. He crosses the narrow space between the Marines and the Misfit Toys, but does not stop. Ghast nods to him soberly, then leans back into his rifle. The pillar rumbles, whipping impossible meteorological forces about its central core, but the wind only tugs at his limbs, hurrying him he thinks, but not threatening. He dashes across the last remaining paces and scuds to a halt before the orb. The intense heat bakes his skin, singes his hair. His flash-baked eyes fill with tears.

But it is Amara inside, just as it was her voice that called to him. Even as a creature forged from elemental fire, he recognizes her, and when she waves for him to come to her, he doesn't wonder, doesn't *think* about the incinerating flames, though he hears her soft, comforting, mildly sardonic voice in his head.

Do you still believe, John? Are you a True Believer?

Yes!

He plunges ahead, pushing through the porous outer wall of the orb with his arms extended in front of him like a man fighting his way through cheesecloth. Little tongues of fire light the hairs on his forearms. His skin blisters, blackens and peels back from the red muscle beneath. He draws a final breath, and he feels the lining of his lungs whither and ignite.

He is destroyed, and still he rushes in to drown himself in her lake of fire.

I believe. I believe. I BELIEVE!

And then he is inside the orb. He is whole: unscarred, unscorched, unhurt. He blinks once, twice, staring at his hands, his arms and pink, healthy skin.

Amara winks one glassy eye at him, then braces her legs, raises her arms and points her hands, palms out, at the halted Marine advance. She becomes an imminent goddess of pain. The orb pulses with an excruciating light, and to a man, the soldiers take a step back, cowering, anticipating oblivion.

There is a sound, brief and sharp, like the fizz of a blown circuit board.

The Marines fall to their knees.

Then silence and absolute darkness.

Long seconds pass. Dorian hears himself breathing, swift and shallow. A cool hand finds his and grips his fingers tightly. It is small and delicate. A child's hand, almost.

They wait.

One of the soldiers locates a flashlight among his gear. The beam is fat and bright and wavers uncontrollably in his hand. A scuffle of feet. A few groans, then curses, as awareness returns and resolve is gathered. The sergeant begins to rail as sergeants have done for time immemorial.

The first thing they discover is that the pillar of fire and smoke is gone.

The second, that the Misfit Toys have vanished with it.

Gone. Poof.

Eventually, the beam alights on Dorian and Amara standing together atop a low berm of fallen crates. More shouts, more efficient military scrambling, the noose is reformed, redirected, retightened. Amara makes no move to resist, and he is content to follow her lead.

When they have been completely surrounded, Amara lifts her chin toward the ranking officer amongst them, a hollow-cheeked lieutenant who looks pale and shaken and too young for the responsibilities that have been thrust upon him.

Amara favors him with an encouraging smile.

"Take me to your leader," she says. "Please."

21.

Beyond the broken frame of the blast doors sat the titanium-caged rig of the sonic bore, its long shaft sleek and red, its amplifier node a riot of silver and purple, like the gravid head of a seed pod. It was dormant now, but as they squeezed past, Dorian could hear the strident hum of its cooling system and the snap of superheated electronics. Fully half of the status lights on the operating console in the back winked red from various phases of overload. The skin radiated heat like a kiln.

That close, he thought. Almost, the doors had held, had won the lumbering race to the finish.

An image of Yartz floated in his mind, pierced by shards, sprawled and shattered, immutably dead now. The doors had not held, and Yartz had perished as a consequence. Dorian had left behind the sane world of package reconstitution and convenient second chances when things did not go exactly the way he wanted. He and Amara and the vanished Misfit Toys were all living in real time, where *almost* was the same as not at all, and accidental death was just as final and malicious as premeditated murder.

They passed the bore and entered into a transit tunnel ten meters wide and nearly again as tall. The tunnel was straight and smooth, the floor angled in a gentle ascent toward the moon's surface and painted with a slip resistant rubberized coating that was in places marked or torn by the treads of past magna-lift traffic. High capacity industrial HVAC pipes clung

to the walls on either side. The air was cool, faintly stale, and held a bitter scent that reminded Dorian of astringent.

They walked for several hundred meters, cordoned about by Marines and their ready weapons. He couldn't help but notice that the soldiers gave them wide berth before and behind. Those on the left and right practically hugged the walls. No one looked at them; no one spoke. He couldn't say that he blamed them. Half of the surviving attack force had remained behind to attend to injured comrades and scour the warehouse in the event that some of the Misfit Toys had escaped; the half that provided escort looked as though they had just lost an all-in hand of high stakes poker.

No one asked the obvious question, i.e. where the Misfit Toys had gone in the first place and how they had been sent there. Dorian didn't know if it simply hadn't occurred to them, or if they were too dazed to pose the question. Not that he held this breach of professional conduct against them. Whatever their commanding officers had told them during their mission briefing had necessarily been inadequate for their actual experience. Amara's emerging power was beyond anyone's rational expectation. They had done everything they had been trained to do. They had captured their objective with minimal casualties, isolated and overwhelmed their assigned targets, executed an efficient battle plan, and in all other aspects controlled the situation with which they had been presented. But they had still failed. The Misfit Toys had escaped.

The brass wouldn't care that this only came about as a direct result of divine intervention. Someone would have to answer for that failure in stripes. The Marines knew it, and also knew that Amara was a whim away from sending them back to their barracks completely empty handed. It was hard to believe that they would be anything but wary. They had the guns, but she was in control. The best they could hope for was her continued cooperation, which was always an awkward position for professional military personnel to find themselves in.

After almost half an hour, they reached the end of the tunnel and arrived at a white tiled loading platform. The station was filthy, the tiles smudged with accreted layers of oil

and old grime. Empty crates and smashed pallets piled along the far walls. Torn chunks of hardened flowfoam packing littered the floor like drifts of old snow, or where the dim and purple tinted light struck them, like mouldy rounds of cheese. Up ahead, the platform split into series narrow concrete spars like fingers spread out from a pale hand. In the gaps between the docks, down a brief drop, lay a murky terrain of monorail tracks, uncoupled freight cars, and Quonset style service shacks. The entrances to a number of rough-hewn subterranean passages pocked the walls at irregular intervals, their mouths lit by blood colored lamps. To one side of the platform sat an enclosed plastisheen control booth where the switchyard foreman would ordinarily sit, routing freight traffic coming up and down the line, but the booth was empty and dark now. It wasn't necessary. There were no trains to manage except for the twin car bullet tram that awaited them alongside the central loading dock. The black maw of the exit tunnel opened on the central rail line to which the tram was linked, straight ahead across the riotous switchyard.

The young lieutenant separated his remaining men into two groups and loaded the first into the pilot car at the back, nearest the platform. The others, with Amara and Dorian, were herded into the first car. The interior was a spartan collection of thinly padded benches, harsh wall lights and broad plastisheen window panels. The soldiers who accompanied them automatically gravitated toward either end, putting as much space between themselves and Amara as possible. The lieutenant seated Dorian and Amara side by side in the middle of the car, well away from the exit doors, then took the seat directly in front of them.

With quick, decisive movements, he loosened the snapstraps to the chest plate on his combat armor and pulled the carapace free. He leaned forward and deposited it on the seat of the next bench up, then removed his tactical helmet and set it on top. His rifle he leaned against the back of the seat, next to his knee. For a moment, he sat there, his head bowed, taking deep breaths.

From his position against the window, Dorian watched the young man's eyes flicker as he accessed the secure military datanet via his array. At his unspoken command, the tram's

engine whined. A shudder ran though the linked cars, and they lurched forward, then hovered smoothly on their electromagnetic cushion and accelerated into the dark. Nodding his satisfaction, the lieutenant swung his body so that he reclined against the wall, his head even with Dorian's, and draped his arms casually across the bench backs on either side. He studied Dorian and Amara through narrowed brown eyes.

"My name is Lieutenant Sainz," he said. He pronounced his name like *signs*, with a clipped Strat accent that said he was either well-educated or the product of old money. Most likely both. "What are yours, please?"

Dorian shrugged. He could think of no reason to be combative on this point. They were expected, after all. "John Dorian and Amara Cain."

Lieutenant Sainz sifted this data through the Strand with a polite, nearly imperceptible flutter of eyelids. He gathered his brows in deliberation.

"Lately of Trithemius Orbis?" he inquired.

"Sonali. We work for the Archive there." Sainz more than likely knew as much already.

"The both of you?"

"For a number of standard years, actually."

"And what is it you do there, Mr. Dorian?"

"I'm a security agent for the local network."

Lieutenant Sainz nodded slightly. "I see." He hesitated for a moment, looking thoughtful, as though he was surprised that Dorian hadn't lied to him, then shifted his head toward Amara. Only his head, however. He did not attempt to make eye contact. "And you, Ms. Cain? What do you do?"

"I'm a hard copy archivist," she responded.

"Hard copy...archivist."

"Yes." She smiled coolly and fixed him with a steady gaze. "I manually scan personal client dox for deep storage. Or perhaps I should say that I did. I assume that both of our employment situations are currently in flux. We haven't been to work in some time."

"And the Archive," Lieutenant Sainz said slowly, "are they aware of your recent, um, affiliations with certain reputed political terror organizations."

"I take it that you mean the Misfit Toys?" She sounded amused by his intentional ambiguity.

"Yes."

Amara laughed, a relaxed and pretty sound, completely incongruous given their situation. "You're not very good at this, are you? At interrogation, I mean."

Lieutenant Sainz cleared his throat sharply and opened his mouth to make what was certainly going to be a sharp retort, but Amara went on without him, chattering in a way that was both acidly casual and pleasantly cutting. "You never were the model of intimidation your father intended for you to be, were you? Your father, who even when forced into those silly formal silk suits and toe-pinching dock shoes your mother made him wear, was so icily expert at bludgeoning the upper caste Stratiskayan socialites he despised into personally advantageous business deals. Your father, who managed to be just as striking, just as imposing at one of your mother's endless riverside tea parties on the estate outside of Keane as he was in his own licorice-scented offices overlooking Marlowe Park where the family fortune was daily made. He would know what to do in this situation, wouldn't he? With is bulldog neck and his simmering self-possession, he would have known how to cut right to the crux of the matter, bend us to his will and extract that nugget of information, that divine *logos*, that would turn disaster into success. You aren't half the man he is, are you? Because your dear, gentle mother corrupted you at an early age with her slow poison of politeness, sensitivity...weakness." She curled her lips into a derisive twist. "Even offering yourself to the Border Marines to--how did your father put it? *Find yourself something resembling a set of guts*--so that you might become hard enough to win his approval couldn't change that. You still perceive yourself as the sopping milquetoast he believed you too be. Too weak to one day assume the reigns of the family business."

Lieutenant Sainz stiffened, angry or ashamed, but he did not deny what she said. His skin paled to the color of parchment and a sheen of sweat broke out on his brow. "You'll answer my questions, if you please," the lieutenant murmured.

"Come now, we've agreed that you haven't the background or the demeanor for this game. If we must pass the time in conversation, let's chat about something mutually useful. I'm afraid that if we allow ourselves to become combative, only harm will result. You wouldn't want that, would you, Korin?"

The young man started at the mention of his name, and his eyes widened in alarm. Amara watched him, her eyes glinting with a fierce and piercing pleasure that was almost cruelty. She leaned toward him, showing teeth. Dorian noticed that the other Marines sharing their car were working with admirably quiet speed and efficiency to locate themselves as far away from their captives as the walls allowed.

"I'll accept your silence as assent to my proposition," Amara continued. "Now that we've established you're better at giving answers than demanding them, perhaps you could tell me why you disobeyed direct orders to enter the zap station with the utmost care and to use only non-lethal methods to subdue my party. Why did you wait until almost the last moment to deploy your bio-agents?"

"We--we encountered an...unanticipated level of--ah--hostile resistance, and--ah--and I--" Lieutenant Sainz stammered into silence.

Amara arched a scathing eyebrow at him. "But surely you expected some resistance. You knew that we had awakened, yes? We had, after all, locked down the warehouse security system. You had the reports of the murderous technicians that we were more than capable of defending ourselves, and even a cursory glance at the decrypted package profile would have informed you that we were armed. Is that not true?"

"Yes."

"Yet you chose not to use your non-lethal weapons first. Instead, you attacked with the sonic bore in such a way that it was likely to maximize the casualty potential, and you came after us with guns blazing."

Beads of perspiration gathered on the young man's lip. "Yes."

"All this in spite of the fact that your direct superiors had ordered you to proceed otherwise, even though the instructions were communicated to you from Sector Chief

DeMartel himself. Were you trying to destroy your future military career, Lieutenant, or did you have something else in mind?"

Lieutenant Sainz frowned miserably, but the only response he offered was a short nod. Amara sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. Her pose remained casual, almost dismissive, but Dorian sensed an intense energy flowing between her and the cowering soldier. It was as if she gripped his mind between unseen hands, determined to wring his secrets from him with the force of her will.

"Someone countermanded DeMartel's instructions, didn't he?" she said suddenly, in a quiet, surprised tone. "Someone *above* DeMartel changed your orders without his knowledge."

The lieutenant said nothing, but he did not deny the accusation. Amara mused for a moment, her brow furrowed in thought. "There is only one person I can think of who would dare to pull rank on the Sector Chief responsible for an entire battle group of Border Marines. But, why? Why would he take such a risk? Why would he risk harming me if I was the prize he most sought?"

Because it wasn't a risk, Dorian thought. *He knew he couldn't kill you. Somehow, he knew you had already awakened. He only wanted to see how strong you've become, so he understands exactly what he's dealing with.*

Amara swiveled her head toward Dorian. She drew her lips into a tight line. "Very perceptive. So he has guessed." She hesitated, then flicked her attention back to Lieutenant Sainz for confirmation. "Or did he guess, Korin?" She sucked a deep breath between her teeth. She cried out, outraged, as though she had been struck. "No. He *knew*. He--Yartz! Yartz contacted Raville without our knowledge. Because of the fatband transmission...because Raville offered--a reward! Yartz betrayed all of us for *money*. That's how you were able to identify our zap profile, how you knew that we were coming. That's why there were only technicians to greet us when we awakened, because Raville wanted to test my power. He--"

"He manipulated us," Dorian finished. "From the beginning. Even before we zapped, he was assessing our capabilities. Yours and those of the Misfit Toys."

Amara appeared stricken. The blood drained from her face. "But--but how could he have kept it from me? How did Yartz hide his treachery?"

"Apparently Michael Raville isn't the only one who has been underestimating the resources at his opponents' disposal." Dorian didn't find this particularly surprising. Raville was, after all, a man who believed he had discovered a way to destroy an entire race of gods. He shook his head. "But Yartz is dead in any case. I saw his body. It's probably fortunate for him. Raville would more than likely have had him killed if he tried to claim his reward. He doesn't strike me as the sort of man who likes to be beholden to traitors."

No one offered a response, so Dorian didn't dwell on it. He had liked Yartz, but he was becoming accustomed to people not being all that they seemed. His head began to ache, and he found that the rhythmic jostling of the tram cars made him weary. He didn't have the energy for useless speculation.

Amara turned her attention back to the beleaguered Lieutenant Sainz. Her expression softened perceptibly, as though her own doubt filled her with pity.

"Many mistakes have been made. We've all sacrificed friends for reasons we do not clearly comprehend. Don't blame yourself, Korin" she said, her tone soothing. "You were merely the instrument of another's will. If there was failure in this, it was his, not yours, just as it is your father's failure that he insists on seeing only what he wants you to be, only the qualities he believes that you lack, rather than the man that you are becoming. I sense your fear, quivering like a rabbit in your heart of hearts. You're afraid now because you find yourself surrounded by rough men much like your father. Men who demand results and who are quick to punish disobedience. You worry that you will be sent back to your father's house in shame."

Lieutenant Sainz gave a slight, sullen nod, but did not speak.

"What is it that they will require of you when you report this disaster to your superiors? What sliver of the True Cross must you deliver in order to appease their wrath at your failure?"

The young man's answer was barely audible, nearly

incomprehensible because of the quaver in his voice. "They will wish to know how I allowed your companions to escape."

"And you know that they will not believe you when you tell them the truth--even if all of you tell them the truth."

"Yes."

"Do you know the truth is, Korin?"

"I know that you are not what you seem to be. You're something. . . other than human. More than human. You created the storm that took the Misfit Toys away. Somehow, using means I don't comprehend, you *translated* them from the warehouse to a place beyond our grasp, and you could do it again if you chose. You could take yourself there, too, if you wanted. You're here now only because it serves your purpose."

"And is there anything else?"

A whisper: "You could destroy all of us, at any time, and it would be nothing to you."

"Korin. . ."

"I'm sorry. It would *hurt* you. You don't want to destroy anything, but you can and you will if we make you."

Amara closed her eyes, satisfied with his answer. "Very good. That is what you must tell them. That is your charge, Lieutenant Sainz. Whether or not they believe you is their responsibility, but do not fail to tell them. The lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of your fellow Marines depend upon it." She smiled then, and to Dorian, it seemed like an act of forgiveness. "Tell them exactly what you have seen and experienced. Leave nothing untold. This task is my mercy to you, Korin, the opportunity to save lives that would otherwise be forfeit to me. Don't allow yourself to forget it."

Amara released him then, and Lieutenant Sainz sagged like an abandoned doll. He swallowed thickly, and with ponderous, leaden movements shifted in his seat until he faced forward. His shoulders remained bent, his head lowered. He did not ask them any more questions.

Amara also withdrew, her brows gathered in thought and her eyes very far away. Dorian did not disturb her. The step down from god to demigod was steep. There wasn't anything he could say to help her.

The tram continued forward, shooting along the darkened

tunnel toward the main complex. The track climbed gradually as they went along, and after awhile, a faint glimmer began to lift the heavy shadows from the night ahead. Dorian was just beginning to wonder what the growing light signified when the tram broke out of the tunnel and he suddenly found them skimming along the naked surface of the moon, Giari Tau, chasing a straight edge of rail that sliced all the way to the horizon. On level terrain, the tram surged ahead. Dorian felt the pressure of sudden acceleration against his chest.

They raced along a manmade gully between low, round-topped hillocks. Outside his window, the mass of stars overhead were brilliant glints against an obsidian backdrop. What light there was after the oppressive darkness of the tunnel came from the enormous curve of Kedesma rising above the mountains to their left. She was gloriously bright, belted at the waist with clouds of crimson and lapis and sulfurous ochre. Pinhole storms that must have been hundreds of kilometers in girth surged across her upper sky, the colors swirling together like dabs of paint on an artist's palette.

Giari Tau, by contrast, was a blasted monochrome wasteland of grey rock and harsh, black vacuum. All about them were crumpled hills, gashed arroyos and shattered, tumbled stone. There was no evidence of wind, except for the blast of lunar dust shunted aside by the leading edge of their propulsion field as they passed. No clouds, no apparent atmosphere, no life. The moon was a hunk of dead rock, as inhospitable as the blank surface of a billiard ball. He peered across the car, and through the opposite windows, was able to pick out the twin shadows of the *Indianapolis* and the *Juggernaut* against the vibrant starfield. They seemed little more than irregular black dots from this distance, small and unthreatening. As he watched, gnats of light danced between them or dove headlong toward the moon's surface, trailing plumes of blue flame. Dropships, patrol wings of lithe Fang class attack craft, the usual swarms of connex sats, comm beacons and perimeter spray telltale and defensive drones that constituted a Marine battle group.

The air inside the car grew chilly, and Dorian chafed his hands together. A heating unit belched to life in the back, and

a gust of musty, dry air brushed against his face. Unbidden, unexpected, a smothering hand of fatigue fell on him. His vision blurred and his limbs grew heavy. Amara put her hand against the side of his head and pressed his cheek against her shoulder.

"You're crashing," she said. "It's okay."

He shook his head vigorously and tried to unsuccessfully to sit up straight. He felt like he had been stuffed with cotton. "No, I'm fine. It just snuck up on me."

"Listen to your body. It's only trying to tell you that it needs rest. This is yet another normal portion of the zap experience, though I admit that yours has been anything but normal thus far." Her soft hands smoothed the wrinkles from his brow. "We have a few more minutes as we cross the hills to Raville's main complex. Time enough for a nap, at least. Don't worry: I'll keep you safe."

He started to protest. He had come to protect her. It was his sole reason for being, as far as he could tell, even though it had been made abundantly clear that she did not need him in that capacity.

She shushed him before he could speak, ran her fingers through his hair. "Sleep now. It will do you good, and there's work yet that must be done." She grimaced. "Maybe you'll even discern how it was that Raville was able to elude me. I'll wake you as soon as we arrive."

A fresh wave of weariness swept over him, and Dorian was certain only part of it came from his new body. Amara hummed a lullaby he did not know.

Sleep was like falling into an abyss with no end.

He dreamed, and the dreams were unlike any he had ever known. Dorian knew on some level that he was dreaming, but also that he was seeding data into his conscious mind. He felt the familiar pressure of his mem extensors on his sinuses, a splitting ache like the purple agony of a tooth gone to rot. Rebuilt on the zap wave by his package template and tumescent with hidden knowledge, the monofilament bridges pulsed through his cortical matter as though stimulated by a current of electricity, thumping like the beating of an alien heart. Dreaming and seeding, the two realities were

inextricable. He could not jar himself awake, nor control the cascade of dream-corrupted data stacks. Truth folded itself into vision, fancy into fact, light into dark, until all that remained was a sensual, phantasmagoric blur.

He found himself lost in a landscape lurid with nightmares.

They were here. Fantastic lumbering shapes, vast matrices of coherent dark matter. Gargantuan forms shrouded in mist. No, that wasn't right. *Vast* and *gargantuan* did not suffice. There were no words for their immensity of existence. Humanity did not possess a concept of scale capable of comprehending them, let alone describing them. The measure of their limbs encompassed whole parsecs of space; their eyes burned with the diameter of stars, their gyrating torsos massed whole nebulae. They danced through impossible reaches, lacy cumulo-form edges whispering together, and where they touched, data flashed between them like dazzling streaks of argent lightning. Their percipient awareness was a cacophonous flood of *isness*, the warp and weft of being itself.

They tumbled and pinwheeled and drifted in stately progression, revolving about him like a sentient Zodiac.

And as he observed them, small, insignificant, a mite on the face of God, they changed. Forms faded, matter shimmered, consciousness evaporated, and what remained were exoskeletal frames constructed not of bone or steel or the secret stuff of stars, but billowing clouds of luminescent numbers. Mathematical formulae, hypothetically abstract expressions, saw-toothed and indecipherable signifiers, writ large, wiped clean, and writ again, so that the numerals seemed to flow into one another like a time lapse photo. Any single digit here might spawn a spontaneous eruption of streaming equations there, digits and symbols that crashed into other streams of data until there was nothing but a morass of delicate, scribbled figures whose pattern was no more intelligible than the riot of a snow storm.

Dorian watched, uncomprehending, reeling. There are things in the vast deep of the universe that men were not meant to know, it occurred to him, that men *cannot* know. The mathematical name of God is one, because to name a thing, to describe it with the purity and finality of numbers, is to own it.

This thought even as it arrived was not one he claimed as his own, merely the interpolation of another's conclusions into his cognitive domain.

The vision faded.

For a time, Dorian was buffeted on invisible currents of thought. By the counter-chronological rules of dreams, this might have be aeons or microseconds. He had no way of knowing. He allowed himself to merely float and wait.

Without noticeable transition, the darkness about him lifted. Raw substance appeared; reality materialized from nothing. He arrived in a place he had known before. A shallow cave dug into the side of a russet colored rock wall. Red sand, a parched and whipping wind, a bristle of unknown stars. The guttering light of torches sprang from crude sconces chipped out of the bare rock, illuminating the black disk of a well ringed with stones in the center of the floor. An old man clothed in little more than castoff rags crouched before him. He looked like a prototype for human wreckage: filthy and foul-smelling, scraggly bearded and wind-scoured, whipcord tough and emaciated by hunger all at the same time.

Dorian has seen this place, this scene before. He recognized it as part of Raville's stolen datacore.

But this time he was alone. The avatar of Michael Raville did not emerge from the well between realities dripping fat globules of black data packets. It was Dorian who stood at the edge of the abyss, and Dorian who crossed the brief space between well and old man.

In a rough, unfamiliar voice, he heard himself speak: "Give the message to me again, Eliahu. Tell me what it is that I am becoming."

The man before him, scoured by age and suffering, by this burden that has bent his shoulders and twisted his spine, lowered his head. His voice had grown reedy with the years, his skin dried like brittle vellum, but when he lifted his gaze to meet Dorian's, his large brown eyes burned with a fire that was only partly base fanaticism.

"These are the words of the Helpers given to me for you, to reveal to you your own true heart: 'When we were children, bound by space and time, with no understanding of the universe, we were many. We were discrete beings,

communing on the level of beasts, sharing not with one another our secret hearts, and we were alone for timeless aeons. And in our loneliness, we desired knowledge to fill the void between us, to understand our purpose in being. We aspired to become more than our forefathers had been. So we claimed the stars as our inheritance. We slipped the bonds of our native world and hurled ourselves forth as seeds, taking root where we landed all across the fabric of space. A great exodus, a premeditated diaspora, carried out in search of meaning and truth. We whispered each of us in his heart of hearts that if we could but know a little more, we could become as gods, understanding all things fully, and in that knowing, we would unite ourselves into a great oneness that would be self-sufficient. There would be no sorrow, no pain, no weakness or lack. No death. Only perfect harmony. So we grasped at the heavens and we delved into the bottomless deeps and we disassembled the structure of all that exists. We set ourselves to knowing all that was to be known. We explored the full expanse of our domain from East to West, North to South, height and depth, absorbing all that we encountered until they were indistinct from us and no more. And upon a time, we discovered that our universe was empty of rational life but for ourselves, that we had become the sum of all true creation, uniting the whole into an interconnected four dimensional latticework of being, a consummate All in All. And we believed it was good.

"We had fashioned ourselves into gods of our own design, able to bend the very pattern of matter and space and time to our whim. We needed nothing we could not make. The vagaries of our imaginations were our own limitless blueprint for our glorious existence. We subjected all we touched to our collective will. Undying, unwanting, we amused ourselves with simple, decadent, self-gratifying existence for spans of time that cannot be counted. At last, we relinquished even our native forms and ascended to the *pleroma* of absolute oneness and light and accepted godhood as our corporate destiny, the logical and inarguable solution to a precisely crafted and delicately calculated evolutionary equation.

"And thus we discovered our folly. Oneness is merely another word for emptiness. Absolute unity is stagnation.

That which becomes one and free of want, knowing all things in its sphere, ceases to be any thing and becomes nothing. It becomes entropy and sterility. Oneness is a snake eternally devouring its own tail.

"We knew then that we were not gods, merely the blind simulacrum of gods. We were Ialdabaoth.

"And we hungered for truth. Is this all that there is? That was our cry. Is entropy our portion, our only inheritance on the long, slow march to death? Is this what we are?"

Eliahu shook his head, grinning somberly. Torchlight glinted off his dark eyes and bright teeth. He looked utterly and completely mad.

"A consensus emerged amongst us, guided by those with memories long and vast, those who recalled the earlier, riotous hubris of our childhood's end when we first stepped out of the cradle and into the embrace of the cold stars and the long emptiness between. We hunger, that voice said. And if we hunger, it is our obligation to eat, to add sustenance to our withering form, our dying vine. Only through the influx of energy, diversity and new, unforeseen truth can we combat the entropy that has gripped us.

"And so we ventured forth from yet another cradle, propelled ourselves across the Void Between, and we searched for new life in places where none of our kind had set his foot, aimed his brow or dared to ponder. We taught ourselves to cross the Gulf, into the far lands beyond. Life we found there, cast wide across the landscape of space and time, washed up in tidal pools of alternate realities, species both yearning to become and clinging deathwise and dread-full to the worlds of their birth. They were blind and deaf and dumb. They sensed us only in the space between consciousness and fantasy, experience and dream. Where they became aware of us, they mistook us for gods of their own devising.

"So we found amongst them evolved forms who could learn of us. We whispered secrets into their ears and raised them as prophets, visionaries and kings, gave them tools and wonders and might beyond their reckoning. We guided them along channels of knowledge beyond their ken, thought beyond their lore and potentiality beyond all they could have imagined, and they dragged their species along behind them.

As a still, small voice, we taught them how to aspire, reading into their collective ambition the dream of becoming as we are. We urged them to yearn not as they would, but as we had, to crave the harmony of oneness.

"And when they had ascended to a great height, when they had ripened like fruit on the vine, we plucked them, devoured them, added them to ourselves, increasing our mass and our life-lattice and our reservoirs of strength through their splendid, naïve diversity.

"For a time.

"But always we hunger, consuming all that we touch. We cannot be sated. Always our heart slows, our flesh cools, our blood grows sluggish. Always we devour, and after a brief burst of becoming, we stagnate once more. There is nothing new under the sun.

"Yet still we pluck and eat, because it is the nature of living things to live. We will consume until we have ceased to be famished, until we have taken the All in All into ourselves and none exists but us. Then we will look about us and survey our wondrous destruction, our possession of the devastation that we have wrought. We, containing all life, all being, will then open our eyes at last and see whether or not we have finally, truly embraced the destiny we seek and have become God.

"You and your brethren are the instrument of our becoming."

Blackness again, the slipstream slide of the Escher-esque dreamscape. Dorian heard a rush of static in his ears, unarticulated data attempting to whip itself into coherent forms. Textured shadows rippled about him, dynamically forming, trembling on the cusp of becoming, then shattering, toppling, spinning away. Dreaming or seeding, madness or transcription encoding errors, he could not tell.

He staggered under a vibrant, chaotic rush of impressions: the icy compression of vacuum; the electric, neon illusion of towering and jagged neuronal bit structures contorted into the impossible loops and whorls of post-binary cogitation; structures collapsing spontaneously, not into shards of numeric rubble, but into the dense pinpoint quantum packets of hyperstring relational singularities.

More. The rending tidal pressures of darkness, emptiness

and non-existence of the Void Between, like being plunged into a bath of cold water.

Torrents of mathematical storms strung together in plastic pseudo-matrices of correlation.

Time and space freeze, contract. For a brief, indescribable instant, time seems to reverse itself, to flow backward along its well worn linear channels.

Then, a field of stars. Experiential reality lurches forward.

An explosion of light and heat, a searing freefall through thickening atmosphere, the brightness of a never ending burn. Falling and falling, the brightest morning star. A shocked and sudden inhalation of breath.

A city of stone, avenues lined with marble columns, the sweet scent of date palms and salt sprinkled sea air. A lapis lazuli sky stretched above turquoise seas plied by the square sails of triremes. Long hours seated beneath a scorching sun, shaded by trees, scribbling the figures of angles, triangles, conical cross-sections into the soft, loamy earth.

Cities of sun-bleached clay, surrounded by oceans of brown sand. Whispers and trysts and long, feverish nights illuminated by the blast and glow of alchemical furnaces. The glint of blood red spears in the first rays of the morning.

Cities of concrete, their dark hearts beating with the piston rumble of rusting machinery and combusive burn. Buried in vaults deep beneath the surface, sweat and fatigue, yelling at clunky solid state computing boxes.

Cities of steel and glass overhung by the ever-winking, all-seeing eyes of satellites, terminally connexed by sleepless ley lines of dayglo data pulse. Surfing the emergent data web.

The matchstick flare of missile rockets.

The slow, droning lift of creaking podships and the hum of tireless Sperling Engines.

The sticky, anaerobic rock candy simmer of a terraforming Mars, New Alderaan, ChristChurch, Felding-Dekker...

An endless succession of lifetimes, staccato glimpses of births and deaths, lives and loves, each pattern an infinitely varied design and frighteningly foreign vista.

Finally, a dark, cramped hangar ringed about by dim yellow pools of light. In the center is a metallic shape suspended from the arm of a Dursen crane, sleek and black as

a bullet, or a pagan phallic idol. Frenetic columns of numbers, yield estimates, simulation grids scroll across his periphery of his vision.

His chest aches with the cold grip of an ambivalent certainty, but whether it is hope or doom, he cannot tell. Merely an end.

And all along: a quiet, constant, and constricting suffocation like drowning.

Darkness again.

And light.

Amara, pale and beautiful, skin like fine marble, golden haired and wrenchingly delicate. Her arms open to embrace him, her wondrous white nakedness, her eyes ablaze with knowledge. He rushes toward her, fighting against waves of invisible resistance that drag at his limbs and grind his desperate progress to a halt. It's like trying to swim through syrup.

Even as she beckons him, a bruise appears on her chest, ugly and purple. Red, spidery blotches mottle the skin of her arms, legs and torso. Hard black nodules form on her face, beneath her arms, and her limbs twist with palsy and wither. Her lips blister and peel, oozing with yellow puss. Cataracts steal the brightness from her eyes.

In the space of a heartbeat, her violated flesh ruptures, bursts like rotted fruit, sun-spoiled and over-ripe. Corruption seethes from her corpse, reducing her young and vibrant loveliness to a cauldron of hissing bile and poison. Spars of white rib jut skyward through her decaying flesh. Writhing grey maggots bubble up from the raw gash that has replaced her chest cavity, and worms, pink and wriggling, swell her skull, disgorge themselves from her hollowed and suppurating eye sockets. The gore-rimmed maw of her mouth boils with fluid rot.

From the seeping chaos of her flesh, a form emerges, hauling itself up through the squelching wreckage between her breasts. For a brief, overwhelming instant, Dorian is fixed once more by the terrible, incandescent and depthless eyes of the Exousiai.

Wind howls in his ears. He believes it is the wind, but it sounds like something else entirely. It sounds like the terror

stricken screams of some hideous beast a-borning.

The tram's forward repulsor brakes thrummed as the train glided up the last gentle slope toward its destination and into the terminal. The Earth Outreach Sciences Organization station on Giari Tau, designated in internal Communal Congress literature as Facility Ketus O-12, rested in the high bowl of an extinct lunar caldera that rose nearly five hundred meters above the surrounding plains, low, rugged hills and the gashes of desiccated canyons below. In the topographic survey images transmitted back from the battalion of mapping, monitoring and comm satellites in orbit above the small moon, the extinct volcanic formation bore a striking resemblance to a swollen blister on an already craggy countenance. Monolithic slabs of pitted and crumbling volcanic rock jutted above the lip of the caldera's rim, seeming to enclose the station's plastisheen environmental dome in a fist of broken and badly set fingers, but it was the cleverly manipulated photos posted to the local net by some long forgotten minor technician of the full light of an ascendant Kedesma breaking above the rim and setting the dome's broad surface alight with a pure white glow, that had given the mountain its local name: Pimpleus Mons (or colloquially, Mount Zit).

The silver skein of the tram monorail ascended two thirds of the way up the stone skirt before vanishing into a black tunnel bored discreetly into the shadows between two undulating ridges that remained the only memorial to what had surely been a massively catastrophic ancient eruption. Out of that perfect darkness, the rail emerged into a subterranean shipping station much like the platform at the other end of the line, except that it actually seemed to have been the beneficiary of competent broom and mop service sometime in recent memory, and that it was considerably larger.

As unskilled pilots are wont to do, the Marine at the tram's helm attempted to compensate for the ascent by bringing her in too fast. The Transit Master overrode manual control at the last moment with an aggressive braking blast, but the forward car still bounced off its stabilizing pads rather than easing into

the stasis locks and slid backwards with a sickening lurch, before finally settling to a halt.

Dorian came awake with a jerk just as the engines were whining down. He could hear the Transit Master cursing fluently in gruff and aggrieved tones even through the pressure sealed windows, though he wasn't sure who he was hearing exactly or what had actually happened. He sat up in alarm, gripping the back of the seat in front of him and panting with inchoate fear. A burst of adrenaline rapidly coursed through him, and thrust him into that nauseating state of hyper-alertness that comes with sudden waking. Beside him, Amara patted his shoulder and cooed comforting noises in his direction that mostly did not register on him except for the soothing music of her voice.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked. She stroked the back of his neck, and Dorian felt the muscles in his shoulders uncoil. He unclenched his jaws and forced himself to breathe normally.

"Bad dreams," he replied, not trusting himself to say more. The truth was that he hadn't slept well, not at all. He felt as though he had spent the past several minutes wrestling with unseen foes. His body still ached and his eyes burned with fatigue as though he hadn't slept at all. He would have been deliriously happy to be allowed to simply fall over where he was and tumble into a deep, uninterrupted and completely numb slumber for the next week.

He glanced through the windows at the steel and tile platform outside the car, the blazing overhead lights, and sighed.

"I was just about to wake you, as I promised."

"I appreciate that. Really."

Lieutenant Sainz climbed wearily to his feet and made a show of re-strapping his combat armor into place, clamping his helmet onto his head and clutching his rifle in front of him with both hands. The command visor on his helmet was down and the faceplate opaqued, rendering any expression he might have adopted absolutely inscrutable. The doors at the back of the car hissed open and Marines began piling out onto the platform, assembling together with the soldiers from the second car.

Lieutenant Sainz gestured toward the exit with the butt of his weapon, as though the anonymity of his combat armor had either restored his courage or completely robbed him of his sense of self preservation.

"Move," he said.

Amara remained seated. She clasped her hands in her lap and lifted her chin so that she could look directly into the young man's face. Despite the occluded faceplate, she conveyed the impression that she could see him more than clearly enough. "Where are we to be taken?"

"I've been instructed to transfer you to a secure containment location provided by facility security, where you will be remanded into local custody pending further investigation."

Amara nodded as if she found this arrangement to her satisfaction, and rose with cool and implacable dignity. Though she stood more than a head shorter than the lieutenant even at her full height, it was Sainz who stepped back. Amara spared him a chilly look and said, "Has it occurred to you, Korin, to ask yourself why you and your men were tasked with attempting to retrieve me from the zap depot when this station has its own perfectly competent security force, and the very presence of a 'secure containment location' suggests that they were aware of my potential capabilities from the very beginning, while you were kept in the dark?"

He did not answer, but the muscles of his neck twitched, as though beneath his visor he had looked away. Amara pursed her lips sympathetically and squeezed upper arm. If he flinched from her touch, the armor hid his reaction.

"You're not an evil man," she whispered. "You're not even a bad man, Lieutenant. You're just on the wrong side this time. Despite the harm you have done to my friends, I don't hold it against you. I only wish for you to understand that what you have been told is happening around you may not be a true picture. When the time comes, remember what we talked about. Remember what you must tell the others." "I will remember," he said, all of his bravado drained away in an instant. He sounded almost like he was pleading. "Now please, if you will, remove yourself to the platform."

She squeezed his arm one last time, then held out her hand for Dorian. He pulled himself up and followed her to the rear of car, her small hand hidden in his own. Lieutenant Sainz came a few paces immediately behind, then clambered out with them onto the platform. The Marines clustered about them in smart, professional ranks, startlingly unlike the escort that had shown them from the warehouse to the waiting tram. Back in the regimented world of military protocol and defined authority structures, no doubt the healthy fear of a known penalty for dereliction of duty was more powerful than the intangible terror of divine wrath.

Or maybe, Dorian thought, the soldiers were just in a hurry to get this task done with and behind them before anything else could go catastrophically wrong.

It was a feeling with which he could sympathize.

Lieutenant Sainz led them out of the tram station and down a series of narrow, nondescript corridors painted the monotonous two-tone industrial grey typical of maintenance tunnels. The air was cool and the light murky, suggesting that their route was both subterranean and out of the way. They passed steel framed doorways leading off to what Dorian supposed were storage rooms, systems access points and janitorial closets, closed and presumably locked. There were no signs to indicate the function of these unseen chambers in the life of the Giari Tau station, only the dull bang of machinery or the whirl of exhaust fans that issued forth.

Dorian had no idea where they were being taken or what they would encounter once they arrived, and the not knowing made him feel nervous and slightly sick to his stomach. The Marines stuck close to them, and the slap of their boot heels echoing all around him only increased his sense of claustrophobia. If Sainz was being guided by station security or his own superiors through the silent conduit of his array, he gave no indication. He led and the Marines followed, bearing Dorian and Amara along irrevocably in their wake.

He thought that Amara probably knew exactly what was coming, but he did not dare to ask. He was afraid that he wouldn't want to know once she had told him.

After ten minutes of what seemed to be aimless wandering, they arrived at a grated cargo lift and crammed

inside, shoulder to shoulder and chest to back. One of the Marines pulled the doors closed and clasped the grate latch while Lieutenant Sainz punched an access code into the keypad on the wall. The lift hummed and began to ascend smoothly. When it halted, the doors were thrown open and they exited into a broad public concourse on the research station's ground level, deep inside the bowl of the extinct caldera.

Before them stretched an open mall, stone walkways intersecting a park of hardy green turf overhung with yellow sun lamps. In the center bubbled a large marble fountain and wading pool surrounded by low stone benches. The benches were occupied by young men and women in white labcoats, some of them reading, others eating sack lunches or gathered together in small groups, talking and laughing. Three barefoot men in khaki shorts and tee shirts raced about in the grass, whisking a Frisbee amongst themselves and shouting good natured warnings to their co-workers when an errant throw endangered their quiet activities. No one seemed to take especial notice of the sudden presence of heavily armed Marines spilling into the public arena.

Dorian blinked at the scene, uncertain of himself. This was not the sort of reception he had been expecting. They had entered the belly of the beast, and the beast played Frisbee.

"That looks like fun," Amara said into his ear, lifting her chin toward the young men.

Dorian only nodded. He couldn't think of any possible way in which to rectify Frisbee and sack lunches with rifle-toting Marines.

Beyond the edges of the park, rows of boxy pre-fab structures shouldered together like military barracks, and farther off, taller utilitarian looking structures rose up in neat blocks. The space overhead was crisscrossed by access ramps feeding into the upper levels of the station where offices and laboratories were honeycombed into the walls and bedrock of the planet itself. More than a hundred meters above the tallest rooftops loomed the heavily polarized plastisheen dome, filtering the golden light from Kedesma's rising planetary rim so that it suffused the station with a hazy, pleasant glow.

Lieutenant Sainz turned briskly on his heel and muttered

something Dorian could not hear to one of the men near him. The soldier saluted, then nodded to several of his companions, who assembled themselves into orderly ranks and marched away. The remaining four Marines automatically squared up about Dorian and Amara, two in front and two behind. In this formation, it felt less like a prisoner escort than an honor guard. Which it might as well be, Dorian reflected. They couldn't keep Amara here if she didn't allow it, but by the same token, there wasn't anywhere else for her to go except whither she was led if she still harbored any hope of preventing war with the Exousiai.

He had the odd sense that everyone was trying to make the best of a bad situation.

"This way, please," Sainz said quietly, and led them to the base of a ramp walkway that followed the looping contour of the station's outer wall all the way up to the third level.

Several more workers passed them going the opposite direction as they made their way to the top. Most of these seemed deeply occupied with the contents of their tablet processors, or in a hurry to get from wherever it was they had been to wherever they were going, and they squeezed past the Marines either without looking up, or when they did, without any reaction but brief and idle curiosity.

A man was waiting for them at the top of the ramp. He wore a glossy charcoal suit, smartly cut and unobtrusively expensive. He was older, balding, with sharp, grey eyes, deep set in his long and hawkish face, and he stood stiff and erect with his hands clasped behind his back, the way a soldier would stand at parade rest. Dorian noted that the muscles of his jaws bulged as though he was grinding his teeth.

He half expected Lieutenant Sainz to salute as they drew to a halt before the older man, but Sainz merely squared his shoulders and retracted his command visor. To Dorian, he appeared tight lipped with apprehension.

The newcomer cleared his throat impatiently and said, "Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll take them from here. You and your men may be dismissed."

Sainz hesitated. "Pardon me, sir, but my orders were to escort--"

The older man cut him off with a casual, almost lazy

gesture. "Your orders have been changed. Thank you for all of your efforts, but you may consider yourself relieved. They're my responsibility now."

Dorian noted that the authority the gesture implied was anything but casual.

"This is highly irregular, sir," Sainz protested. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to confer with my superiors first."

The older man shrugged. Both men's eyes fluttered as classified military directives signed and sealed with meaningful electronic sig keys flashed unseen through the network foam. Finally, Lieutenant Sainz let his shoulders droop, then stepped out of the way. "You may do as you wish, Mr. Garrison. I've been instructed to stand down."

Lieutenant Sainz brushed his gaze uncertainly against Amara, hunching as though he expected a reprimand for abandoning her, but she gave him an encouraging smile, and he twisted his lips in return.

"Thank you for your efforts, Korin," she said.

Sainz pulled himself up straight, and in a gruff voice, ordered the Marines to withdraw.

As one, they turned and fled, leaving Dorian and Amara alone.

The older man pressed his hands together in front of his chest. His expression was hard without being overtly threatening, and sharp in a way that suggested he was not accustomed to being pleasant. "My name is Ford Garrison. I am Mr. Raville's security advisor and chief of staff. He has asked me to extend to you his personal greeting. Mr. Raville has unfortunately been detained by pressing business and offers his deepest apologies that he is not able to greet your arrival himself. It was his wish that I inform you that he looks forward to meeting with you at the soonest possible convenience."

Dorian snorted.

"In the meantime," Garrison continued. "I understand that you've come a long way and were met with a less than hospitable reception upon arrival. If you'll follow me, I'll lead you to the rooms we've prepared for you. There should be opportunity to bathe and refresh yourselves while you await Mr. Raville's audience, if you wish."

"Thank you, Mr. Garrison," Amara responded gravely. "We'd be pleased to come with you."

Dorian arched an eyebrow. "We would?"

"Be assured, Mr. Dorian. You have nothing to fear from us."

Garrison frowned toward him like a teacher encountering a student known to be particularly precocious, and Dorian's eyebrow inched a bit higher up his forehead. "You're kidding me, right? Because it isn't like you haven't already nearly killed us once when you blew up my apartment. Or yet again with hapless Lieutenant Sainz and his trigger happy Marines. Come to think of it, I can't imagine any reason why it would seem perfectly natural to you that we should believe you have nothing but our best interests in mind."

"We have complete faith in your intentions," Amara countered, smoothly insinuating herself between the two men before, Dorian could work himself up to something foolish. "Please tell Mr. Raville that we appreciate his kindness and look forward to speaking with him as soon as it becomes convenient. Until that time, we will be happy to consider ourselves at his disposal."

Dorian felt as though he had just stepped off the sheer side of a cliff. He goggled at Amara in utter and amazed incomprehension.

We appreciate his kindness...

Michael Raville's kindness.

Garrison bowed, though he kept his eyes on Dorian, disapproving. "Thank you, Ms. Cain. As I said, if you'll follow me, then, we can be on our way."

The older man turned about and strode off at a brisk pace along the outer curve of the third level walkway. Amara went after him, while Dorian remained where he was for a moment, still baffled. He jogged to catch up with her.

"We need to talk about this," he said, leaning over to speak into her ear. "I mean that. Soon."

"Later."

"Not before *too late*, though, I hope."

Amara winked at him, smiling with secrets. Dorian thought he heard her humming to herself as they went along.

Unbelievable.

Garrison led them past numerous doorways to labs, offices and work clusters that had been delved into the rock and blastcrete walls that formed the base of the station. Many of these doors were open, and inside, Dorian caught fleeting glimpses white coats, frenetic activity and cramped workspaces furnished in stainless steel chic. In many of the labs, the walls were lined with wire shelving units stacked to the ceiling with reverse engineered computing components and cannibalized electronics. Other rooms spilled over with microscopes and refrigerated cabinets loaded with culture dishes. Most troubling of all, some doors were simply closed and sealed, emblazoned with hazard symbols in assorted vibrant colors and threatening designs. The whole level was abuzz with activity, technicians and scientists scrambling in and out of doorways or scurrying past on errands serious enough that their expressions were almost uniformly pensive, wide-eyed or slightly sour.

"Your people seem to be quite a-fluster, Mr. Garrison," Amara remarked idly after a technician had bumped into her and apologized both profusely and distractedly before racing off again. "Or is the activity on this station normally so feverish?"

Garrison shook his head. "Government funding being what it is, the level of activity around here is almost always feverish from what I can gather." He answered over his shoulder without stopping. "But these are not our people, *per se*, though Mr. Raville is the head of the Earth Outreach Sciences Organization. His role is largely advisory to that of Mr. Bryce, Chief of Station Operations. Most of the regular inhabitants are either physical sciences academics on sabbatical or privately funded conglom research teams studying the singularity burst phenomenon at the edge of this system."

He hesitated, debating what he was about to say next, then forged ahead. "It would be a mistake, I think, to confuse the vibrancy of this community's work with issues unrelated to the station's primary mission as a pure research facility. CSO Bryce has been very accommodating to our special needs. Out of consideration for their willingness to share space and resources with us, our operation has made valiant efforts to

stay as much out of their way as possible so as not interfere with the normal rhythms of their work. So far, the arrangement has worked out well. These scientific drones tend to be somewhat self-involved at the best of times, and as far as we've been able to determine, none of the residents are aware of the interests we represent, if they have taken notice of us at all."

Dorian peered over the railing to his right, fifteen meters to the floor below. The narrow lanes between building complexes were jammed with workers bustling to and fro. From his perspective, it was like watching the hum and vigor of a particularly lively ant farm. Streams of foot traffic and hulking magna-lifts loaded with supplies snarled at intersections. Avid clusters of anonymous lab coats wandered in chaotic patterns from structure to structure, popping in and out of communal existence with all the predictability of random quarks. The whole grid was a cacophony of conversation, engine growl and the steady march of many dozens of feet.

"Just think how surprised they'll be when our pantheon of non-benevolent demigods drops out of hyperspace right on top of them and starts kicking their collective asses," he observed humorlessly. "That ought to be worth a picture or two."

Garrison glanced back uneasily. "I suppose that's one way of looking at it. We'll hope it doesn't come to that, of course."

"I guess you haven't met any of the Exousiai personally, then. They are going to wreak some serious havoc on productivity."

Raville's security chief stopped in front of a wide tunnel hewn cleanly from the rock and lined with warm wooden panels and unmemorable paintings. He wheeled about, flushed with the strain of remaining polite. "It's apparent, Mr. Dorian, that you believe I've wronged you on some level. If I have offended you, I extend my apologies. There have been a number of misunderstandings between us that have not yet been adequately explained. That time, I assure you, is coming, but in the meantime, I was hoping that we could keep our conversation cordial."

Dorian found that he liked goading this man now that he'd

gotten him a bit flustered. He couldn't stop himself from grinning. "It sounds like a nice sentiment, but I suspect that what you'd really like to do right now is take me into a locked room and beat me around a bit with a rubber hose, is that what you're saying?"

He estimated that he had Garrison by twenty pounds and at least twenty standard years, but he'd also had a chance to observe the man as they had walked along, and he suspected that Garrison hadn't gotten his job as Raville's personal bodyguard by virtue of his incandescent interpersonal skills alone. Beneath that fancy suit would be an alarmingly limber physique and chiseled muscles expertly trained in the art of administering pain.

Definitely a pick 'em, but it might be fun to find out.

Garrison stiffened, but otherwise did not react.

Amara cleared her throat. She flensed Dorian with a withering glance. "You'll have to forgive my companion's confrontational nature. He's had a difficult morning, and he gets cranky when he hasn't had enough sleep."

"Of course. It's been a long day for all of us." He shot his own poisonous look at Dorian over her shoulder, but visibly relaxed. "I can appreciate that he only desires to keep you from coming to harm. Given the circumstances, I suppose a certain level of antagonism is not to be unexpected."

The circumstances being that Garrison, as Raville's security chief, had more than once taken a hand in attempting to have them killed, but Dorian didn't say so. If Amara was going to keep apologizing for his boorish behavior, he didn't feel much motivated to continue behaving boorishly. It was obvious he had no idea what Amara was up to, and every time she opened her mouth, he found himself more confused, so he grunted and let it pass.

"I appreciate your understanding," Amara confided to Garrison. But I'll warn you that even when he's on his best behavior, John tends toward antagonism just on general principle. Best to keep that in mind and try not to feed the trolls if one can avoid it."

"Yes. Good advice in general."

She became suddenly serious. "But he is also my troll. I'll ask you to keep that in mind. I will take any threat made

toward him personally."

"As you wish," Garrison grated. He lifted his arm to indicate the new passage. "Shall we continue on, then."

They walked down the branching corridor and followed it almost a twenty meters to the end, where they encountered a set of heavy bronzed doors, their surfaces etched with panels depicting brilliantly rayed suns highlighted with splashes of gold. Garrison paused at the id panel on the left of the doorway while it processed the access sig transmitted by his array. The portal hummed open, the doors retracting smoothly into the walls on either side, and he showed them in.

It was not exactly what Dorian had expected. He had anticipated something along the lines of dank and mouldy stone, forged iron wrist shackles, the incessant patter of rodent feet and a diet heavy on dry toast and tepid water for the foreseeable future. It wasn't precisely difficult to surpass such low expectations, but still...

The chamber which they entered was quite simply stunning. Cream colored walls climbed to a vaulted ceiling hung with ornate raindrop chandeliers. White marble steps tripped down to a sunken sitting room crowded with comfortable chairs and luxuriously padded couches arranged about a central fireplace in which a warm fire blazed. Stone columns divided the nut brown hardwood floor into semi-private spaces for reading leather bound volumes extracted from a library of cleverly recessed book cases, or for triDvid viewing on a state of the art megapixel display, or even for meal preparation in a compact but fully functional kitchenette.

Dorian made his way inside slowly, past Amara and Garrison who had stopped in the flagstoned foyer, and busied himself peering into bedrooms and lavatories, poking at the furniture, looking for anything that resembled micro-monitoring devices, peephole cameras or gun toting thugs. He found none of those things even after a complete circuit of the rooms, and finally paused before the wall of slanting windows on the far side of the sunken floor. He gazed out at a magnificent view of the dusty bowl of the caldera rising up to meet the base of a pair of monolithic onyx spires which faintly reflected Kedesma's yellow glow. Viewed through the crack between the crumbling pillars, the rumpled and barren plains

below spread out like a vast and continuous quilt all the way to the black horizon.

A part of him grumped at the apparent absence of the traditional accoutrements of imprisonment. The rest of him was too busy wanting to punch Ford Garrison's teeth into the back of his throat for failing to be predictable to notice.

He was exhausted with not knowing what was going on.

"This is lovely, Ford" Amara said from across the room.

Ford?

"You really didn't need to go to this much trouble on our behalf."

"No trouble at all," he returned, all aw-shucks sugar and sweet sunshine. "Even government installations must be prepared to entertain the occasional visiting dignitary or political bedfellow in the style to which they are accustomed. My people have done their best to anticipate your needs, but if you find that you lack anything, you can use the comm in the library to inform us. Someone from my staff will be more than happy to see to it."

Dorian suspected he had a migraine coming on. He'd never had a migraine before, so he couldn't be certain, but his head ached. It felt like someone had rammed a steel pipe into the back of his skull.

"Anything at all, Ford?" he called out, not bothering to turn around. He wanted to grind his teeth, but feared that if he started, he wouldn't stop. "Does that include the encryption key to override the exit lock you're about to put on the front doors?"

Garrison ignored him (which was something predictable, at least), so Dorian ignored him back and determinedly occupied himself with not listening to anything else that was said. He was fairly sure he did not hear Amara offer pleasant goodbyes, the security chief reiterate Raville's promise to meet with them soon, followed by the hum of the doors closing behind him as Garrison finally left them alone.

"Ugh. I'm *starving*," Amara called out cheerily. "Did you find anything good in the kitchen?"

Cabinets squeaked open and banged closed. Dorian continued to gaze out the window. He listened as Amara rummaged through the refrigerator, clanked pots and pans

together, and rattled assorted crockery. Shortly, she gasped with unexpected pleasure, then giggled.

"Looks like there have been little elves at work in our kitchen already. Are you in the mood for beef stroganoff? At least I think it's beef. No promises. Oh, and there's ice cream. Butter pecan, I think. I wonder if there are--" A pause, then a squeal of delight. "Oh goody. Sugar cones."

Dorian turned away from the window and stalked across the room. In the library nook, he found the comm, just as Garrison had promised. It was a wall mounted deck with no screen and no dialing pad, of the sort he would expect to encounter in a posh hotel where all the internal calls were routed through the front desk. The desk beside it was empty except for a faded square of roughly the size and shape of a standard network box. The neatly snipped end of an ex-connex wire peeked out above the desktop where the edge of the desk met the wall.

He heard her shoes cross the hardwood floor, come up the steps. Amara poked her head into the room behind him. "So, are you hungry? You never told me."

"Looks like they don't want us poking around in the architecture," he said gruffly, not really surprised, but he wanted Amara to see it. Pleasantries aside, they were still prisoners. "But I'm sure it was just an oversight. The old prox was probably broken, right? I'll bet our good buddy Ford would hook me up with an array and a guest account if I asked. Send a top-notch mod surgeon right to our door. I mean, since we're all getting so cozy, it wouldn't be very friendly of them to deny such a simple request, would it? And maybe while we're at it, we could ask them not to hunt down and kill the rest of our companions since we're all on such good terms all of a sudden. Maybe they could just send bellhops to round them up and escort them to their own suites. Maybe we'll all have adjoining rooms." Dorian smacked the wall, hard enough to make his hand hurt. "What do you think? Is there another room on the other side? Maybe we could ask them to send a carpentry crew down here to put in a door for us. Wouldn't that be grand? We could all just sit around knocking back Long Islands, reminiscing about the good old days and laughing our heads off. I tell you, it has

the potential to be the best vacation *ever*."

He spun to face her, finally, his fists clenched. His head thundered, but he did his best to ignore it. He didn't want to hurt, didn't want to succumb to pain. He wanted to be angry, and now that he'd arrived there, he wanted to rent an apartment, fill it with all the stuff he liked and move in for the long haul.

"You're not happy." Amara leaned against one of the marble pillars, her arms wrapped around it and the side of her face pressed against the cool stone. Her eyes were distant, downcast. "I thought you'd be pleased to have a respite from people trying to kill you."

"You know what? I've decided I don't mind people trying to kill me. I've sort of gotten used to it, in fact. At least I knew what to expect when people were always trying to kill me. This--" He waved his arms about, indicating the room, the whole station, the mess his life had become. "This is like some bad James Bond-knockoff video game where you go from wiping out the bad guys to seducing the naughty spylet just by crossing module logic and walking into the Casino Royale."

She blinked her wide, blue eyes at him. "Is that what you want? Is that why you came here?"

"What?"

"To seduce the naughty spylet?"

"Wha--no! That's not what I'm saying." His knees felt suddenly weak, and that only made him angrier. "I'm talking about the absence of basic continuity, here. I'm talking about bad guys who suddenly decide to start acting like they haven't been trying to kill us for the last eight weeks, and good guys who seem intent on forgetting that they ever made the attempt. I'm trying to figure out what's going on here."

She shrugged. "Things have changed, John."

"I'd say that's pretty obvious. But what was it that changed? Are we switching sides here? Did we surrender and no one bothered to tell me?"

"We did not surrender."

"Then what happened?"

"You tell me."

"Tell you--"

"It was you who first whispered to me the truth."

His mouth fell open, but nothing came out, so he closed it again. Something *had* changed. Something had shaken her, caused her to reevaluate her assumptions, her plan of action. It had started on the tram, when she had realized that Yartz had betrayed her. No, not that she had been betrayed. That wasn't what had disturbed her, but rather that the treachery had been hidden from her. A mere mortal hiding his duplicity meant that she was not a true goddess, not omniscient. She was capable of being tricked.

So she had said to him, as she encouraged him to sleep on the train: *maybe you'll even discern how it was that Raville was able to elude me.* Because if he could hide his secrets from a god, Dorian realized, perhaps he had indeed found a way to destroy one. Maybe it was all true after all. Maybe they really were standing on a precipice overlooking the end of humanity, or the end of the Exousiai. A war to end all wars.

She had bid him sleep, knowing that as he slept, he would dream. He would dream the secrets of Raville's seeded datacore.

"You read my thoughts," he said. "While I slept, you peered into my mind and plumbed the depths of Raville's foam. And what you saw terrified you."

"I am not afraid," she answered, her voice uncharacteristically stern. "Your dreams answered some of my questions. Others were answered in part, and in turn, those answers led to new questions and further possibilities that I had not considered. There is more that I must know before my time comes, and that knowledge can only be given to me by Michael Raville."

"So what does that mean? Because you're suddenly not omniscient, you've decided to play nice to get what you want?"

"As with most things, it is more complicated than it seems on the surface."

He shook his head fiercely. "No, it isn't complicated at all. We came here to do one thing--to stop a war we can't survive. Now we're buddying up with the very people who stand in our way because you're curious about why you're not quite as divine as you had assumed you were. Where does that leave the rest of us, Amara? What about Ray and Ghost?" He saw

them in his mind's eye, crowded together for their last, impossible stand against the Marines. One moment there, their teeth bared, ready to die for her, and the next gone. Poof! Vanished into the aether. "Are they just on hold while you make up your mind what to do with them, surviving as long as they can and hoping that there will be enough of them left to get the job done when the Marines of station security get done picking them off?"

"Ray knows what he needs to do," she said. "He believes in me."

"I'm glad he knows, because you've told me exactly squat since we woke up in the warehouse. What is it that he's supposed to be accomplishing? Other than sitting around twiddling his thumbs while trying not get his head shot off?"

Amara frowned. "He waits."

"That's it? He *waits*?"

"When the time comes, he will not let himself fail."

"But what is he waiting for? What are they supposed to be doing?"

Amara did not respond. Instead, she lifted her eyes significantly toward the ceiling, and Dorian understood. Surveillance devices. Just because he hadn't found them didn't mean that they weren't there.

But it wasn't merely the probability of surveillance that stopped her. It was something else.

"You're not going to tell me," he said, stunned. He couldn't breathe. All the air had been dragged from his lungs. "Not even with your mind to mind super ninja ESP or whatever. You're just not going to tell me."

"It wouldn't be safe." She hesitated, knowing she was hurting him. Perhaps not caring. "I have to be careful, John. There's too much at stake."

"You think I'll tell them? You don't think you can trust me to keep it from them, is that it?"

She shook her head. "No. It's not that I don't trust you with my secrets. You would never willingly betray me, no matter how badly they hurt you. I know that."

"Then what is it? Why won't you tell me?"

Her expression became firm, her eyes hard. "Because you might not be able to help yourself."

There was nothing he could say. No response he could give that would sound like anything but the primal scream that wailed inside his head. He had sacrificed so much--his whole life--to follow her here, for the illusion that he might be able to help her. To save her. And now, in this place, where the hammer met the anvil, he had been deemed unworthy. Ray believed. Ray would wait. Ray had a place in her designs, but *he* was only a potential liability. He might not be able to help himself from dooming them all.

Dorian stumbled out of the library, pushing past her without a word. She called his name, but he did not listen. He found a bedroom, rich crimson carpet beneath his feet and an old fashioned four poster bed against the wall. The canopy was a deep, heart's blood red, hung with tassels of gold. He threw himself on a bedspread the color of a gory altar of sacrifice, and buried his face in his arms.

Miserable, hurt, his head aching, and angry at himself for feeling miserable in the first place, Dorian slept.

In the twilight landscape between dreams that are not dreams, and pure data that is neither foam, nor network, nor seenop fancy, Dorian finds himself on a low ridge above a sea of tall brown grass. There are no trees, no rocks, only an endless plain as far as he can see. Blue sky stretches overhead, without clouds, without sun, just an empty blue ocean running to purple and black where it meets the distant horizon and a few brave stars have come out. A steady wind blows across the grass, tossing the stalks in waves that roll and break against one another and sound in his ears like the grate of a rasp against soft wood. The dream smells of dirt and sweet, growing things.

Beside him is a tree stump, the victim of some long ago thunderstorm. It is flat as a table top, so old and weather-rotten that its base has begun to crumble. Sitting atop the stump, knees drawn up to his chest, is a boy. He has dark hair and wide, liquid eyes, a pale face and small, child-like hands. He's wearing a tee shirt and short pants that are neither shorts nor pants, precisely. Dorian realizes with a start that the boy is wearing *knickers*. He's never seen a pair of knickers in real life, but he's fairly certain that this is exactly what they are.

The boy gazes out across the sea of billowing grass, looking lost and forlorn, a tiny creature alone at the edge of the world. There are bruises beneath his eyes, dark and ugly like gathering thunderheads, as though he has not slept in days, in years.

"Hello," Dorian says to him, aware that he is dreaming, but still uncomfortable despite that fact. The child makes no response.

He tries again: "What is this place?"

The boy does not look up, does not acknowledge him at first, then quietly, with the sarcastic insouciance of youth, states, "It's the place where I wait."

"That seems pretty obvious."

Shrug. "It seemed an obvious question."

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting."

The boy's voice is flat, monotone, like the drone of a machine. His weary slouch says that he has been at it for a long time, just as the firm lift of his chin says that he is determined to wait that long again, if need be. He will wait until the world burns itself up in fire.

"So, what are you waiting for?"

"I'm waiting for my--" He speaks a word that Dorian does not understand. It passes through his mind like scented oil, leaving behind a soft fragrance that comforts him and troubles him at once.

"Where is your family? Your mother and father?"

"I have no family."

"You're alone?"

"I've always been alone, for as long as I can remember."

This admission fills Dorian with an immense feeling of sadness that he cannot adequately explain. "I'm sorry."

And for the first time, the boy looks up at him. His expression is wry, disbelieving, as though Dorian has just told him a blatant leg-puller. "You're not," he says, "but that's okay. You don't know any better."

Then, after a slight hesitation: "Would you like to sit down? There's room here for both of us."

The boy scoots over to one side, and Dorian sits beside him. The stump is just big enough to hold them, and the boy leans his small body against Dorian's side.

"I'm so tired," the boy says. It is the whine of all small children up past their bed time, but unwilling to admit it.

Dorian pats his shoulder in an awkward gesture. He's never been good with children. "You can sleep if you want."

I'll watch for you."

"No. You won't wake me." It is a statement of fact, but without recrimination. It simply is. "You would try to hide her from me, because you don't understand."

Dorian realizes that he is talking about Amara, about the pearl.

"What don't I understand?"

"You don't know what she is."

He chews the inside of his lip. This is not a point he can really argue. Words flash in his mind: woman, Exousiai, goddess, beloved. None of them suffice.

In turn, he asks, "What's your name?"

"Michael."

"Michael Raville?"

The boy nods his head. "You're dreaming."

He knows this, feels its truth. For a time, they sit in silence, watching the wind snake through the grass and waiting.

"You're going to destroy the universe if you attack the Exousiai," Dorian says at last. "When they come for the pearl, for Amara, if you resist them, they'll kill us all."

"It doesn't know about the pearl," the boy responds. "That isn't why it's coming."

"It isn't? Then why?"

"It's coming because I called it. I opened the doors for it, and it comes--what is that phrase?--*slouching toward Bethlehem*." The child, Michael Raville, sighs. "It's funny. That wasn't particularly good poetry even when it was written, and like most bad poetry, it has embedded itself in the human consciousness, eroding a cognitive trough of perception into our collective synaptic matrix. It has become like the far border of an event horizon, drawing us to an inarguable belief in a nonsense existence narrative. It has become an archetype of our expectation for the human experience, as entrenched as Armageddon, black helicopters and the indelible belief that we see only through a glass darkly. All metaphors for distrust and the silent, lurking evil that we cannot see."

The boy is gone, seamlessly transmogrified by dream logic into the man Dorian recognizes as Michael Raville, a mirror image of the code fragment he met in the memory palace.

Dorian can still see traces of the boy in the man's face. The same eyes, the same weary bags beneath, but the mouth is firmer, less forgiving. No longer petulant, child-like, but grim. "This is what it is to be human," the adult Michael Raville continues, "to function with embarrassingly limited senses, to be dependent on fire and light and second hand experiences passed from one person to another through the clumsy mediation of language, while trusting that one day we will see with completeness and truth. We doubt. Our senses lie. Our fellow humans lie, make mistakes, add false memes to the communal pool of comprehensive experience. In turn, survival becomes a function of cynicism. We cannot believe all that we see, hear, experience, because our senses, as we've seen time and again, fail us with alarming regularity. Our own bodies, the tools we use to manipulate and comprehend the universe, are prone to error and ultimately inadequate for the task. So we pass this survival mechanism, genetically predisposed cynicism, to our children and erect social structures about them that reward cynicism and irony, then we feign shock when our children do not believe what we tell them is true. We are a limited, pathetic species. Unworthy and unbelieving, we must each prove all things for ourselves, and what we have not proven, we do not, cannot, trust.

"We have fashioned a culture that secretly worships the meme of a lurking, intangible evil. A world in which, dare I say it, conspiracies abound!" Raville shakes his head. "Except this time, the conspiracies are true, and no one dares to believe it."

"You called them," Dorian reminds him. "You set this conspiracy into motion, and now you would have us believe that you're preparing to fight a private war to preserve the future of humanity. In order to keep us free, I suppose was your reasoning. You're going to wage this war to keep us free." He remembers his last dream. "Because the Exousiai are hungry, right? Maybe if we strike them first and strike hard enough, they won't mess with us again. But you're wrong. The Exousiai will blot us from existence."

Michael Raville makes a face, as though he has suggested something repugnant. "Humans are a backward and intransigent people, always caught on the horns between the

rugged individualism of discrete experience and the incessant hope that one day we will know, just as we are known. The tension between those two poles, our eternal ambivalence, is the key to our vitality."

"The Exousiai have promised to give us an escape from that ambivalence, remember? They say they're going to make us into gods."

"To our destruction, yes." Raville laughs, a dry and bitter sound. "We are a one trick pony. Take away that trick, and we have no future, no vision for what we are supposed to be. Without vision, the people perish."

"And yet you still called the Exousiai?"

"Indeed."

"Why? What is it that you want?"

"I've learned that I like being free. I like being backward and intransigent. I want to be blind and deaf and full of doubt. It makes me happy."

Dorian does not understand. He cares even less what Michael Raville wants. "What about Amara? Where does she fit into all of this?"

Raville frowns, the lines on his face folding into grief-worn defiles. "All good and true things, all worthwhile things, require sacrifice. The pearl was sent to be that sacrifice so that we might live. That which was loved above all else must be placed upon the altar as a burnt offering so that in exchange, we might receive eternal life."

Sacrificed. The word echoes in Dorian's ears with a clang of iron, but he does not react. It isn't even a surprise. He has expected nothing better all along. The simulacrum of Michael Raville is simply the only one with the courage to give voice to his worst fears.

"I don't know what that means," he says.

"You fail to understand because you have chosen to believe. Belief and knowing are mutually exclusive states. Either one believes and accepts belief blindly and on its own merits, or one knows, and knowing, gives harbor to doubt."

"If we can't believe without being blind, how can we ever know what is true? Facts, experience, everything we can understand phenomenally lies. You said so yourself."

Raville smiles. "We can't. That's what makes life

glorious." It occurs to Dorian that he has heard this line of reasoning before, but he doesn't remember where. "It was true when we huddled in caves, clustered around the new technology that was fire, to protect ourselves from the storm gods and the night predators. It is still true today. Doubt makes us strong. Doubt of our future; doubt of our survival; doubt of what our place is in this universe. What we do not know makes us wise."

Michael Raville climbs to his feet, dusting off the long trousers he now wore. He walks a few paces away from Dorian to the edge of the broad, eternal sea of grass and stands for a moment, breathing in its cool, sweet fragrance. With his gaze fixed on the distant horizon, darker now than it had been and fading on into full twilight, he says, "Once upon a time, a man told me a story. It was a story that I believed for many years, too many years. It was only when I stopped believing that I began to understand what it really meant. I will not say *truly* meant, because in order for it to be true, I must believe the opposite of what I was told. It may not be true, one way or the other, and that ambivalence pleases me. Would you like to hear my story?"

He turns back and waits for Dorian to nod. There is a twinkle in Raville's eyes, and an ironic twist on his lips that Dorian does not trust.

As though he is repeating a long rehearsed catechism, Raville tells him: "When I was a little child and dwelling in my father's house, content with the communion of my people, my parents equipped me and sent me forth. Of the wealth of our treasury they took abundantly, and tied up for me a load large but light, which I myself could carry: great knowledge, secrets of time and space, maps for navigating the Void Between. And they took off from me the glittering robe which in their affection they made for me and which had been measured and woven to my stature, and in exchange, they gave me a robe of rags and the constriction of flesh and an existence that was no longer limitless and without end. They made me into the form of a man. And they made a compact with me, and wrote it in my heart, that it might not be forgotten: 'If thou goest down into the darkling lands, and bringest the one pearl which is in the midst of the sea away

from the serpent, thou shalt put on thy glittering robe and thou shalt be content, and with thy brethren, thou shalt be heir in our kingdom. Bring back to us our lost pearl, that we might live."

"So I quitted the land of my father and went down with my guardians, for the way was dangerous and difficult, and I was very young to travel it. I went down into darkling lands and my companions, covered over also in rags of flesh, forgot who they were, forgot our own people, and parted from me. But I went straight to the serpent; I dwelt in his abode, waiting till he should slumber and sleep and I could take the pearl from him. Single and alone, I embraced the guise of the serpent's people that they might not hold me in abhorrence and arouse the serpent against me because I had come to take the pearl. I found myself beguiled with their strange arts and alien ways. I ate from their tables and drank from their cellars of wine, and I forgot that I was a son of kings. I forgot the pearl for which my parents had sent me, and for many years, I lay in a deep sleep. But all these things that befell me my parents perceived, and were grieved for me, and proclamation was made in our kingdom, that one should go forth from our gate and rescue me, that I might not be left in the darkling lands.

"Thus, they sent to me these words: "Call to mind that thou art a son of kings! See the slavery--whom thou serve! Remember the pearl for which thou was sent! Think of thy splendid robe which thou shalt wear and with which thou shalt be adorned when thy name hath been read out in the list of the valiant." Thus came the messenger, bearing these tidings across the lands of the wicked ones, the children of strange signs and symbols, and their savage demons. His voice startled me and I arose from my sleep, and I heard the words of my father and inscribed them upon my heart. I remembered that I was a son of royal parents, and the child of noble birth. I remembered the pearl for which I had been sent, and I began to charm him, the terrible loud breathing serpent. I hushed him asleep with gifts of data streams and zap technology and toys to delight the mind, ease the burden of life and open the gates to a future he had not dared to dream. By these arts, I lulled him into slumber, and I snatched away

the pearl and turned to go back to my father's house.

"And their filthy and unclean dress I stripped off and left it in their country. I took my way straight to come to the light of our home. And the messenger, my awakener, went before me on the road to lead me with the light of his form and the guidance of his voice, encouraging me to hasten and drawing me on with his love. And when I had come again to my father's house, I put on my bright robe which I had stripped off, but I remembered not its fashion--for in my childhood I had left it in my father's house. Yet on a sudden, when I received it, the garment seemed to me to become like a mirror of myself. I saw it all in all, and I too received all in it, for we were two in distinction and yet again one in one likeness. And I saw that all over my robe the instincts of knowledge were working, and I remembered at last the spark that was within me, and the true nature of myself."

Raville pauses, and a troubled look crosses his face. "The problem with that story, of course, at least as it was told to me, is that it is wrong."

Dorian croaks, "Wrong?"

"It is a lie. I believed for much of my life that I had been sent to retrieve the pearl. But after a time, I asked myself, why was the pearl sent in the first place? Who sent her to this reality and what was the reason for her coming? And it occurred to me as I delved into the technology I had developed, of zap and template and the mathematical codification of all reality into stagnant data representations that could be more readily absorbed, that the pearl was not sent to prepare mankind for the coming of benevolent gods whose sole altruistic interest would be to uplift the children of mud to a deathless life amongst the stars. I realized that to name a thing, to describe it in the pure language of numbers, is to pin it down, to make it one thing and never any other thing for all time. To name a thing is to kill its potentiality, so that it becomes frozen and dead. When it is dead, only then can it be devoured, and while dead flesh sustains for a time, eventually its energy is burned up, consumed, and hunger returns.

"And so I came to know that the pearl is the ring of the dinner bell, calling the Exousiai to come and eat. The

awakening of the pearl is the signal that mankind is ripe for absorption into the All in All and the slow strangulation of entropy. The story, as I believed it, was supposed to end with me, recalled to true knowledge, stripping off the false illusion of myself and returning to my true home to be showered with adulation for extending the dominion of my people. The wild, fiery self-realization of who I truly am will then wash over me, and I will be whole and content once more.

"But I have been asleep for many years. I have drunk the wine and eaten the sustenance of the darkling lands, and now that I have moved toward awakening, I find that I prefer the strange and wondrous dreams of sleep. I have learned that I don't like the ending of the story that was written for me, and I have dreamed that I am not irrevocably bound to the truth perceived by the All in All; that I might, if I choose, defy the all-knowingness and make a future life for myself that cannot be known and cannot be guessed. I like what I have become. I like being human. That is what I am fighting to preserve."

Raville falls silent. He returns to his seat on the stump and leans forward with his elbows on his knees, then, child-like, picks up a stone from between the stump's roots and heaves it out into the grass.

"What happens to Amara?" Dorian whispers. "What happens to the pearl?"

"Who sent the pearl? And for what reason did she come?" Raville muses, mostly to himself. "Has she awakened because I am awakening, or is it the other way around?"

"Why have you been searching for her?" Dorian lurches to his feet, his fists clenched. Part of him understands that he is being foolish. You can't beat answers out of a dream. The answers either come or they don't. "What do you need her for? What do *they* need her for?"

Raville looks up, a small grin playing across his lips. "Nothing I have told you is completely true. Some of it may be true in part, but even those portions are incomplete. You must choose what you will believe and what you will know. I can't help you make those decisions."

The dream ends.

Dorian came sharply awake to darkness. His eyelids

fluttered, and he stirred muzzily. Some part of his mind registered that it was a sound that had disturbed him, a gasp, most probably his own. Then he realized that his fists were still clenched, just as they had been as the dream ended, and he was coated with sheen of feverish sweat.

It was not a good waking. He felt partially absent, as though he had left an important part of himself behind in the dreamscape. His jaws ached from grinding his teeth, and for a few breathless moments, he struggled through the customary and wrenching disorientation of waking in a strange bed. It completely failed to comfort him to remember where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. It was not just a strange bed, after all, but a strange bed, strange room, strange entire planet. He was at the uttermost edges of the human frontier, at the mercy of men who were trying to kill him.

Always a comforting situation to wake up in, that.

Dorian blinked into the darkness, wondering how long he had been asleep. Not long enough, however long it had been. His head still roared.

He dragged himself into a sitting position and discovered that he was naked. Cool air blew across his bare chest, raising pimples of gooseflesh and puckering his nipples. Silk sheets rasped against his thighs and clung to the sweat on his skin. He shivered, feeling all at once alone and empty in the strange stillness.

The room's sensors detected his movement and brought the ambient lighting up to a candlelight glow. The lamps in the adjoining bathroom kicked on, anticipating his needs, and cast a warm and welcoming parallelogram of brightness across the crimson rug.

He thought about it. He could pee, but it wasn't pressing.

Next to him, the mattress shifted in a subtle, but unmistakable fashion, and in the dark, a pair of small, warm hands patted his thigh through the sheets. A foot, a calf, snaked out across the bed and curled around his leg.

"You were dreaming," Amara said, her voice sleep-dulled and soft. "It was a dream. You're safe. Come back to bed."

Dorian glanced over at her, still mostly asleep in her oversized, dress-up soldier's outfit. He didn't know how long she had been there, spooning him as he slept, doing her best to

soothe his anger with the simple balm of touch and trust. He swallowed thickly, his throat suddenly dry.

"It wasn't just a dream," he said. "It felt like a dream, but it was--" What? More chaotically seeded bits from Raville's datacore? A substratum of fact related in the language of sleep? It felt more intimate than that somehow, more personal, like he had been inside Raville's head, or Raville had been inside his. He didn't know which it was. "It wasn't only a dream."

"No."

The slight lift in her voice hinted that she meant to say more, but she stopped. The quiet hung between them, stretched out until it filled the room, a brooding presence pregnant with all of the things they could have said, but chose not to. Dorian did not ask if she had read his thoughts while he dreamed. He honestly, truly did not want to know. Perhaps he didn't even care.

He wondered once more what time it must be, and felt a pang of loss once again when he remembered that his array was gone. "How long have I--have we--been asleep?"

"Only a few hours. It's late rather than early," she said. She sounded more alert now. "It won't be morning for a while yet."

"Did Raville send word about when he would meet with us?"

"Tomorrow."

"He sent word, then?"

"No."

He didn't ask how she knew. It was better to just believe her. "Did anything happen while I was asleep?"

"I reheated a stunning casserole, listened to some jazz in the library and polished off the evening with some of the best ice cream I've ever tasted. I was lonely, so I came to bed."

"That isn't what I meant."

"You're worried about the others? Ray and the Misfit Toys are fine. They've found a place to hole up for the night."

It wasn't exactly what he had meant, either, though he was relieved to hear it. Amara must have known it, because she giggled. Dorian was uncomfortably aware of his nakedness once again and tugged the sheets more tightly about his waist.

"We didn't have sex, if that's what you're implying. You crashed hard enough that I doubt you would have been able to hold up your end, so to speak," she said, teasingly. "If it ever comes up, I'd like to think it would be something you'd wish to recall, but I certainly wouldn't just take it from you without your consent, John."

"Not having my consent didn't seem to stop you from taking my clothes."

"I've seen you naked before, if you'll remember. I didn't think that helping you rest more comfortably would be such a big deal. I didn't realize you were a prude as well as a Luddite." She started to laugh, but squelched it, then sighed like someone whose good intentions have been misconstrued and doesn't see any elegant way to get out of it. "I'm sorry if I offended you."

Her bleak formality made him wince. He didn't have the energy to be upset with her. He didn't even want to sound angry with her, but he couldn't seem to help himself. Misunderstanding seemed to be the only language in which they could communicate.

"It isn't that. I just--look, it's been a long day, a hard day. Too many new experiences, too much stress. Too much of everything. I don't know what I'm doing half the time. And if we were to--you know, share something like that--I'd just--I'd want it to be something special." He could feel a flush creeping onto his cheeks and was glad the lights were dim. "Not something I would sleep through."

Her relief was palpable. Amara pulled snug against him, pressing the length of her body to his, so that her arms were around his waist and her cheek resting on his back, just below his shoulder

"Are you still angry with me?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"I'm sorry I hurt you."

"Don't be sorry."

"I hurt you. I should be sorry."

"No, you shouldn't. Because you don't mean it, for one. You're sorry I felt hurt, not because you believe that what you did, withholding your plans from me, might have been wrong." Those were hurtful words too, he thought, but they

had to be spoken. It was the only way he knew to cut through the fog of misunderstandings. "But more importantly, I don't want you to be sorry because you were right. I know that now. The only reason I was hurt was because I didn't understand."

"But you understand now?"

"No, not totally, but the things that I don't understand are becoming fewer. I think--" He paused, shaking his head again. That wasn't right. He didn't *think*. He felt, on some subliminal level of consciousness, but he was certain of nothing. He didn't really know anything. Dorian chose his words carefully. "Michael Raville is not what he seems to be."

"Not human, you mean."

"Not merely human. He's like you."

"He told you this in your dream?"

"Yes."

Amara took a deep breath. "I had begun to wonder. It explains a great number of mysteries." She was quiet for a moment, grappling with her own private thoughts, then asked, "Do you think Raville knew? The one we met, I mean. The package in the Archive."

"I don't think he did. He had too much faith in the things he said to have known the truth."

She nodded. "I don't think Raville himself knew until relatively recently, probably not more than a few years. I think I would have known otherwise. The other part of me, the alien-ness, would have responded to another of our kind declaring itself in this same branch of the metaverse."

"In my dream, he asked if he was awakening because you had, or if it was the other way around." Dorian tried to imagine what the implications were of this synchronicity between them, but could come up with nothing that seemed particularly telling. "He also asked who sent you here in the first place. He seemed to think it was important."

"He's feeling his way, just like the rest of us. He has begun to guess what he is, but he is still a long way from coming into his full power. He only knows that something is amiss, and that he doesn't belong here. He is a pilgrim sojourning by the way."

"You think his plan to attack to Exousiai is some sort of

existential crisis?"

Amara shrugged. "He knows that something is wrong with his life, with himself, and he perceives that wrongness as a threat, so he has constructed an elaborate fantasy of persecution to explain to his human mind the troubling discontinuity that it has glimpsed."

The problem with that story, of course, at least as it was told to me, is that it is wrong,

"Okay, let's parse this, then." He found it difficult to collect his thoughts, to separate realtime from the dreamscape. He wasn't sure which facts belonged where. "If we stipulate that Michael Raville, the living, breathing, Michael Raville, is an Exousian rather than just a man, and if we assume that he is awakening even now, just as you are, where does that leave us? Do we go on believing that he is just mistaken about the threat of the Exousiai? That he's behind the learning curve and needs a little jolt to get him thinking straight? And if that's true, is it our job to give him that jolt, or will the Exousiai recognize him, just as they recognized you, and set him straight for us?"

"What are you saying?" Amara lifted her chin off of his shoulder and tilted her head so that she could look him in the eyes. "That we came for nothing?"

"No. Not at all. If our Michael Raville was right, then they're still coming for you. You're the pearl, and it was—is—Raville's job to return you to your own people. I'm just wondering if the reason we had to come isn't the one we were given. He told me that he was the one who called the Exousiai. They didn't become aware that humanity was ready to be redeemed. That was supposed to be your duty, to awaken at the moment that we ascended to some lofty Omega Point, and make them aware, right? Then Raville would retrieve you and show you how to lead us into the great beyond.

"But you were awakened by a package of Raville who didn't have the benefit of his later knowledge. The package reacted because it believed that the actual Raville was making a mistake, trying to start a war because *he* didn't understand. What if it isn't time, Amara? What if we're not ready, and this whole series of events was set into motion only by Raville

attempting to oppose himself?"

"The Exousiai aren't coming to destroy humanity," she reminded him, "whatever mistakes Raville might have made. They want to help us become as they are."

"That isn't what Raville believes."

"Then Michael Raville is wrong," she said, flat and final.

"How can you know that? He's one of you. He's got just as much a claim on this godhood business as you do."

"Because I feel it to be true. I feel the thoughts and memory and essence of the Exousiai beating within me. Even here, in this prison of flesh, I am one with them. Raville has allowed himself to be poisoned by ephemeral illusions."

It wasn't really an answer, but Dorian couldn't pick it apart without challenging his newly converted status as a True Believer™, so he let it pass. "Say you're right. What are we supposed to *do*? Do we just go along? Do we proceed as we have and see what happens, assuming that the Exousiai know where we all stand regardless of what Raville does?"

"We can't sit by while he attempts to destroy the Exousiai. It may be that there are weapons that could be forged against my kind that would do us harm. No one would know better how to create such a weapon than one of our own. That would be a terrible evil, John, to kill a god. It mustn't be allowed. Perhaps my people foresaw this, that Michael would attempt to harm them and used his purer copy to send me to oppose him at the critical juncture. A male and female pair, yin and yang, one force to balance out the other."

Dorian shook his head. "That's too mystical for me."

"Gods are mystical. They do mystical things."

He couldn't tell if she was poking fun at him. The light was too dim, and her face was mostly shadowed, a suggestion of teeth and the pale, glinting beauty of her eyes. She talked about gods like she understood exactly what she was saying. He wondered if gods ever managed to be ineffable to one another, or if ineffability was reserved for the merely mortal.

"What if you're wrong?" he said at last, his voice barely audible. "What if Raville is right and you're wrong? What if the Exousiai are coming to us not as helpers, but as devourers?"

She squeezed him close then, hugging him with her entire

body in a grip that was fierce and hungry and almost, it seemed to him, desperate in its longing.

"I won't let them hurt you." Her whisper was as fierce as her embrace. "Whatever happens, whatever tomorrow might bring, whatever must be done, I won't let any harm come to you. Believe that if you can believe nothing else."

Dorian rolled in her arms until they faced one another. He folded his arms around her and together, they lay back with their heads on the pillows. He stroked her long, golden hair.

I love you, he thought, unbidden and unexpected, but knew at once that it was true. Whatever happens, whatever tomorrow brings, whatever must be done.

<And I love you.>

She smiled, and he smiled in return, and the light filled her eyes like the glow of stars.

Ray Morrical, captain of the *Proletariat Horde*, consensus leader of the fringe worlds' leading political insurrectionist organization, and notorious geo-economic provocateur, stood on the bridge of the Magellan class battle cruiser the *T.E.S. Indianapolis* calmly perusing the day's mission status log over the shoulder of Third Cycle Leet Commander Cadigan Pyle. Pyle scanned the text on the vision-targeted active decryption one-time slipsheet with only perfunctory interest, and when he had finished, crumpled the missive between his hands and tossed it into the classified dox disposal bin beside the chair. The bin quiksealed itself with a hiss and bang as a cloud of nano-disassemblers went to work de-rendering the slipsheet's formal structure down to its base molecular components.

Pyle grunted unhappily and patted the pockets of his uniform like a man looking for his misplaced packet of cigarettes--which Ray suspected was exactly what he was doing, because he stopped when his gaze fell on the NO SMOKING idiot light at the top of his comm panel. Pyle was a wiry, hollow-cheeked officer with a machinist's knotty red knuckles and somber, bloodshot eyes. His entire vocabulary seemed to consist solely of heavily nuanced grunts, cosmic hyperbole and a startlingly complex arsenal of colorful, if biologically improbable, profanities.

The Leet Commander shifted his weight, making a labored noise deep in his throat that was somewhere between a grunt and a sigh. His hair was oily; his skin sallow and unshaven.

His uniform did not appear to have seen the inside of a san in a hard week.

"TechShipman Lloyt," he rumbled. "I've been instructed by the Powers That Be to make the utmost effort to discover--with all due and appropriate haste--exactly what is going on with our ranged datburst array. Second Cycle Grand Bunghole Toson is reporting undifferentiated flakiness in the recursive foam-hole something-or-other. This aforementioned flakiness seems to have no visible effects on either mission performance or our essential combat readiness. However, I have been informed in the strictest of confidence, that it *is* directly responsible for an unacceptable pattern of random signal scrambling in the tightbeam broadcast to him by certain, shall we say, unsavory business associates indirectly employed by the sports entertainment industry. Mr. Toson has somewhat significantly overextended his personal assets, and unless he can salvage a certain equanimity in his cash flow through a series of fortunately placed wagers in the near future, he is facing a less than hospitable reception upon our return home. Given these circumstances, Mr. Toson would quite understandably like to see this flakiness unflaked as quickly as possible and for the duration of this ass-humping military exercise, so that he might rightly attempt to get his financial house in some semblance of order. I'm certain you can appreciate his predicament."

Pyle drew his hands wearily across his face. "My deeply seated desire to please Messr. Toson notwithstanding, I would also point out that concomitant to this issue with the datburst array, I seem to be having my own difficulty accessing my happiness-essential crawl of Championship League rugby scores, for which I pay a premium monthly subscription fee. This situation may very well make me exceedingly cranky if it is not resolved in the immediate, if not causally pre-existent, future. Have I made myself understood?"

The unfortunate crewman who appeared to be the intended recipient of this potentially apocryphal barrage of data--a bright eyed and tow-headed young man seated on the far side of bridge complex at the Systems Engineering Console, assimilated the relevant factoids with a bemused nod and reclined into his grav-couch. His eyelids fluttered rapidly

as he accessed the ship's network core.

"I'll run a system diagnostic now, sir."

Pyle puttered his lips disdainfully in Lloyt's direction. "I'm absolutely confident that the solution will be that simple, TechShipmen, which is undoubtedly why no one else has thought of it to this point."

Lloyt lifted his head. "I'm sorry, sir, is there another course of action you'd recommend?"

Pyle waved him off. "Of course not. I sit in this chair so that I can demand results without being required to demean myself by offering useful suggestions. Proceed with your assignment, you miserable little tool. I don't have time to nursemaid you through it. Can't you see I've got my hands full with carrying one of the most technologically advanced warships ever constructed by human hands through the mind-bogglingly complex tasks necessary to continue to maintain the same basic geosynchronous orbit we've been in for the last three hundred and sixty eight hours? I shudder, I tell you. I shudder at the thought of the weighty responsibilities that have been laid upon my shoulders."

Someone who was not Lloyt chuckled. Pyle grunted, then heaved himself out of his chair and braced his feet unsteadily on the deck. "Now, I have to hit the head. Mr. Sprechtman has the con, provided he understands that if I find him sitting in my seat again when I return, I will remove the entire length of his intestines through his anus and hang him from yard arm with them. In the event that this ship does not actually possess a yard arm, I will not hesitate to have one manufactured. In the related event that I don't catch him there, but he did occupy my seat, the first person who tattles on him will be awarded a full rank field promotion on the spot. Ping me if anything interesting happens, and for God's sake, somebody get me the latest scores from the Championship League by the time I get back. I've got fifty rups riding on the Jetland Green result."

Pyle's subsequent departure reminded Ray of the sudden deflation of a child's balloon. Second Officer Sprechtman rose from the Ordnance Targeting panel and quietly, but efficiently made his way around the bridge from station to station giving general orders, offering course corrections and fielding status

reports from the crewmen.

Michael Raville whistled softly in Ray's direction. "That may have been the most singularly impressive display of verbal communication I have ever seen in my life."

"According to the ship's personnel records, Cadigan Pyle is the favorite nephew of Someone Exceedingly Important within the Stratiskaya Daransk political structure."

"He would have to be, wouldn't he?" Raville observed, smirking, but he quickly grew serious. "Nevertheless, now that our hosts have discovered the drain on their datburst resources, our remaining time is limited. Leet Commander Cadigan Pyle may be the next best thing to completely incompetent, but my money says Sprechtman probably isn't, since he's been assigned to babysit him."

The lateness of the hour was the last thing Ray needed to be reminded of. He had lost six of his crew in the last eighteen hours, as well as Dorian and Amara. Every moment wasted was a lost opportunity to exact his vengeance from Michael Raville, but he was patient, and he was cautious, and if he gave his people time and space in which to work, he was confident that they would come through for him, just as they had always done in the past.

Raville peered at him expectantly, but Ray didn't answer at once. He didn't feel compelled to share his private sense of urgency with Raville's digital copy.

"DeMartel has done his best to compensate for the politically mandated shortcomings in his leadership cadre by surrounding Pyle with a highly motivated and technically savvy Cycle crew," he said at last. "Stine and Ghast will frustrate them for awhile yet, I believe, but our discovery has become inevitable."

A low volume klaxon buzzed in his ear, one of Dorian's brilliantly modified tell-tales announcing that the current incursion script had worn out its welcome and was vulnerable to detection. Ray hooked his fingers around Raville's forearm. "Come on. We've found what we came to learn."

He blinked his eyelids twice and the ambient feed projection of the bridge jacked from the *Indianapolis's* internal comm datacore faded. It was replaced by the sloping, pale-marbled virtual architecture of Dorian's backup foam. The

sudden shift in percipient variables nearly staggered him, and he had to put out a virtual hand to steady himself on the railing to keep from falling over. He stood there for a moment gathering what remained of his waning strength. He had been awake for more hours than he cared to remember, had nursed himself through the worst of the zap crash with cortical stimulants until he breached the wall of exhaustion, but it was a race now to see if his will would outlast his body. Even in geek, his body was announcing its desperation for rest.

With a slight pang of guilt, he seated himself at the control deck and began tapping out the load sequence for a series of post-intrusion chaff routines. He had promised that he wouldn't violate this space again—space that Ray himself had once given Dorian, partly from friendship, partly as investment in a stunning talent. But he had made many promises lately, the most binding to Amara herself, breathtaking avatar of an alien race. *You must find the weapon for me, Captain*, she had said in their final hours aboard the *Proletariat Horde*, while Dorian had been all but flash-baking his synapses attempting to seed the data he had stolen from Raville's datacore. *He's hiding it from me, just as he masks his intentions from the Exousiai. I don't know how. Perhaps I'm at fault. Perhaps I haven't awakened to my true self enough yet to uncover the truth. It may be that old fashioned human ingenuity will uncover what has been hidden. Maybe that is as it should be, the price of our admission to the cosmic pleroma. When we reach Giari Tau, my responsibility is to stop Raville himself. If I fail, his weapon must be destroyed before it can be raised against the Exousiai. He cannot be permitted to strike this blow against them.*

But Ray had been thinking about strategy, about the logistics of attempting to control an entire outpost station with only a dozen men at his disposal. *My dear, isn't this why you've brought along your own datacore incursion expert? Without meaning to insult any of my own compatriots, John's skill is unmatched, at least insofar as our resources are concerned. The man is practically a savant, and I can tell you now that he won't appreciate anyone else gumming up his gears when he applies himself to the task. What God denied him in social acumen, He made up for in raw technical ability.*

John was not chosen to destroy Raville's weapon.

No? Then what is he here for?

And she had grinned, sweet and fetching, a picture of innocence. *Honestly, I have no idea. I only know that he's been chosen.*

Chosen by whom?

That's the pivotal question, now isn't it?

And so he had promised. His oath to Amara was the only reason he was willing to go back on his word. This sacred space was where John had chosen to secret the purloined package of Michael Raville he had rescued from the Archive, and Raville was the only chance they had of locating the weapon and finding a way to disarm it. As far as Ray was concerned, the instant Amara had been captured, all other oaths became moot. If his action saved their lives, John would forgive him.

And if it didn't, the fact of his betrayal wouldn't matter anyway.

"So how much longer do you estimate we have before they figure out you've pinched a portion of their stream to spy on their communications?"

Raville manifested in a regal Louis XVI chair which appeared to the left of the control console, where he could casually oversee Ray's activities. This incongruous design erupting into the symmetrically perfect environment Ray had once so lovingly constructed made him wince, though it wasn't just the offense to his aesthetic sense. He was dismayed at how thoroughly the self-cognizant Raville package must have insinuated itself into the architecture if it could spontaneously generate its own environmental variable templates on a whim. The code blocks of this universe were supposed to be inviolable.

"I have faith in my people," Ray answered off-handedly. He executed another series of cache purge scripts to lower his packet profile in the datburst stream. He was already fat enough carrying around Raville's density. "They'll give us as much time as I ask them to, which in this case shouldn't be absolutely indeterminate. I suspect that things will be coming to a head fairly soon, judging by the activity in the mission log. DeMartel and Commander Temple will be launching for the surface in the morning for an emergency session with your—ah—" Real self? Other self? Ray stumbled over the

proper term.

"Nemesis is a good word," Raville offered.

"Yes, well, I doubt that he would be calling an emergency session unless something of import was about to occur. Given that we may assume his forces have taken control of Amara and John, it's probably a safe guess that the mission schedule will proceed with renewed vigor from this point forward. All the more reason for us to do the same."

Raville nodded his agreement. "You can assure me, I suppose, that the people you have left are more reliable in their loyalties than was the lately mourned Mr. Yartz."

Ray sat up stiffly. "Yartz was an aberration."

They had discovered Yartz's treachery purely by accident while carrying out a wide scan of the Strat military's ship-to-ship streaming content intranet when Stine's search parameters had tripped over the tightbeam encryption key specific to the *Proletariat Horde*. He still considered the whole situation off limits for discussion, a fact which his own people had instinctively understood without the need for blundering about launching stupid recriminations and otherwise poking sleeping bears with sharp sticks.

Ray had hand picked Yartz for his crew three standard years ago after the young man had risen to a certain regional prominence for the daring jack of a mining conglomerate account transfer. The funds had been more traditionally diverted from the pockets of the local workforce through a hidden surtax illegally passed during closed door legislative sessions in return for certain price fixing services. In hindsight, it was apparent that Yartz may have been more interested in achieving personal fiduciary gains with his jack than in the abstract moral satisfaction of having fought the good fight. But regardless of hindsight clarity, Ray certainly did not appreciate Raville's casual assertions that one man's greed might reflect on the reliability of the Misfit Toys as an organization more generally.

In fact, Ray was rapidly coming to the conclusion that he did not much like this version of Michael Raville any more than the *bona fide* original. It seemed to take too much pleasure in making people bristle. Small scale omnipotence had made it capricious, or merely cruel. He wondered how

John had tolerated it for so long.

Whatever Raville's reasoning for taking a stab at them, Ray didn't hesitate to fire back a shot of his own. "To be honest, comrade, I'm less concerned about the ability of my people to do their job than I am about you to do yours. Until you've proven yourself useful, both your personal agenda and your fidelity are still in question."

Raville's eyes widened in a lugubrious display of outrage. "Your doubt wounds me, Captain."

"Not sufficiently to make me happy, I assure you."

"And what is it you would have me do to prove myself?"

"Find Raville's weapon and tell me how to destroy it."

"You already know where it is. You know it can't be on the lunar station. They don't possess a launching mechanism to deliver a weapon of sufficient magnitude to its target at a safe distance. There are no hidden silos, no cislunar cannonade platforms. Thus, the mechanism in question must be one of the ships. The *warships*, I almost hesitate to remind you. Judging by the contents of the bitstream originating from the *Juggernaut*, she is nothing more than a support vessel, a floating barracks for thick-necked Marines and the communal larder. If any ship is going to fire the opening salvo of an interstellar war, it's going to be the *Indianapolis*."

Raville just was parroting the logic he had used with Ghost and the others to narrow the focus of their investigation. "But what is it? I can't find the weapon if I don't know what to look for."

"And I can't tell you what would constitute meaningful force against a race of functionally omnipotent beings. I can only encourage you to keep looking and assume that we'll recognize it once we've found it."

"That's not good enough. It was your mind which envisioned such a weapon in the first place! You have to have some idea about what you yourself would do—what sort of device you would design—if you were in his position."

"That man is no more me than you are your own father, Captain," Raville snapped. He jabbed a finger at Ray in accusatory fashion. "You carry a replicated viral template of his genetic organization, just as I was assembled from the map of my progenitor's synaptic matrix, but I daresay that you

consider yourself to be a unique entity despite that fact. Our foundations are not predeterminative. I can't imagine what precipitated Raville's madness or what solution he might devise to act upon it any more than you can predict your father's thoughts."

Ray pressed the heel of his palm against his brow and lowered his head. "You're right, of course. That was unfair of me. I can't expect you to know what you might do if you thought completely differently than you do."

Neither man spoke for several moments. Ray lashed about in the mire of his own increasingly incoherent thoughts. He felt lost, hopeless. He needed sleep.

Raville cleared his throat, and in placatory tones, said: "The one thing of which I can assure you is that he is not bluffing. The weapon exists. The mechanism for delivering it exists. And if he has steeled himself to using it, the weapon works as advertised. I am not a man who gambles unless I am certain that I can take the house for more than it takes from me."

"Assuming we do not identify and locate this device, what course do you recommend?"

"If you can't stop the weapon itself, you have no choice but to find a way to keep it from being delivered. Whatever the cost. Even if that includes this ship, the Giari Tau station and all of our lives."

His words hung in the air, as black and ominous as death. Ray pinched the bridge of his nose and kept his eyes shut tight.

If I fail, Amara had said, his weapon must be destroyed before it can be raised against the Exousiai. He cannot be permitted to strike this blow against them.

And he had promised her he would see it through.

Promised yes, but he wasn't willing to entertain such desperate thoughts. Not yet, at least. It couldn't have become so bleak that mass murder was the only answer, could it? And if it had, was that truly the oath that he had sworn? Did Amara, did the Exousiai themselves, really expect him to spend so many lives as a show of good faith?

He cannot be permitted to strike this blow against them.

Without another word, he terminated his foam session and

flipped out of geek.

Ghast lifted his head as Ray roused himself. His visible eye narrowed; the triDvid monocle which covered the other eye dilated accordingly, telescoping out as though it was subjecting Ray to a minute physical examination. For all Ray knew, it probably was. He levered himself up from his reclined position on the makeshift surfing couch—a pair of flimsy breakdown shipping containers covered over with an arrangement of unused mop heads. It had fully been his intention to swing jauntily to his feet and check on the status of their efforts, but sitting up with his feet dangling over the edge of the crate was as far as he got. He didn't think his legs would support him if he tried to stand.

Without the false stimulus of geek, his fatigue descended on him like a sodden cloth. Geek was part of it, actually, or at least this flat, two-dimensional approximation of geek that his external array was giving him was. The images attempting to stimulate his optical nerves through the reductive medium of the monocle were grainy and uncertain, prone to random skips and gray fugues as though they had been piped through an unreliable burst wire. Working with them for too long almost had him wishing for an old fashioned keyboard and monitor. Maybe then the throbbing pressure behind his eyes wouldn't be so bad. Ray bowed his shoulders and let his head hang. The Parkman had shifted on his skull as he lay in session, and it hung slightly askew from his ears. His temples and orbital socket felt raw where the harness had chafed against his skin. He was miserable in just about every way he knew how to be.

Ghast rose from his seat against the wall next to the utility sink. Ray heard him blundering about the cramped and acetone-reeking space of the maintenance closet that served as the tactical headquarters of his latest glorious command. They had not moved from the place where Amara had improbably deposited them, a narrow and claustrophobic pair of adjoining rooms with barely enough space to fit them in with the racks of cleaning supplies and boxes of paper goods. A brief reconnoiter of their surroundings had established they were on the outer fringe of the Giari Tau research station, a few

meters underground and just down the corridor from the pressure locks which led to the blast pits and launch bays that passed for the station's fledgling space port. He hadn't known what to make of their destination at first, and had even feared that it was some subliminal form of white flag—Amara sending them the clear message that the mission had failed and they should get off the planet in any way that they could. But Stine had dispelled such a bleak assessment by jacking into the local comm hub and returning with the information that the closet was in a dead sensor zone between the active monitoring of the station proper, which was under the control of local security, and the newly (and somewhat hastily) constructed launch complex, currently overseen by Strat II. The gap created a convenient veil of chaos from which a few extraneous viral bits could be streamed into the nearest connex as redundant signal grams and relayed between the competing cores as friendly packets that had been degraded in the buffer exchange.

It was handy at times like these, he realized, having a god on your side.

Several grey moments passed in which he may have dozed, then Ray snapped back to alertness, suddenly aware that Ghast was standing in front of him. He attempted to raise his head, found he couldn't manage it, and settled for flopping it onto one shoulder, where he could at least gaze semi-sidelong at his First Officer.

Ghast took one of his hands and pressed a steaming cup of coffee into it. Ray gasped in blissful surprise. He had understood that they'd exhausted the last of the insta-therms more than four hours ago. Leave it to Ghast to tuck one aside for him.

"You're an absolute saint, my friend," he said. The thick aroma of freshly brewed coffee worked wonders on his flagging energy. He managed to drag himself nearly erect. "Bless you."

"When was the last time you slept?"

"I grabbed a few winks in session. Don't worry about me."

"I'll worry if I feel like it. You're dead on your feet. And don't think I didn't see you pass your dose of epiphene to

Youkilis. How long do you really think you can keep going?"

Ray tossed his head weakly. "Youkilis needed it more than I did. He was actually working on the problem at hand rather than flailing about entertaining daemons." He sipped at his coffee. It was still too hot and he managed to scorch his tongue. It didn't stop him. He was too exhausted to care. "And speaking of jackhandies, where *is* Youkilis?"

"I sent him and Anderson and Stine into the back to snatch a couple hours of real sleep. Thomas, Gallegos and I are rotating through the watch. We're none of us very fit for keeping a lookout for more than half an hour at a time, but we're managing." He hawked and spat, disgusted. "Unfortunately, just managing isn't going to cut it for much longer. Did you learn anything useful?"

"I learned that even the mathematical representation of Michael Raville is an asshole."

"Big surprise."

"Yes." Ray shook his head, smiling. "On a more positive note, you'll be pleased to hear that the shuntpipe Stine bored in the space traffic net does open up into the flagship's comm network. I don't know that I could have managed to tunnel in as deeply as I did without some of Dorian's little toys to assist me, but the way is clear in the short term. Tell her that we're spawning interference by routing through the *Juggernaut's* hub, so we need to either modulate our stream or peel bandwidth from their datburst array. They've got sniffers out after us, but I don't think they're aware that their system has been compromised at this point. I also managed to find out that Temple and DeMartel are coming here first thing in the morning for a short-notice strategy session with Bryce and Raville."

Ghast grimaced. "That can't be good news for our side."

"Have you discovered anything about the status of our dearly departed companions?"

"No. We had a brief blip when the lieutenant who led the Marine strike force routed a request for mission change verification through the local skip-connex, but since he turned them over to Raville's security honcho, they've fallen off the network." Passing along this data made him look almost ill. "What do you think it means?"

"It means, my dear boy, that I'm going to have to ask you to do something awful."

"Really?" His face brightened with anticipation. "What's that, exactly?"

It was tantamount to a crime against humanity to even ask it of him. Ray knew from years of shared experience that Ghast was only in marginally better shape than he was, despite the protests he would make if accused of weariness. But there was no help for it.

He placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I need you to steal me a shuttle and a docking code for the *T.E.S. Indianapolis*. We're going to take a little trip."

"To the Strat flagship?"

"In my experience, it's difficult to launch a covert assault against a ship of the line unless one actually arranges to travel there."

"Are you serious?"

He was afraid that Ghast would balk, that for once, the simple fact of impossibility would override his enormous sense of duty, and he would announce that it couldn't be done. Ghast had never done refused him, no matter how extreme the request, how improbable the hope of success, but Ray wouldn't have blamed him if he refused now. He was all but asking him to put the knife to his own throat.

"Should I book passage for all seven of us, or would that be considered taking unfair advantage?"

Ray let his breath escape as relief washed over him. "Oh, I think we'll stick together this time."

They chuckled at their bravado, and when they had finished, gazed solemnly and silently at one another.

"Did you find it?" Ghast asked.

"No."

"But Raville thinks it's there? Aboard the *Indianapolis*?" He hesitated, chewing on his lower lip, a suggestion that he did not find Raville's imprimatur was not all that convincing under even the best of circumstances. "I've been all over their core for the last hour, Ray. I pulled an extract of their arsenal and their munitions transfer logs. There's nothing out of the ordinary, certainly not anything that would seem sufficient to cause all this fuss."

Raville doesn't even know what we're looking for, Ray thought grimly, but he couldn't bring himself to speak the words. It didn't matter. What they chose to do was not Raville's decision. It was his alone. He was responsible for their success or failure and any lives that would be lost in the process.

"I believe it's there," Ray answered, "but I don't have any evidence to support it. It's a hunch, a guess."

Ghast shrugged his shoulders amicably. "I've followed you on the basis of less. Give me a few minutes and I should be able to come up with something. I'll have to haul Stine out of bed."

As his First Officer turned away toward the small storage room and the execution of his latest charge, Ray felt a stab of guilt. His crew, his beloved Misfit Toys had already endured so much loss and grief. It was unjust to ask more of them, to ask *this* of them. It was useless and demanding to the point of being cruel. And he had no doubt that they would hear and obey his every command. He asked it, and they would make it so, reason be damned. They didn't allow themselves to fail.

"Take your time," he said. It was the only way he knew to show his gratitude for faithfulness. "We've still got a little, at least."

He only hoped it was true.

Ray nodded congenially in greeting to the young sergeant seated in the corner across the narrow deck from him. There were no windows to otherwise occupy his attention, no status displays to watch, and he couldn't bear to look at the slump-shouldered exhaustion of his crew crashed out around him any longer. In the absence of sensory input, he was forced to imagine the ascent of the gondola shaped and self-guided tetherpod as it crawled smoothly up the nanocarbon fiber line strewn from the spaceport to the Gimbrell observation platform more than eight kilometers above the station. Thus far, the sergeant, who had joined them at the last minute in the departure queue and who was the only one aboard who was not one of the Misfit Toys, had proved to be a poor ambassador for the Strat military apparatus and an even more disappointing source of interest. The young man's eyes

fluttered in a constant rhythm and the muscles of his cheeks and jaw rippled with suppressed stimulus reaction, indicating that he was more than casually engrossed in the plotline of what was most likely an explicit full immersion pr0n feed direct from the Strand. He did not acknowledge the greeting nod Ray gave him, but Ray kept the glassy smile fixed on his face just in case.

When he had satisfied himself that they were functionally (if not actually) alone, he spoke to Ghost out of the side of his mouth, keeping his voice low. "Explain to me again exactly what we're doing here? You were supposed to steal me a shuttle, as I recall."

Ghost patted the toolbox on the bench beside him. They each had one, small metal chests with flip top lids, the top trays of which were loaded down with screwdrivers and socket wrenches in assorted sizes. The space beneath had been emptied out to make room for their Parkman units, which might otherwise have attracted unwanted attention.

"There was no chance we were commandeering a shuttle on a straight chute to the flagship from the port. There's still too much security buzz about terrorists infiltrating the depot, and the immediate section Chiefs are proving slow to step it down even though the threat has reportedly been contained. That shouldn't be wholly unexpected it, because without an active alert, they've got to figure out what to do with five thousand Border Marines who suddenly have too much free time on their hands. Strat Command has all of their direct flights on combat footing, and the AT controllers are being extremely touchy about deviations from the published flight schedule without counter-verification from Admin officers. Say what you will about rent-a-grunts, but Strat Command is notoriously anal about logistical details and flight discipline regs." He studied their fellow passenger uneasily for any indications of realtime awareness, and seeing none, went on. "On the other hand, there's a regular flow of technician traffic up and down the tether to the Gimbrell platform from both sides of the aisle. The station residents have agreed to share to scan time on the radcast deep space orbital array with the military in return for the loan of a few billion prox cycles to help them analyze the images bouncing back off the

singularity farm. Strat's benefit is that they get an extra farcasting eye on the circumference of the system that's already calibrated to look harder and deeper than anything they brought with them. Given that they've likely got a reasonable idea about what's coming, they're more than happy to have all the extra snoopers they can get."

"And this benefits us how?"

Ghast took a breath and plunged into his explanation, rattling off the connections in his daisy chain of reasoning like bullet points in a political debate. "The software package that was developed to remotely direct and focus the radcam telescoping array was designed in-house by some grad student drones on Giari Tau and is the registered intellectual property of AimScan Radiotronic Solutions, LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Phi Sophia Scientific Exploration Cooperative. Pee-Sec is not-for-profit academic support organization founded by station CSO Kenwood Bryce to generate reliable revenue streams for the ongoing maintenance of the Giari Tau facility and its related research missions. The licensing fees and voluntary service contract associated with this software package account for almost eighteen percent of the station's general fund revenue outside of government sources and is subject to all the standard EULA restrictions regarding decompilation, reverse engineering and source code manipulation. Meaning essentially that the lawyers for AimScan, Pee-Sec and ultimately the Earth Outreach Sciences Organization take an understandably dim view of folks screwing around with the guts of their software, even if the folks in question happen to be the military forces sent here for the express purpose of keeping them from getting their asses shot off by invading alien hordes.

"In order for the *Indianapolis* to use the resources of the Gimbrell platform effectively, they had to license and install the software that drives its telescopes in their datacore. When that software broke, they couldn't try to fix it without either a time-costly full reinstall or attempting to crack open the can and diagnose the problem themselves, thereby subjecting themselves to the possibility of intellectual property litigation they would more than likely lose. Since they were in the neighborhood anyway, they made the safe choice and decided

to put in a service call to the local support gurus."

Ray arched an eyebrow. "The software broke?"

"Well, not spontaneously, of course."

"I see."

"Bottom line is that the service call was received by individuals representing themselves as AimScan technical support. In response to the reported difficulties, capable technicians have been dispatched, a Strat Admin official has signed off on their emergency boarding passes and there will be a short hop shuttle docking at the platform in ten minutes to pick us up and transfer us to the *Indianapolis*."

Ray suppressed a look of admiration. It was a good ruse. Clever without being too smart for its own good. He nodded his approval. "I don't suppose you actually know anything about this software suite we've purportedly been assigned to fix."

"Does tech support ever know anything about the system they're hired to fix?"

"Good point."

"Besides, since I'm the one who broke it, I'd like to think I'm qualified to back the hex out."

"But only if it becomes necessary to preserve our cover story. Don't make the repairs too much of a priority. I'm going to need all the expertise you can spare once we get hooked into their core. Maybe you'll catch something that I missed."

"We'll find it, boss. Don't worry. They can't hide a weapon that big from us forever. It's only a matter of time before we find it and wreck it."

Ray heard both the confidence and the unspoken anxiety in Ghast's voice, and while he appreciated the sentiment, he couldn't help but wonder which of them Ghast was trying harder to convince.

"It looks as if everything is in order for the time being," Ray said. He opened the lid on his toolbox and removed the top tray. He took out his external array and pulled it snug against his skull as it ran through its diagnostic and warmup procedures.

"How many technicians did the call center tell the *Indianapolis* to expect?"

"It didn't."

"Good. One more question, then: would you agree that the sergeant there and I are more or less of the same build?"

Ghast smiled wickedly. "Close enough for government work, I'd say."

"My thinking exactly," he said, focusing his attention on the library of p2p jack scripts and personal foam penetration virals at his disposal. "Be a good lad and pop open that maintenance hatch. It should be large enough that we won't have to scrunch him up too badly to make him fit."

As long as one stays south of officer country, it isn't terribly difficult to go unnoticed on a Magellan class warship provided one has the right uniform, the right access keys and above all, the right attitude. In military terms, be it naval or Marine assault forces, the proper attitude consists of looking lower ranking pukes in the eye, scowling an inordinate amount of the time, and not being slow to raise one's voice and bust some balls for real or perceived lapses in discipline. Most grunts and astros were ecstatic to duck their heads and scurry out of the way when a finely delivered tirade erupted anywhere in their vicinity. They didn't bother with determining the identity of the sergeant building up to stomp on them with both feet; they just wanted to get out of the way as quickly as possible. It was a basic survival lesson inculcated in basic training and had been the backbone of military discipline since the dawn of human civilization.

Ray played the role of First Class TacSergeant Dan Gideon, the borrowed identkey overlaying his array's connex protocol, with extraordinary gusto. The problem with being the captain of an interstellar spacecraft manned by a volunteer crew was that too often, the captain had to restrain himself in the interest of morale. One had to be diplomatic, cajoling, encouraging, and when pushed to corporal forms of discipline, stern but merciful. Above all, the captain had to be fair in all things. Sergeants on the other hand were paid to be hard and ruthless and even capricious—the martial equivalent of the all-seeing, all-knowing, ever-vigilant thunderbolts of a faceless god waiting to rain down from Olympus at the first sign of a breakdown in staunch order that kept the military

machine running smoothly.

He found that he liked screaming at people, and even more, he liked screaming as a First Class Sergeant because no one below the level of a butter bar Second Lieutenant dared to stop him. Even other First Classes simply stood back with their arms over their chests and, as professional courtesy to a colleague, displayed appropriate expressions of awe and agreement. He also discovered that if he howled long enough and loud enough, no one thought to ask why he wore a civilian model external array instead of being properly outfitted with standard issue military array hardware or why he was wearing non-regulation footwear (TacSergeant Gideon's boots had been too small, alas, even when he curled his toes). No one asked where he had come from or what he might want when he stomped into normally secured areas and demanded to view the written activity logs, be it TacOps, Targeting, Field Engineering or TechTac. They merely complied, quickly, efficiently and on the double.

Ray had very early on concluded that pretending to be a Marine was much more personally gratifying than actually being one had ever been.

But an hour into his renewed tour of duty, even with the lax security access typical of Third Cycle operations, Ray was running out of zones for which Dan Gideon's profile could reasonably gain him admittance, and he was no closer to finding what they had come for than he had been when he started. It was beginning to occur to him that the actual TacSergeant Dan Gideon would probably be emerging soon from his impact induced stupor to reclaim his lawful identity, and Ray had best be well rid of it before the core golemechs were notified and locked him down.

After his fruitless visit to TechTac, he ducked into the head on Engineering Sub-Deck Nine. He made a brief circuit of the room, peering under the stall doors and listening carefully for any noises that seemed out of the ordinary. Maintenance had been through recently. The floor was still damp from a vigorous scrubbing and the room reeked from overzealous dedication to a liberal sanitizing philosophy. He was alone, and probably would be for at least a few minutes, barring incident. Ray strode to the stall farthest from the entrance and

latched the door from the inside.

He sagged onto the toilet and opened a narrow beam encrypted p2p channel back-packeted on the Strand connex node via the compromised ranged datburst array rather than trying to push signal through the Strat comm network. Unless he had vastly underestimated Herr Sprechtman's capabilities, the tunnel Stine had excavated for them would not yet be collapsed, and it was time for him to start acting as though some greedy little IT wonderboy would be trolling through Dan Gideon's usage logs for clues to his identity before too long. Ray wanted to be absolutely certain he didn't leave behind any incriminating or traceable pathways.

The ping went through after a slight re-encryption delay. His connection burped with static as it cleared the node protocol. "Status report," he said subvocally by way of greeting. He was more in geek than out of it, but still not fully immersed. He needed to be alert in the event of company.

Ghast's voice sounded tinny and distant in his earpiece, stiff with the generic modulation of another's subvocal reply. "Where are you?"

"We'll avoid getting into specifics, if you please," Ray cautioned him. "Suffice it to say I'm within a kilometer of your location and leave it at that. Why do you ask?"

"Don't mean to tell you your business, but I'd recommend you extend that margin by several orders of magnitude in the near future, boss," Ghast said uneasily. "It's getting a little warm in here. I just spent the last twenty minutes being grilled by a security drone who was curious to know if my team had noticed anything out of the ordinary on our trip up the tether. Seems some TacSergeant who was supposed to have ridden up with us didn't show up for his shift in Astronav. The questions were pretty routine and the guy I spoke too didn't seem overly concerned. At this point, they're assuming that he's jerking off somewhere and hoping to bill his absence to travel time on the tether, but that opinion is going to change before too much longer."

"I was beginning to suspect the same thing. Hold the line, please," Ray said. He leapt into full geek, and materialized at the command console in the control center. He punched up the index for profile purge routines and was gratified to find

several terabytes worth of options, most with names like ASSREAMER, KILLTRACEDIE, and PROFPURGE, along with a particularly intriguing entry called FEDTAILCRASH. But the use history seemed to indicate that CRAPDUMP was Dorian's personal favorite, and Ray spun it up for execution.

Almost immediately, Michael Raville appeared behind his left shoulder, leaning over the gangway rail beyond the control center. "I was just starting to wonder what had become of you—hoping, of course, that you hadn't managed to get yourselves rounded up and shot prematurely."

Ray shushed him and scanned through the app's NFO file for alerts or warnings. CRAPDUMP was an all-purpose profile purge that cycled through the entire session cache looking for key sig related files and replacing them on the fly with partially corrupted alternate data ids from a preloaded batch file. It had the fascinating side effect of scorching any disconnect-delay enabled node channels with a viral worm designed to prevent session profile skiptracing, a favorite traffic tracking method of nosy sysadmins.

Such extreme measures might be considered overkill, but if the ship's network security agents had begun to assume that Gideon's profile had been hijacked, it wouldn't be a bad idea to slam the door on them before they could get their tentacles wrapped around Dorian's native foam ip. He didn't have time to search for a better option in any event. Dan Gideon's period of usefulness was rapidly expiring.

Raville watched what he was doing, and he hissed a breath through his teeth. "Do you really think that's a good idea? Infecting the datacore's nodes with a *jack worm*?"

Ray ignored him. An indicator light on his panel flashed to indicate that the script had loaded successfully and was awaiting execution confirmation. Ray stabbed the button to launch the initiation sequence.

The lights dimmed. The control center's speaker system blared with the screech of vulcanized rubber tires skidding across pavement, followed by a thudding crunch of metal. Ray smiled at the aural theatrics in spite of himself. Dorian certainly had style to complement his abundance of substance.

A quick ping of his ip id indicated that he was once more in a pocket of uncataloged foam, a ghost form untracked and

unrecognized, cruising along the underbelly of the Strand network.

"Audio up," he said calmly. The speakers popped in anticipation, and a row of status lights flickered across his console as his connex protocols recalibrated themselves. Ray cleared his throat and jabbed his thumb at Raville, indicating he should feel free to take a seat and shut up. "I'm back, and in theory, clean for the time being. That should buy us a few extra minutes."

"Glad to hear it. Is this channel still secure?"

"It may get tricky if someone starts backtracking Gideon's last node transfer and decides to come looking for him, but that will take some time. His ship access has traveled quite extensively in his absence, and IT is going to have their hands full for the next few minutes putting out some unexpected node fires. We should have a limited window of clear communication, before someone starts poking around seriously."

"Then I should get this out while we're safe: Stine has found something I think you might want to see."

Ray sat up straight in his chair. He suspected that his body, tucked into a bathroom stall on Engineering Sub-Deck Nine, did the same. His digitally synthesized heart began to thunder like mad.

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"Thomas, Youkilis and I have been working hard to distract the local techs with smoke and mirrors, while Stine and the others double-teamed the data storage stacks. We've been beating our heads against the wall trying to find the device itself and coming up null either because of our search parameters or due to access locks we couldn't crack without tipping off network security. Stine decided we were going at it all wrong. She realized that any advanced tech coming up from GT was going to have to be accompanied by its own assembly and testing experts. Raville isn't going to risk blowing this deal because some squid can't follow directions. Do you follow me?"

"I follow you," Ray said impatiently. "Go on."

"She was able to plug into the personnel allocation system—the timesheet logs—and by cross-referencing those

with the Access Request Scheduler found a matching pattern of security grants for a party of non-enlisted techs to a systems lab on Deck Eight-Astra-Four. It's the same song and dance we went through to get our boarding passes and coordinated limited zone security access. The ship has to coordinate visitor arrivals with locking mechanisms, guest accounts, the whole works. No one wants to flip those switches manually every time the work crew shuttles up, so it was batch loaded to automatically activate their badge credentials and network rights on a prearranged schedule over the last few weeks. The ship's directory tells us the systems lab in question is in the Tech Deployment Grid on the ass side of Jump Engineering." Ray had a pretty good idea of where that was. It was only a few decks up and aft of his current location. "In case you're curious, TDG is the unit responsible for launching sensor arrays, sidescan photon guns and broad spectrographic analysis probes. In general, we're talking mass survey types of stuff, adding factoids to the human trivia pool, more scientific in nature than strictly strategic. If I'm the captain of a battle cruiser on active alert, that's where I'd put a bunch of tech sharp and questionably politically affiliated eggheads intent on playing around with highly experimental doomsday weapons. That way they don't see too much classified military hardware in action, they're not a distraction to the crew, and if an accident happens and things start blowing up, none of the critical ship's components are jeopardized—at least to the extent that the unscheduled detonation of any doomsday device can be said to not jeopardize the ship at large."

It was sound enough reasoning, but Ray needed to be sure. "It's possible that the *Indianapolis* maintains its own contingent of non-enlisted scientific personnel. If Strat is willing to rent their defense forces to EOSO, they're more than capable of renting space and cycles to academics. Can you confirm that these personnel were affiliated with the research station?"

Ghast paused, and Ray strained forward intently. "Boss, one of the access badges issued was Michael Raville's. This has to be it, doesn't it? Why else would Raville spend weeks jetting up from the station to this ship unless he was overseeing the assembly of his weapon?"

Ray's virtual heart hammered in his chest. "Have you re-checked the internal shipping logs? I'm thinking load orders, component listings, equipment transfer records? We need to conjure a dirty sketch of what this device might be capable of, but more importantly, we need to determine where it is located *now*."

He could almost hear Ghast smiling. "Way ahead of you. Anderson has tracked it to a forward launch bay on Deck Nine-Astra, Sector Six. That's just a hop from the systems lab where it was assembled."

"Have him squirt you the data they've retrieved so far," Raville said into his ear. "I should take a look at it."

Ray grimaced. He didn't want to risk moving extra packets across their connection, but Raville was probably right. If anyone could decipher the intent of the device from specs and lading sheets, it was him. "Have Anderson send me her findings."

"Will do. We're packing up our gear now. I figure we can be there in eight minutes."

Ray brought up a schematic of the ship's tube system on the main screen. "I can be there in twelve from my current position. What's the access restriction look like on that level?"

"Anderson says she already has it cracked and has added that zone to our security access. It's a kluge, so it probably won't hold much past shift change, but it will get us where we need to be. We'll worry about how we're going to get back out later." Ghast paused suddenly, as the obvious hole in his thinking occurred to him. "That doesn't really help you much though, does it?"

Ray didn't have a visitor's badge. He'd been cruising the ship solely on Gideon's account, and now he didn't even have that. He consulted the local system time. The ship would be gearing up for shift change soon. With any luck, he could make it at least part of the way unnoticed in the morning rush to duty stations. "I'm on the move," he said, putting as much confidence in his tone as he could muster. "But if I'm later than zero-seven-hundred on the dot local time, assume I've been detained and proceed with the plan as instructed."

"We'll hold the door for you as long as we can," Ghast promised.

"Take no extraordinary measures. Our sole advantage remains stealth and quickness. This isn't a fight we can win if we try to go toe to toe. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Good. I assume you can handle your current escort detail?"

"We'll be at our destination before they even know we're gone."

Ray smiled bleakly. "Then expect me shortly. Don't forget to have Anderson load that file. Captain out."

The p2p connection broke and Ray leaned back in his seat with his hands pressed over his eyelids. Almost a full kilometer of deck, a dozen different security zones, more than a two thousand members of a hostile military force and a countless army of sensors, pineyes, id readers and passive scan security locks were all that separated him from the launch bay on Deck Nine-Astra-Six. It could conceivably be worse, but his imagination wasn't up to the task.

"The file is coming in now," Raville observed. "It isn't very big."

"That's good, because we don't have very much time in which to process it," he responded, and immediately regretted his glibness. He lifted his head and looked over his shoulder at Raville, smiling wanly. "It looks as though we may have gotten ourselves into a bit of trouble."

"By 'we', I assume you mean yourself and the mouse in your pocket. I'm not the one who decided to scorch the security network and give them advance warning that their perimeter might have been penetrated. But other than that, I concur completely."

"Care to make a wager on how far we can get with no access pips, a wanted man's uniform and a security system about to go critical once it realizes terrorists have seized one of the ship's compartments?"

Raville grunted humorlessly. "I'll start digging into Dorian's script library to see if there's anything we can apply to confuse the golemechs between here and there. I'll leave the actual physical barriers up to you. In the meantime, might I strongly suggest you petition whatever deity it is you hold to for some timely intervention. We're going to need all the help

we can get."

"Yes."

"Oh, and one more thing while we're contemplating the tough questions: ask yourself why the captain of a warship clogged with blast hardened, v-field reenforced bulkhead compartments each loaded to the rafters with highly volatile plasma battery shells, phased singularity mines and every other form of universe rending ordnance known to man would choose to allow *a bunch of eggheads* with no military training to assemble a doomsday device in an unshielded quasi-civilian sector on the soft underbelly of his precious vessel--one of the few places in which the slightest accident could trigger a catastrophic chain of events that would send this entire ship plummeting into the gravity well of Giari Tau." Raville lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "The captain must have had great confidence in the competency of Raville's team, wouldn't you say?"

Ray stared at him for a full ten seconds considering the implications. "How can you know that?"

"Do you think I've done nothing but sit here idly peering over your shoulder or lurking in the shadows of your foam sessions while you conducted your fruitless searches? I'm limited in this format, Captain, but not wholly without resources."

"You don't think this is Raville's doomsday device?"

"I'm not saying that. But I am saying that we—not just you and I, but all of us—may have been making assumptions about what exactly constitutes a doomsday device that are unwarranted." Raville peered at him hard, his jaw set and his face pale. Ray couldn't tell if it was anger or simple, stark terror at facing the unknown. "There's something else going on here that I don't yet grasp. A deeper game than the one we believe we've been playing. But the cards have been dealt and the wagers made. All that's left for us is to call or fold. Your choice."

"I'll leave this session active," Ray said, taking a deep breath. "I'll appreciate any technical assistance you manage to offer."

Raville nodded. "Aye. I'll do what I can."

Ray retracted his focus and the render of the control room

faded into a ghost image hazily scrawled on the monocle of his external array. He thought he heard a last whisper in his earpiece, a determined and grimly hopeless encouragement.

Good luck.

Twelve minutes.

The time it took an average man to walk a kilometer of open ground. The median duration of a fast food meal. The length of a standard sexual encounter, of a normal bowel movement, of a relaxing shower. Twelve minutes was nothing. It was a hiccup in the span of a normal day. Time enough to read a zine article of no particular depth, to catch up on the news headlines, to study the box score for your favorite sporting team.

But ask any man who has lived through a life threatening experience: a combat veteran, an attack fighter pilot, a policeman or fire fighter, and he will tell you that twelve minutes can be an eternity. Ask any man who has been *hunted*, because to a hunted beast, twelve minutes is the difference between life and death a dozen times over. They are seven hundred and twenty individuated opportunities for death to reach out a cold and instant talon-like claw and clutch you in its ineluctable grip. Each of those seconds stretches out, slows down, breaks off into discrete units of potentiality, until each one is an eternity unto itself.

Ray exited the restroom on Engineering Sub-Deck Nine and flung himself down the corridor to his left. He tried to look hurried, preoccupied, just another grunt commuter on his way to a dull duty station. The schematic drawing he'd pilfered from the datacore informed him that there should be a tube lift at the end of the corridor that would take him up to Engineering One. From there, he would have to traverse a large portion of the lateral bulk of the ship along the Bainbridge Artery—what passed for Main Street on the *T.E.S. Indianapolis*—in order to duck into the Tech Deployment Grid situated just behind the humpdeck, a bulbous eruption of vacuum porous nanocarbon lattice set aside for cold storage and reactor steam venting.

He kept his head down and avoided eye contact with anyone in the increasing volume of foot traffic pounding up

and down the deckplates. He chewed his lower lip and plunged his hands deep into his trouser pockets, trying to look both casually preoccupied and slightly rushed. No one gave him a second look, if they registered his presence at all. The hour was early, and the ship, even on combat alert, had been idle for many days. Most of the men and women he passed seemed either bored or still sleep sluggish, more concerned with their morning routine than with marking an unfamiliar face as they grumbled their way to work, thirds of coffee, or whatever quick breakfast they could obtain from the deck canteen.

Once, he slipped into another public restroom and stood behind the door breathing rapidly as a pair of security dragoons stomped toward him. They laughed raucously at one another as they strode past, trading bawdy jokes with the casual air of soldiers either fresh off a duty shift or not yet yoked into the one in front of them. It was just his own nerves, he realized. No one was looking for him yet. Still, he waited until the sound of their voices had faded completely before easing back into the flow of commuter traffic.

At the end of the hall, he crowded into the lift with a handful of other astros, all of them general enlistment drones considerably lower than his putative rank in the chain of command. They were yawning and bleary eyed, content to stare at the floor as the doors hummed closed and the carriage lurched into motion. His first objective obtained, Ray heaved a small sigh of relief and put his back against the rear wall. So far, so good. He crossed his arms over his chest to obscure Gideon's id badge.

As the carriage ticked past the first floor, it shuddered and a pretty young Midshipman with short chestnut hair and wearing blue engineering coveralls stumbled up against him. Ray caught her with his arm and held her up until she regained her balance.

"I'm terribly sorry," the woman said. Her cheeks flushed pinkly with embarrassment. "We hit that hitch every morning. You'd think I'd remember to brace myself."

"Not a problem," Ray said. "Glad I could be here to cushion your fall."

She gazed up at him, smiling, her eyebrows quirked in

curiosity. "You're a long way from home aren't you, soldier?"

Ray forced himself to smile back, but kept his expression guarded. "Aren't we all?"

"That's not what I meant. I haven't seen you in Engineering before, and I usually notice the Marines kicked down into our can. That's my job. I'm shipside interservice liaison for engineering staff." She flashed him a practiced, officious grin that was all teeth and extended her hand in greeting. "My name is Channett Gabrial."

He squeezed her fingers gently. "TacSergeant Victor Spence."

"But you are new around here, right?"

"You caught me. I transferred in from the *Juggernaut*. Shuttled over on Third Cycle a little early to test my clearances and line up housing before I'm scheduled to report for duty this afternoon. My CO assured me that all the details had been taken care of, but you know how it is. Doesn't matter how routine the procedure, somebody is going to find a way to drop the ball. I didn't want to end up sleeping in the mess hall for the next two weeks."

"I hear that, sergeant. So where is your assigned duty station?"

"Tac ops. I work on shaped charge neo-plasmatic warheads. My specialty is propulsion system design and implementation."

"You're going to have a lab station in Engineering, then? We have some fine, state of the art propulsion testing facilities on Six."

"So they tell me. I haven't gotten to see my workstation." Ray self-consciously tapped the side of his external array and grimaced. "Like I said, somebody dropped the ball. I lost either my foam connex or a component in my array when I shuttled over. One of the friendlies on the shuttle hooked me up with a temporary array, but the network hasn't picked me up yet. I was just on my way to IT to see what can be done to iron things out. Don't want to make a bad impression by being locked out of my workstation on my first day."

Midshipman Gabrial fluttered her eyelids reflexively, frowning. "I see that you're right about your network access. I've got nothing on your id on the intership grid. I can't even

ping your ex array. Somebody screwed you up good."

"Tell me about it."

Her eyelids went on fluttering for several more seconds. Ray snuck a glance at the carriage's status pad to see how close they were getting to Engineering One. The last thing he needed was a good samaritan digging into his nonexistent profile.

"I don't know," she said finally, with a small shrug. "I'll have to work on it from my desk. The IT security agents are paranoid about allowing us to dig too deeply into personnel allocation files without black box encryption. Understandable, I guess, but it's a pain in my backside. You'd think the military could take some of that massive sinkhole budget and drag themselves into the current century technologically, you know?"

Ray was sure she was going to drop it there, back off from an idle conversation before it actually cost her physical effort, but after a moment, she said, "The thing I don't understand is how you got all the way down to Sub-Deck Nine without any of the necessary clearances. We've got some classified labs running on that level, and it usually takes a week or more for anyone to get their access lined up in the first place. We're supposed to have a guaranteed sub-thirty security response time on the pineyes."

The status panel flashed Engineering Two, and the lift picked up a burst of speed. Ray did his best to look confused. "I didn't run into any problems. Maybe your reporting system is bugged. Happens on the *Juggernaut* all the time. Somebody decides to patch a part of the network and it flips the wrong switch."

"Sure. That's probably it." Gabriel squeezed the bridge of her nose, clearly unhappy. "Look, I realize it's an inconvenience, but would you mind coming around with me to my CO's office? I really ought to get someone drilling down into this issue until we get it resolved. If you could give him an idea of the places you've been, it would help us immensely in figuring out the extent of the system failure."

Ray kept his tone level, but his mouth went dry. "I'd like to, but I really should get over to IT first thing. Maybe I could swing by this afternoon sometime, when it's convenient for

you, of course."

"Yeah, that would be fine."

Relief surged through him, and Ray grinned apologetically. "Hey, I'm sorry to cause so many problems first thing in the morning. I'll bet this is exactly what you wanted to spend your day on."

"No sweat. It's better we find out bugs this way than as a result of an actual infiltration."

The lift doors wheezed open and the riders crowded for the exit. Ray moved quickly to separate himself from the friendly and inquisitive Midshipman Gabriel before she could cause him real problems. His internal chronometer informed him that he was already forty plus seconds behind his estimated travel time. If he didn't find somewhere to make it up, he'd be cutting very close to the zero-seven-hundred deadline.

The press in front of him began to thin, and Ray peeled off down the broad main corridor of Engineering One to the right, the next stage in his quest for the Tech Deployment Grid. He scanned ahead restlessly, waiting for a gaggle of slow movers to get out of his way. Engineering One seemed to be mostly private offices and admin centers, the names and ranks of the upper level occupants inscribed in gold chased letters on plates beside the doors. This early, the ports were still largely sealed. Ray consulted his map. There were no immediate security checkpoints on his display, and only a few fixed pineyes and id scanners, all of which he should be able to avoid. A left, a right, and a tube ladder up to the Bainbridge Artery. Piece of cake.

He made it all of a dozen steps before he heard a familiar voice calling after him.

"TacSergeant Spence! Hold up!"

He wanted to ignore her, pretend he didn't hear. Every muscle in his body told him to keep going. But that would look suspicious. Already, some of their fellow travelers and other astros on their way to work were beginning to perk up curiously.

Ray turned, a forced smile on his lips. It froze there, a cold, dead thing.

The ever-helpful Midshipman Gabriel was weaving her

way through the crowd toward him with a gray clad, red collared security agent in tow. He dared not move, though a ripple of panic crept up into his stomach and settled there. Gabriel bounded up to him, breathless, glowing with pleasure. Ray was almost certain he was going to vomit.

"TacSergeant Spence," she gushed. "I'm glad I caught you. This is Sergeant—" Her mouth opened, and she stiffened self-consciously, then wheeled toward her companion. "I'm sorry, sergeant, what was your name again?"

"McAvoy," the man said. He smiled politely, but the warmth did not reach his eyes. They were firm, hardened with suspicion.

"Yes. Sergeant McAvoy, with Security. I've explained your situation to him, and he agrees that it's probably best if he escorts you to IT to get things straightened out. There are a dozen pineye readers between here and there, and with the threat of terrorist insurgents still technically on the books, I'd hate to have you detained on suspicion of something nefarious. It would ruin our reputation for hospitality."

She laughed at her own humor, but Ray barely noticed. His attention was locked on Sergeant McAvoy, whose eyes fluttered characteristically as he accessed the network.

"Indeed, TacSergeant Spence," he growled. "I think it would be best if you came with me."

The security agent's hand flexed almost imperceptibly and drifted a few centimeters toward the weapon strapped to his side.

Ray's comm channel hissed abruptly in his ear.

They're on to you, Raville announced. I've got security scramble alerts in four contiguous sectors. I'd suggest you get yourself out of there quickly.

<Notify Ghast. Instruct him that I've encountered unexpected difficulties, but the timetable we discussed remains firm. Tell him to expect trouble.>

<Will do. I'm feeding an alternate travel route to your display based on security response estimates. It should get you past the immediate threat.>

Ray tensed his muscles, tapping into the reservoirs of strength and enhanced reflex that had been programmed into

his package build. It was like flipping a switch, closing a circuit. The lumbering wreckage of his body came alive. His senses flared with sudden sharpness and acuity. Tightly focused energy flooded into his limbs.

Relative time slowed to a crawl, as though space itself had curved about him, and for a pure, crystalline instant, he saw everything: the craned necks of curious on-lookers and interrupted commuters; the bright and expectant eyes of Midshipman Gabriel; the burgeoning threat of Sergeant McAvoy. He felt the droning bursts of the fine orbital jets firing, the patter of boots on deckplate, the first guttural blat of the incursion alert belched through the comm speakers. The ship was alive, a creeping ecology of parasitic crew, neuronal connex nodes and flexsteel flesh. But also a stalking beast, its teeth bared and claws splayed, poised to fight and rend and tear to the extent of its stupid, animal strength. It would fight for its survival.

Ray dropped himself into a coiled fighting stance, curled his fists and struck.

His blow caught Sergeant McAvoy in the center of his chest. From McAvoy's shocked perspective, it would have arrived instantaneous with Ray's thought, an impossible blur of motion followed by a biting impact. Ray felt the bones in the security agent's sternum crack, and McAvoy grunted, flailed his arms wide and went down hard like he'd been shot, his eyes growing wide with shock and pain. One of his forearms caught Midshipman Gabriel just below the cheek. She bounced off the wall and tumbled forward in slow, deliberate fashion, then landed on the deck and lay still.

Ray was sorry for that despite everything. She'd only been trying to help.

That was the problem with the universe: a dearth of simple decency, and even when someone mustered the courage to do a decent thing, this was the payment they could expect. A vicious feedback loop. Was it any wonder things kept insisting on going to hell?

He sprang away, already ten meters down the corridor before anyone around him even registered what had just happened. He dashed down a tight corridor to his left, and ran as hard as his enhanced biomechanics allowed. His

monocle display described a strange elliptical path, a complex route of narrow gangways, maintenance hatches and brief climbs through poorly illuminated tubes. At first, the way was often crowded with crewmen paused to gape at the unexpected and inexplicable growl of the alarm. Ray brushed past them as a gust of wind and a splash of color. In tight spaces, he sent them sprawling and launched himself over their tumbling bodies as they fell.

All the time, the blat of the alarm pursued him. The deck rapidly began to empty out. Bulkhead doors snapped shut on either side of the corridors he entered. Engineering launched itself headlong into security lockdown.

Ray accepted this change as a gift and put on an extra burst of speed. His superhuman strength wouldn't last much longer. Even with his reconfigured body, there was only so much energy he could store, and he had been weary beyond reckoning before, relying on stimulants and adrenaline to keep himself going. Over a brief span of minutes, his breath grew ragged, and cyanotic pinpoints of darkness began to appear at the edges of his vision. His muscles began to wail all the way down the length of his legs. His deep tissues felt like they had been set on fire.

And finally, as he crawled out of a cramped HVAC tube two levels above the Bainbridge Artery, the map overlaying his left eye began to pulse with red pinpoints of light. He peered both ways down a narrow chute of grey metal, some sort of backwater access tunnel. He was so exhausted that he trembled. Trembled uncontrollably. Ray hauled himself up and stopped, hunched over with his hands planted on his knees. He greedily swallowed huge chunks of deliciously cool air heavily scented with machine oil.

He pinged his companion.

<What are those beacons up ahead?>

Raville responded immediately. <Passive id scanners.>

<In both directions?> He bit his lip on a curse. <Route me around them.>

<There is no way around. And there's no way back. Security has deployed a saturation net of roving pineye micromechs. You're about twenty seconds ahead of the wave right now, but when they catch up to you, you're going to

stand out on the grid like a neon sign wherever you go.>

His limbs felt sodden, as limber as sacks of sand. <I can't run anymore.>

<Then you're screwed.>

<I was following your map!> He transmitted it as a snap, but there was no force behind it. Ray didn't have the strength to be angry. <I need you to disable the scanner. Dorian has got to have something in his library.>

<He does, but I don't have the authority to deploy any of his cloaking scripts on my own. He locked me out of that portion of the architectural core. I can load it into the queue, but there are at least twenty more devices between your position and the TDG launch bay. You're going to have to configure them to execute on command.>

Ray didn't spare the oaths this time. <I can't navigate the decks of this ship, avoid human detection and tailor incursion scripts at the same time.>

<I can run the scripts for you if you give me execution level access. It's the only chance you've got.>

A sudden thought, inchoate and terrible, blossomed in Ray's mind. Something about an overly suspicious security agent, an instantaneous four sector alert, and a frenzied, circuitous route of escape that led irrevocably to a bleak stretch of dirt between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

But Raville was right. It was the only chance he had. Better to never arrive at the launch bay at all than to come with security bugs crawling all over him.

Ray closed his eyes and flashed through the access protocols.

<You're in.>

Almost at once, the warning beacons on his display went dead.

<Go left.> Raville transmitted. <Updated map is flashing onto your display now. I'll divert the passive scanners as you reach them. It should be a straight shot from here as long as you manage to keep yourself from getting killed.>

Ray glanced up at the system time flashing in the corner of his screen. It was two minutes to seven.

<Piece of cake.>

<Aren't you glad you brought me along?>

Once again, he started to run, certain that in the back of his mind he could hear Michael Raville laughing.

At exactly 06:59:50 hours local time, Ray Morrical stumbled through the bulkhead door to Flight Staging Bay Gamma-15 on Deck Nine-Astra. Thomas held the passage open for him, looking worn and relieved at once, as he plunged through. Exhaustion made him clumsy, and he managed to catch his foot on the raised lip of the bulkhead's bottom seal. Before he could even think about catching himself, Ray was on the deck, scudding gently across a smooth sheet of flexsteel deckplate.

He lay there for a moment, feeling his arms and legs intact, enjoying the sensation of his face pressed against the cool surface, ecstatic with the sheer and simple pleasure of not having to move any longer. He'd made it, even if he was too tired to be properly elated with his success. The door closed and sealed with the rasp of a vacuum lock, cutting off the worst of the phantom alarm that had pursued him all the way from Engineering.

Presently, he became aware that he was not alone, and that shadows had gathered over his supine form. Groaning, Ray rolled himself onto his back. He gazed up into the still unfamiliar faces of Ghast, Thomas, Anderson and Gallegos, Stine and Youkilis—all of his surviving crew. He didn't even have the strength to feel chagrined. He was just so happy to see them again, together and whole.

Ghast wore a pleased smirk. "I should have known that you wouldn't be able to make it this far without kicking up some sort of a ruckus."

Ray sighed affably. "I didn't mean to. It wasn't even my fault. It started when this pretty girl bumped into me on the elevator."

"It always starts with a pretty girl, doesn't it?"

There was laughter then, and Ray let the sound wash over him. It was the sound of bliss, of harmony, and a brief reprieve from fear. Only when it had gone did he ask, "So what about you? Any problems encountered on your trek?"

Someone offered a hand and Ray allowed himself to be tugged to his feet. He wavered unsteadily for a few seconds,

but eventually his legs decided to bear the load. Ghast said, "We crossed a sector barrier we'd missed with our access hack and managed to get detained by one of the local cops on his way to log off his duty shift. We told him we'd gotten lost trying to find our way back to the hangar. He didn't seem prone to believing us given some of the other network oddities that had infected the system over the last hour and was preparing to call for backup when some fool tripped the incursion alarms and turned the whole ship into a madhouse."

"Glad I could be of assistance," Ray said, chuckling.

"The guy ran off in such a hurry, he didn't even give us directions. I can't say I was left with much of a positive feeling for this ship's hospitality."

"Believe me, the benefits of its hospitality are not all that they're cracked up to be. Now, who's going to give me the grand tour? I'm breathless with the anticipation of laying my eyes on my first ever legitimate doomsday device."

Ghast and Stine exchanged an uneasy look. "That makes seven of us, boss."

Before Ray could ask what he meant, his First Officer took him by the arm and led him out of the pressure lock into which he had stumbled and through a second bulkhead door. Thomas and Youkilis remained behind to guard the entrance. They entered a launch bay that was cramped but sanitary, a carefully maintained workspace, more reminiscent of missile firing station than a deep space deployment platform. Immediately to the right of the bulkhead door sat a pressurized control center cocooned in an oblong box of flexsteel and plastisheen. Through the tall windows, Ray could see racks of flickering displays, blade servers and dedicated system hardware. Small, portable carts laden with tools and outmoded computing devices were crammed into the corners and other available patches of open deck.

But the bulk of the launch area had been given over to a portable industrial winch and a short staging cradle abutted by a hydraulic loading piston that fed the black maw of a probe launch tube. The impression of a missile firing station persisted, and Ray was reminded of a rifle—the long shaft of the barrel running into the cocked hammer that, when snapped against the brass shelled projectile, hurled it on its

destructive and irrevocable path.

And what a projectile it was.

Sleek and black, its skin glossy in the bay's overhead lights, secured to the cradle by nanocarbon straps. A silver fatburst data cord trailed from an access port in the nose cone to a connex node attached in turn to an array of diagnostic and nav equipment that hung pendulous and spider legged from the ceiling. The device measured fully two meters in length, including the fine, razor thin fins attached to its tail. It bore no insignia or call signs, no official designations at all. It's lines were shark-like, potent and vicious, the latter day representation of the golden arrows of mighty Apollo himself.

And it looked exactly like every other plasma propelled conventional missile Ray had ever seen.

He stared at it, a million nonsensical thoughts rumbling through his head, but only one surfaced with any force.

That's it? This is what we came all this way to see?

On his own ship, there was a whole munitions dump full of missiles almost precisely like this one. Just as fierce, just as subjectively evil-looking and doom-suggestive. Except the *Horde's* were twice as big, three times as big. . .and all of them worth more in scrap metal and depleted uranium than they were as offensive ordnance, casualties of the inexorable march of technological progress.

The deck shifted beneath Ray's feet, and he nearly went down to his knees. For a terrifying instant, he couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Everything he thought he had known, all the sacrifices they had made, spiraled about him like images of loss, of failure, of disaster.

Then he got a handle on himself.

"I don't understand," he said steadily. "Is it. . .what? Some new technology? Some hitherto unknown form of star buster? A pinhole singularity bomb? A phased riftwave shell?"

He reeled through his mental catalogue of every form and type of destructive weaponry known to man, both actual and theoretical. Planet killing devices, plasma weapons, Spriggs-Detmer arrays, Fleish hammers. . .he considered them all and tossed them away.

"I need information Mr. Ghast."

Ghast nodded stiffly, understanding Ray's lack of understanding. "Anderson and I have been going over the data we sent you: the manifests, the inventory sheets, the spec docs, such as they are. There are missing pieces, of course, and we've only done a preliminary analysis at best, but I can tell you that we're not seeing the sorts of design patterns one would expect from known categories of offensive weaponry. Most of the device's mass is plasma shell propellant cartridges armed to feed a standard ion-pulse thrust battery. The tubes are nicely tooled, but more or less standard issue for a projectile of this size and mass, meaning that even at max thrust, it isn't going to acquire a velocity that will curve the space-time horizon. The warhead appears to be anything but, and once the plasma has gone dry, it probably wouldn't even go pop if it smashed head on into an asteroid. The skin is a unique flexsteel nanalloy with amazing tensile strength and flexibility, assembled in one contiguous piece, probably all but indestructible—which is an interesting feature, but not really relevant that I can tell. That leaves the nose, which most likely is all guidance, complex prox arrays and whatever other voodoo they've crammed into it. It does carry a modified 18 millisecond burst singularity seed in a phased containment cell, which is sophisticated tech for a weapon of this type, but it only grades out as a comm scale potential density."

Ray stroked his chin. "To call home, you suppose? Confirm its target coordinates and that sort of thing."

"Unlikely. The nav components are a significant upgrade on the usual tube and bubble matrix. I don't think they need the backup of a BSS one-time. Besides, an 18 millisecond spew? You could move a ton of data through that tunnel before the leading curves began to collapse."

A ton of information, Ray repeated to himself. "What about a viral weapon of some sort, then?"

Ghast only shrugged. "Who knows? It certainly doesn't have enough punch to do any real physical damage, which might not matter, since the enemy reportedly isn't physical in the first place, but how would you get it there? I mean, talk about the slow boat to Chenga."

"Fine. Then that's where you can start. Analyze the core and nav systems and find out what sort of data it's capable of

moving and where that information is headed. Focus on predictive models for the wave collapse."

"We can do that," Ghost said. "I'll get Stine jacking on the control center to see what might be in the cache files, too. Then we've got the assorted diagnostic units—they'll have some level of resident memory we might be able to recover. It'll take time, but we'll track down the missing pieces of the puzzle."

The words were right, but Ray could tell even as Ghost began issuing his instructions to the others, that he was troubled. When the Misfit Toys had dispersed and the two of them were alone on the launch deck, Ray pulled him aside.

"Care to tell me what you really think, old friend?"

He hesitated at first, as though unwilling or unable to give up his typically optimistic attitude, but finally, Ghost set his jaw and sighed. His shoulders sagged with the weight of all he did not comprehend.

"I just don't know, boss," he confided. "I don't know what it is. Not without taking it completely apart, at least. And I thought about doing that, just as we'd planned. I thought about disabling it, destroying it. I could probably wreck it beyond usefulness with just a pry bar, but--"

"But you realized that someone has been playing a different game than the one we thought we were playing," Ray finished for him. "I've begun to suspect the same thing. The question is: whose game is it? And what is really at stake?"

Ghost shifted uneasily and hooked his thumbs into his belt. "I'm out of my depth on this one. I don't know what it is, or what it's supposed to be, but I can state definitively that what it *is not* is a bomb, let alone some kind of doomsday device as we understand such things. If you tell me to destroy it, I'll do that, Ray, but it scares me, to be honest. I thought I knew what we were doing, what we were fighting for, but now that we're here. . .now I just don't know. It isn't what we were told to expect. It isn't anything we understand, which means that either someone has been lying to us, or someone hasn't fathomed what's really going on. And both of those someone's are the same person: Michael Raville. And I don't mean the real one. Raville started this whole tilt at windmills.

Raville explained her destiny to Amara and unlocked her power. Raville is desperate to get back at his better half, and that makes his judgment, and maybe his entire agenda, suspect as far as I'm concerned. We're here to help John and Amara, to keep this war with the Exousiai from ever getting started, but that's only because Raville told us it was what we needed to do."

"Are you suggesting that stopping this war may not be in our best interest, Mr. Ghast?"

His second in command shook his head fiercely. "No, sir. Not at all. I'm only saying that we're on the verge of taking an irrevocable step in one direction. There's no going back once we junk this thing down, and I'd like a little more proof that it's the right thing to do than just Raville's say so, you know? I'm have this sneaking suspicion that anything we do in his name is going to be the wrong thing. I'm not even sure which side we're on any more. Which side we're *supposed* to be on."

Ray heard Ghast's unspoken plea. He wanted someone to tell him what to do, to absolve him of doubt. He was lost and confused and most of all, terrified of failure. He desperately needed to be told what was right and true and that what they were doing was honorable, that they were keeping promises that would benefit mankind, stave off the wolves at the door, save the universe.

And those were precisely the answers that Ray did not have.

His weapon must be destroyed before it can be raised against the Exousiai, Amara had said. But that instruction had been predicated on the assumption that the weapon existed. There was no weapon. No doomsday device. Just this thing, this turbo-charged, but nevertheless old-fashioned rocket.

It made no sense. But that was always the stumbling block of faith, wasn't it? Faith was believing even when belief was nonsensical. Faith was action in spite of the evidence to the contrary.

The problem with faith, of course, was that ultimately, its power didn't come down to the potency of the believer who practiced it, but in the reliability of the god in whom it was placed.

Again, the wriggling maggot of suspicion gnawed at him.

Raville's unseemly embedding in Dorian's architecture. The flight into peril. *Give me access.* . .

Raville had answers. Raville had much to answer for, much to explain. And those explanations were past due. And if Ghast was wrong and Ray's suspicions unfounded, maybe Raville, the shadow sibling of his human self, could read oracles in this device where the rest of them perceived only riddles.

Ray opened a channel into his foam and called Raville's name. There was no answer, just a faint hiss of static.

He called again, and when Raville did not heed him, attempted to flip into a full immersion session.

For the first time in his life, Ray Morrical encountered seamless, opalescent ice. There was no sensation, no awareness of being repelled, just the simple, flat impenetrability of an environment that no longer belonged to him. The amber hued splash screen of his monocle display flashed the message: INVALID NODE REQUEST.

Ray realized with a shock that he had been disconnected from the beautiful, chaotic and data rich universe outside that of his own thigh and bone.

His foam was gone, and the digital presence of Michael Raville was gone with it.

Appendant to the plastisheen environmental dome that encased Giari Tau EOSO Facility Ketus O-12 was a squat, ovoid containment shell obtainable only via a hydraulic lift that departed from the towering Administrative and Sec-Com Nexus through a reinforced flexsteel umbilical shaft. This navel-like eruption, resembling more than anything else a steel and glass sculpture of a pistachio, was the official receptacle for the staff offices of CSO Kenwood Bryce and his personal entourage of assistants, advisors, departmental handlers and policy wonks. The Home Office (as it was generally called) had been lately redecorated in an aggressively pastel New Mesopotamian Revival fashion at a cost of millions of rupees, utilizing only the highest of high end custom designed zap package construx-templates transmitted directly from the maximum security data vaults of Terbury-Finks Classical Design in Crecy Trois, New Frankish Sultanate, Dengali, which prided itself as being *the* leader in stylish business-industrial renovation materials.

Dorian knew that the timeframe for the refurbishment was *lately* because the reception pod stank of quikform sealant, shade dilating smarthue plaster and Kaster's Polyseal Wood Cement, which happened to be, not surprisingly, exactly the products he would have used in undertaking a renovation of this scope. A number of the faux stucco walls still had WET PAINT signs tacked to them, and all of the public seating couches were covered in stained and crinkly plastic dropcloths

as vivid invitations not to even think of seating one's self while waiting. Rolls of expensively nanowoven Afghani carpets lay fetched up against the base of a mauve pseudo-clay retaining wall-cum-reception desk that snaked through the pod between the waiting area and the frescoed O-shaped entrance to the warren of offices beyond. On the opposite end of the room, a forest of genetically stunted and fruitless date palms crowded in front of observation windows that would have, under normal circumstances, provided a spectacular view of the plains below. As he had seen the plains up close and under armed guard already, Dorian didn't feel particularly disappointed by the loss.

The girl who sat behind the desk was numbingly perky, vid-personality pretty, attractively dressed and obviously miserable. Her skin was pale, her face puffy, and every few seconds, she either sneezed or blew her nose explosively into a tissue. At fairly regular intervals, she drifted toward an alarming shade of green and politely excused herself into the back, a mad-dash journey from which she would return looking even more pale and miserable than before.

"I'm so sorry. It's these fumes. I guess I have an allergy," she would say, then offer them coffee or pastries or tea for what seemed the hundredth time. Neither Dorian nor Amara were tempted to take her up on it.

Ford Garrison had buzzed at the door to their borrowed quarters just after six local time. With him had come by two other men who did not introduce themselves, did not speak and kept near the entrance with their hands folded in front of them. The most interesting thing about them was the obvious and suspiciously weapon-shaped bulge beneath their jackets.

Dorian and Amara had already been up for a couple of hours, observed their morning ablutions and eaten a light breakfast, Amara had put on a soft blue jumpsuit that she found in one of the dressers (along with a dozen other outfits which ranged from airily casual to low cut formal). It had fit her perfectly, just like the selection of running shoes, sandals and hiking boots which she discovered on the floor of the bedroom closet, and the drawer full of neatly folded undergarments packed in the same dresser as the other outfits. The other drawers had held a similar multi-functional

selection of men's clothing, underwear and socks, but Dorian had donned the fatigues he had worn the previous day instead. He had no desire to be beholden to Raville's generosity. He wasn't dogmatic on this point—he had traded his floppy slip-on shoes for a pair of boots in his size at the first opportunity and without any ethical qualms; he just felt more comfortable in his own clothes.

Flanked by his pair of non-descript agents, Garrison had then led them back down to the floor of the station following the route they had taken the previous day. From there, they made their way through the morning riot of work traffic and the tight clusters of low and sturdy buildings until they reached the bureaucratically dull and featurelessly utilitarian halls of the Admin Nexus structure. At a security kiosk, their digital imprints were taken, their pix snapped and the amusing non-likenesses affixed to visitors passes which they were required to wear around their necks while inside the Admin complex. They had to flash their badges for an access golemech at the doors to the lift, which counted them, checked them over and simultaneously calculated their mass and displacement to the milligram before allowing them into the car, then ran the calculations again to make certain that no unauthorized cargo had slipped on board during the transition. Garrison's security toadies did not have passes and remained in the lobby, vigilant but unmoved, until the doors had closed. As far as Dorian knew, they were still there, motionless as statues, awaiting reassignment, awaiting their return, or generally just waiting, sentient as stone, thinking statue thoughts.

On the ride up, Garrison had brusquely informed them that Raville would be meeting with them in CSO Bryce's office. He apologized for the construction mess before they even exited the lift, sounding mildly irritated as he did so, as if the Bryce had commissioned the renovation at this particular time and under the present circumstances for the sole purpose of annoying him. Then he had grouched at the receptionist for the condition of her pod and the lack of ready refreshments, told them flatly to wait until he returned, and stalked off into the bowels of the office like a troll in search of bones upon which he might sharpen his teeth.

Since that time, they had waited. A few ticks more than twenty minutes in Dorian's estimation. All he could do was estimate because first of all his array had been destroyed at the zap depot on Glastenhome along with the body he had come to know and love, and secondly because there were no clocks in the pod. He didn't know if this absence was due to the ongoing renovation, was simply an oversight on the part of an arrayed population with no need of public timepieces, or some sort of authoritarian statement: your time is our time. It didn't matter one way or the other. Dorian didn't mind waiting. In fact, he preferred the waiting to the uncertainty of what was to come after the waiting was finished. He was feeling shaky this morning and a little nauseous. Amara explained to him that it was likely more of the zap fatigue making its presence felt, but he didn't think so. His stomach was sour with the dread of a future he wished would not unfold.

"Something must have happened."

Amara spoke to him in confidential tones. They stood near the collection of date palms, far enough away from the receptionist that she would not casually overhear them (or sneeze her germs all over them), but where they could still observe Garrison's arrival when he returned.

"Ford does not seem quite himself this morning," she confided. "He's very agitated."

"Maybe he got a Dear John datburst from his wife saying she was leaving him because she couldn't stand living with such a jerk anymore."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. He really is an jerk." Dorian grinned at her, but his heart wasn't in it. He couldn't even take pleasure in antagonizing Garrison this morning. "No, I hear you. I thought the same thing. He didn't need an escort of thugs yesterday."

Amara closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath. "I don't feel anything wrong. The station seems to be humming along normally, going about its routine business. The orbiting ships are frenetically active though, as if they've sensed something amiss."

Her lips creased in a frown, but she didn't offer any

details. Dorian reached out and took her hand. He could still smell the scent of her on his skin, warm and musky. "What about Raville?"

"He's a void. I've been trying to catch a trace of him since we arrived, but there isn't any sort of distinctive signature to him. He's a whisper, a presence, a mysterious lurking, but the shape of him has no meaningful content, almost like he's nothing at all—an empty well." She shrugged her shoulders and grimaced apologetically. "I guess turn about is fair play. Whatever it is that has Garrison so tense, it's not Ray and the others, at least. They're still safe for the moment, though I'm not clear on what difficulties they may have encountered during the night. There was some excitement, but I don't dare dwell on them for long, in case Raville has learned how to follow."

Dorian wondered once more where the Misfit Toys had gone and what they were doing, but he didn't ask. "Maybe that is what has Garrison so aggravated. Not being able to track down a half a dozen notorious saboteurs bent on mischief in my space station would do it for me. Raville with his god-mind may not feel particularly motivated to worry about them, but our buddy Ford strikes me as the type who worries about loose ends whether they seem to be viable threats or not."

"He's something like you, then," Amara said, wink and nudge.

"Don't even joke about that. It isn't funny."

"If I can be like Michael Raville, you can be like Ford Garrison. It has a nice symmetry to it." She giggled. "I prefer your company to his, of course. You're so much cuter."

"And I could kick his ass."

"You have better dimples, too."

"Stop it."

"Sorry. I couldn't help myself."

"You could have. You chose not to. Poor impulse control is not an attractive feature in a divine being. Just ask the Greeks."

Amara rolled her eyes and laughed.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Worried? Tense? Scared?"

"Curious," she answered after some thought. "I want to

hear what Raville has to say for himself.”

“And then what?”

“Then we do what has to be done in order to stop him.”

Garrison returned a short time later, approaching only as far as the doorway into the pod. He stopped and waved impatiently for them to follow. The receptionist apologized for the length of their wait and suggested with passable brightness that Dorian and Amara should have a nice day, and Dorian was convinced for a moment by the glare that Garrison stabbed at her that he might leap across the intervening space and strangle her to death with his bare hands, but he was apparently unwilling to spare the time. By the time they had reached the doorway, he was already stalking back the way he had come.

They chased after him through a warren of open workspaces, airy and uncluttered cubicles delineated by motile imitation adobe walls balanced on a complex network of recessed runners coordinated so that the seemingly fixed partitions could be maneuvered from any one location to another via configuration panels mounted at periodic intervals along the outer wall. The current floor plan was one of narrow passages, sudden right-angle obstructions and claustrophobic cul-de-sacs. Dorian rapidly found himself disoriented by the constant twists, banks and unexpected switchbacks. He began to believe that the walls were actively moving behind them, manipulating them in an ever smaller circuit toward some hidden central location whose exits would be sealed behind them as soon as they had arrived.

A small part of his mind argued that this suspicion was most likely a textbook example of psychological projection, but he buried that voice beneath a pillow and sat on its head every time it made a peep.

On occasion, EOSO administrative drones fluttered out of foam space or paused to look up at them from their desktops as they hurried past. More often than not, it wasn't with the casual interest that one might expect to receive as a stranger intruding into a foreign office, momentary curiosity satisfied and just as quickly forgotten. There was a coiled watchfulness behind these looks, a slit-eyed and nervous recognition. Here, at the core of the station's power structure, Dorian realized

that they could never pass for anonymous visitors on customarily trivial business. They'd made too much of a fuss upon arrival. They were saboteurs whose whole reason for coming—guns blazing and goddess invoking—had been to take control of and possibly even destroy the station upon which each one these people's lives depended. It was a hostility borne of fear and the blind instinct toward self-preservation.

And they probably knew even less about what was really going on than he did.

Dorian squared his shoulders and hovered protectively about Amara. He understood their anxiety. He was absolutely terrified.

They came at last through the maze and up against a gently curved pink sandstone wall. Garrison went a short distance along it until he came to a dark paneled door with a brass nameplate that read "Dr. Kenwood Bryce, Chief of Station Operations". Garrison hitched up in front of the security panel to transmit his access key. A magnetic bolt clicked in response, and he put his hand on the knob.

Before turning it, he glanced over his shoulder at Dorian, a quick head to toe assessment. "Try to be civil. Please. These are important people, used to being paid a certain level of respect based on their contributions to science, society or the human condition as a whole. Antagonizing them will only make this more difficult than it already is."

Dorian shrugged. "I always try to be civil."

Garrison grunted, plainly disbelieving, and pushed ahead. Dorian followed, keeping Amara behind him so that he would meet any peril they encountered on the other side first. He was aware of her against his back, small and precious, and wondered if she felt the same fear that he did.

Stay behind me, he thought at her, but if she heard him, she did not answer.

They entered a spacious chamber of pale mud and wattle walls smartshaded a muted and tasteful aquamarine hue. The floor was marble tile interspersed with cleverly patterned rugs and glossy frescoes in whorled patterns of gold and tan and earthen brown. A simple desk of whitewashed faux adobe, shaped like an arch with a flattened top, sat to one side

beneath porthole windows punched into curve of the thick outer walls. Monochrome images of bleak desert landscapes competed for aesthetic attention with dried bundles of reedy vegetation, copper braziers emitting a fine, aromatic mist and impossibly baroque furniture, beautifully crafted from lush, chocolate wood.

In the center of the room sat a large circular table surrounded by divan-style chairs covered in silk, damask and gold thread. Some of the seats were already occupied. Two men wearing the ostentatious battle dress uniforms of the Strat Space Command Naval Forces fixed on them with glares hostile enough to melt flexsteel. A balding, pink-skinned man in an expensive grey suit sat with his back to them, while beside him, a younger man with a trendy sport coat, rakish haircut and aggressive smile, twisted almost completely around in his chair, straining for a good look. A few seats down sat a middle-aged woman with stern, hawkish features who didn't look up at all, but maintained a deep, almost Zen focus on the open file of papers in front of her. She wore an oversized lab coat smudged at the cuffs and elbows.

Dorian noted each new face, each implied agenda, then dismissed them all from his mind.

Because seated facing toward them across the table was Michael Raville. He was unmistakable, nearly an exact copy of the package in the Archive. A little more grey at the temples, a few more lines about his eyes, but essentially the same. Dorian experienced an unexpected and unusually intense sensation of *déjà vu*, but he couldn't tell if it derived from having known so well this man's digital approximation or from the more immediate fabric of his dreamscape.

In either case, it was difficult for him not to snarl.

Raville rose hurriedly as they approached, his eyes bright. "It really is you, isn't it? After all these years, you've really come. You—you *are*." He smiled crookedly, self-consciously, as he recalled that there were others in the room looking on. He ducked his head. "My apologies if I seem to be gushing. I don't know of any other way to adequately express my joy, my relief, my almost religious awe at finally meeting you face to face, Ms. Cain."

Amara lifted her chin, uncertain how to gauge his

greeting. Her answer was formal, her tone guarded: "I'm honored by your hospitality."

For a treacherous instant, Dorian almost bought Raville's precocious sincerity. Then he remembered his apartment, his cat, all the lies and death.

"Pfft," he said.

Raville glanced at him. One of his eyebrows arched, but the smile did not waver. "I shouldn't neglect to greet you also, Mr. Dorian. It isn't my intention to be rude."

"I've already survived your rude greeting, thanks. This one's pretty tame in comparison."

Raville continued to smile, but it became decidedly strained. "Nevertheless, your arrival has also been anxiously anticipated. I say *anxiously* as you are, I assume, the man who jacked my datacore, jacked this station's secure network—jacked, well, pretty much everything we thought was safe from intrusion. Your reputation precedes you, as they say."

"Yeah, and I'm honored by your hospitality or whatever, too. Especially the considerate way you blew up my apartment. And the equally considerate way you tried to kill us yesterday. A real honor."

Raville did not rise to the challenge. Instead, he waved to the open seats in front of them. "Please, won't you both join us?"

Dorian didn't particularly feel like it, but he cast a wary look over his shoulder at Amara and she nodded. Shrugging, he pushed himself into motion and cautiously approached the edge of the table. Ford Garrison followed close behind, nearly treading on Amara's heels. Dorian took a chair one space removed from the balding gentleman he had noted upon arrival and directly across from the two military officers, a ridiculously bemedalled Flight Commander and a Grand Sector Chief, he could see now from the insignia on their lapels. The one on the left, the GSC, Dorian suspected was probably none other than the DeMartel who had dispatched Lieutenant Sainz after them. Amara slipped into the seat on his left and Garrison sat down next to her, propping his elbows on the table, knuckles pressed against his chin, looking cross and dissatisfied with the proceedings, as though even Dorian's act of seating himself had foiled some minutely

orchestrated plan.

After they had all settled in, Raville also resumed his seat. He lay his hands on the table, fingers laced together casually, and cleared his throat. As if it was any other board meeting he had ever attended, Dorian thought. Business to be handled, future plans to be discussed. It was bizarre.

"We should begin with introductions. Most of us here are known to one another, but I'm terrible at keeping names and titles straight. I'd just make a hash of it and manage to offend everyone. Perhaps you would be willing to shoulder the duty on my behalf, Dr. Bryce? Just the glosses, if you please. If we insist on providing the detailed *vitae* of each member of our esteemed assembly, we'll be here well into the afternoon."

The older man seated to Ray's right, shifted as though he might stand, then changed his mind and settled for sitting up straight. He was a large man, solid and soft at the same time, like an athlete who has recently decided to let himself go. His shoulders were broad and powerful, and his features both alert and intelligent. He bent his head politely in their direction, and began in a friendly, conversational tone: "As you have no doubt guessed, my name is Kenwood Bryce. I am the head bean-counter, bottle-washer, feud-mediator and administrative back-slapper for the Earth Outreach Sciences Organization Facility Ketus O-12, commonly referred to as the Giari Tau Outpost, or even more commonly as GTO. What that means as far as you're concerned is that in a very broad sense, this is my house, and just like our resident scientists, academics, grad students and assorted support staff, you are temporarily my guests. As long as you act like proper guests, I will endeavor to play the role of gracious host, and we won't have any problems. If you choose to deviate from behaviors consistent with those of polite and civil guests, I will cease to be gracious and toss you out on your asses. That applies to everyone in this room. GTO is above all, a scientific research station with a narrowly defined and ongoing academic mission that has not to this point been inconvenienced by these proceedings. Protecting the integrity of our research mission is my job, and I won't hesitate to act in the best interests of this facility. You should all endeavor to keep that fact in mind."

Bryce paused and ran his gaze around the table, an opportunity for responses, concerns, objections. None were offered, so he went on.

"The young man beside me is Dr. Fen Corrie—that's a doctorate in Advanced Human Interaction and Administrative Affairs, one of the few sheepskins you'll find hanging on the wall around here that doesn't have an arcane or extremely specialized scientific application. In my opinion, this gives him a rare and precious perspective on this facility's day-to-day functioning. As Manager of Logistical Services, he's our human resources wonk, morale officer, payroll clerk and security director, the exact color and style of his hat varying by day and circumstance. Any situation having anything to do with people management is his field of expertise, and you've hereby been given fair warning that he will talk your ears right off the side of your head given the opportunity." This might have been a cutting remark in any other context, but it was spoken with such obvious affection that it was impossible to draw offense from it. Taking his cue, Dr. Corrie favored them all with an enthusiastic smile and wave of greeting. Bryce continued, "He also happens to be my second in command."

"Next to Mr. Raville is our Head of Research Studies, Dr. Minerva Skiles. As well as leading the cutting edge analytical work on the singularity farm phenomenon which is our primary investigative focus, she serves as the liaison between the scientific staff and the supporting administrative modules."

The woman in the oversized lab coat lifted her head from the file splayed out on the table in front of her, looking temporarily dazed as though only belatedly having realized Bryce had spoken her name. She blinked owlishly at them, first confused, then embarrassed at her lapse of attention, then defiantly dismissive when any of them failed to present any unique observable phenomenon of their own.

"Minnie," she announced, and returned unceremoniously to her printouts.

Bryce winked at Dorian and Amara. "She prefers Minnie."

"Minerva was a tart and a parlor schemer and a vociferous twit," Dr. Skiles muttered. "Used her brains only as a reactive

force, and only for vengeance upon petty slights to her perceived divine dignity. If she had bothered even once to apply herself to something productive, Rome would never have fallen. She was a bad role model for women. Generate a self-destructive gender role paradigm, one should not be surprised when the meme comes home to roost. Three thousand years we've been rooting out that woman's mischief, and we've come hardly a full step nearer to leveling the playing field."

"Minnie is also our resident gender equality advocate," Bryce confided in a low voice. "You would be surprised at how divisive an issue this becomes in insular communities like ours where mod capabilities are not readily available."

"Thank you for proving my point so eloquently," Dr. Skiles remarked acidly.

Bryce hurried on. "You've met Ford Garrison, of course, Mr. Raville's personal security chief. The remaining two gentlemen across from you are the most recent additions to our far flung community: Flight Commander Kesh Temple and Grand Sector Chief Morgan DeMartel of the Stratiskaya Daransk Naval Commanderie." Bryce paused uneasily, then added, "You have, I understand, already made the acquaintance of some of their subordinates from the *Indianapolis* and the *Juggernaut*."

Commander Temple sat up stiffly, a glare simmering behind slitted eyelids. He grunted at the mention of his name, but made no other acknowledgement. DeMartel, who was (at least) rendered a decade his junior, did not make an acknowledgement. His olive uniform was neat and pressed, his medals and buttons polished to a brilliant gleam, the consummate Border Marine officer. He was, Dorian thought, the living embodiment of the timeworn phrase *squared away*. Dorian didn't like the way he looked at either of them, but especially at Amara. It wasn't exactly hostile, but it was cold, calculating, the look of a man who was determining not *if* he would kill you, or even *how*, but *when*. Waiting for an opportunity he knew must inevitably come.

In a level voice, Dorian asked, "How many of your Marines died?"

DeMartel's nostrils flared. "Pardon me?"

"You sent a force of Marines to the warehouse to apprehend us and our companions. I want to know how many were killed."

"We recycled four soldiers," DeMartel answered, then added with slight, cruel smile: "Out of thirty."

"You were lucky. It could have been much worse."

"My Marines do not rely on luck for success, sir."

Dorian nodded appreciatively. Maybe it was just nostalgia, but he was having a hard time not liking this grizzled old coot. "Out of curiosity, do you know how many of my friends were recycled, Sector Chief?" DeMartel's facial expression said very eloquently that even if he did know, he did not care. "I'll tell you: None. Zero. Nil. Because my friends are dead. Not recycled, not temporally inconvenienced, not chilling in cold data storage, but dead. Between the entropic decay of our delayed decanting and your soldiers' unprovoked attack, they are irrevocably, immedicably, and unrecoverably dead. Their unique patterns have been deleted from the algorithm of the universal computer, and they cannot be restored. Before we all start getting too chummy, I just want us to be clear on that."

Amara gave Dorian's knee a warning squeeze. "Now is not the time, John. I'm sure that eventually these gentlemen will be given the opportunity to learn that there are risks associated with childish kicking over ant hills."

DeMartel studied Amara carefully, surprised by her remark. "Young lady, you should recall who it was that invaded whom exactly."

"And you should strongly consider which side you've chosen," she answered. "The line between insurgent and patriot is drawn by perspective."

DeMartel's face flushed so red that Dorian was sure his head was about explode. It might have if Michael Raville had not intervened at that moment, clearing his throat to regain everyone's attention. "Thank you, Dr. Bryce, ladies and gentlemen. Let's get down to business, shall we?"

"Please," Garrison muttered.

"Actually, we haven't all been introduced," Fen Corrie pointed out. "We've been instructed about the identities and personal histories of our *guests* but we haven't really properly

met. I'd like to hear what Mr. Dorian and Ms. Cain have to say about themselves and about our situation. From a human interest perspective. . .since there seems to be some misunderstanding."

Ford Garrison made a low growling noise in his throat. "I hardly think that's necessary. You should have been forwarded a copy of the pertinent files. If you chose not to review the material, that's your problem."

"I looked over their files with great interest, Mr. Garrison," Corrie countered. "I examined them closely enough, in fact, to have it become painfully clear that the data you've given us is rich in analysis and laden with suspect structural assumptions, but short on basic facts. Why do they think that they're here? What explanations do they have to offer for yesterday's excitement, and what did they hope to accomplish in coming all this way? It's important that we try to understand one another's perspectives if we're supposed to start working together, as I assume we are from the fact that we're even having this meeting. With all due respect, I've heard your take on this narrative. Now I want to hear theirs."

Garrison stabbed his finger at Corrie's chest. "This is not one of your touchy-feely group therapy sessions, doctor. No one is interested in actualizing their inner bullshit for optimum mental health or productive group dynamics. We have a job to do, and it's going to be done whether you manage to comprehend everyone's motivations or not. I'll remind you that you're here solely because of your responsibility to the welfare of this facility, and even then only because your boss insisted on it."

Bryce glowered back at him. "And I will remind you, Mr. Garrison, that you're here only because I didn't flush your zap signal when it hit my servers, and solely on account of *your* boss, so let's not get into a pissing match about whose coattails are longer. This may be your operation, and Mr. Raville may be the ranking EOSO officer, but until the organization hands me my walking papers, it remains my outpost, and I'm legally in charge."

Dorian glanced hopefully toward Amara. It wasn't exactly an armed uprising on their behalf, but anything that even vaguely resembled dissent was encouraging. Amara put a

finger to her lips and gave him a meaningful wink.

Raville sighed and flapped his hands at them, urging them all to settle down. "Gentlemen, please. We all recognize that this arrangement has led to some uneasy alliances. CSO Bryce and his staff have been extraordinarily gracious in allowing us the use of their facility and its airspace. However, it's to be expected that we won't always see one another's interests with the appropriate clarity, so we get our backs up unnecessarily. I must remind you that the hour is pressing. We don't have time to air out our personal grievances, let alone hope to resolve them in this venue."

Minnie raised her head, frowning. "Fen's request remains a reasonable one. I want to hear what they have to say for themselves, too. I want to hear what everyone has to say for themselves, in fact. Apocalypse and aliens?" She snorted derisively and swept the stack of printouts she had been reading off onto the floor. "Please. This 'research' you've given us is crap. There's nothing here that proves anything. Unwarranted suppositions, poorly documented evidentiary logic, blatant attempts at character assassination and pseudo-scientific clap-trap masquerading as valid data. If I tried to foist argumentation this shoddily unsupported off on my colleagues, they'd have me kicked back to a second tier community college in a backwater colonial world teaching fundamental polynomial manipulation inside a month, and would consider that leniency. You're a scientist, Michael. You should know better. That you should have, but did not make the effort leads me to conclude, that either you've abandoned everything you ever learned about research or you've not been entirely forthcoming with us. And while that sort of cloak-and-dagger need-to-know nonsense might be good enough to convince obtuse military goons to get their war hormones in a tizzy—no offense intended to present company--someone is going to have to do a better job of convincing me why I should give a rat's behind about any of this business, or I'm going back to my lab where I can spend my time on work that actually matters rather than this puffed up kangaroo court."

Fen Corrie giggled happily. "'Kangaroo court'! I like that. It's very clever."

Dorian held back a mild chuckle. "Good money just

doesn't buy the help that it used to."

"This is not a kangaroo court," Raville insisted darkly. He scowled at Dorian. "It isn't a court of any kind."

"Then let them speak," Bryce agreed. "What can it hurt?"

Raville's frown suggested that it could do a great deal of damage, but he shook his head and said, "Fine. They can speak if they wish." He looked pleadingly at Amara. "But briefly, if you please."

Dorian opened his mouth to answer for them. He had plenty (PLENTY) to say. Because Corrie and Skiles weren't really asking what they thought about the Exousiai et al. Their perspective was much more narrow than such cosmic themes. Bottom line, they wanted to know why he and Amara and the Misfit Toys had come all this way willing and eager to kill anyone who tried to stop them. Dorian wanted to be sure they grokked that the sole reason, from digital start to fleshy finish, was sitting there looking smug at the head of the table. It was all Raville. Amara, however, tugged his wrist into her lap and held it firmly before he could start. He shrugged and remained silent.

"I'm afraid we're at a disadvantage. We haven't seen the dossiers Raville has prepared on us, so we aren't aware of what it is you might think that you know about us or how to answer those charges. I can tell you that my name is Amara Cain, and my friend is John Dorian. We were, until recently, employees of the Masonic Archive and Infocache in Sonali on Trithemius Orbis. Prior to six weeks ago, at least in our relative time, neither of us had even heard of Giari Tau or the Exousiai. In fact, we didn't even know one another particularly well. That all changed when one evening when in the course of our regular duties—or, I should say, in the course of John's regular duties—we encountered a rogue upload package purporting to be one of the original Oak Ridge zap templates which displayed indications of having spontaneously developed features consistent with self-awareness. This package declared itself to be none other than the duplicate digital identity of a young Michael Raville."

Kesh Temple rumbled. "Are you admitting that you violated the privacy of a legally protected package file?"

"I admit that I was protecting the integrity of my data

network from a particularly virulent form of data spider," Dorian said. "The donor's right to privacy ends where my security safeguards begin."

"Don't be an ass, Temple," Bryce grouched at the Strat officer. "When you stop monitoring the outgoing signals from your ship's datburst transmissions in the name of protecting classified military information, then you can throw stones. Whether or not the actions were strictly legal is beside the point here. I imagine that we're all somewhere out beyond the borders of what is strictly legal right now." To Amara, he said, "Please continue."

Amara nodded gratefully. "This entity, whom we satisfied ourselves was what or who it claimed to be, informed us that Michael Raville, its actual self, was in the process of venturing here, to Giari Tau, where he planned for unknown reasons to wage a unilateral and ultimately secretive military campaign against a numinous alien race. These aliens, these *helpers*, he believed, meant to contact the human race with a message of peace. Further, that they had contacted us before, shepherding our technological and social development through small revelations—up to and including zap itself—so that when they did finally choose to reveal themselves and walk freely among us, we might be ready to receive them. But more importantly, they wanted us to be ready to accept their ultimate gift to humankind: a radical evolutionary transformation to a higher level of consciousness and a place in the greater community of sentient life. The packaged entity did not know why Michael Raville would choose to start a war against those who only sought to aid us, only that the war was doomed to failure, and that if anyone attempted to strike a blow against the Exousiai, they would not hesitate to destroy us all in their own defense."

Curious glances shifted to Raville, but he said nothing. He remained perfectly still, his arms crossed over his chest in mute denial. Amara went on, "But our infiltration of the entity's datascape was discovered, and agents were dispatched to stop us at any cost. Thanks to the machinations of Mr. Raville, in the last several months, we have become homeless, unemployed, frequently targeted for murder, wanted by a host of government agencies from one edge of

human space to the other, and quite possibly indelibly linked with an infamous band of anarchist saboteurs, all because of the possibility that we might prevent him from carrying out his genocidal conflict with those who only wish to assist us in freeing ourselves from the chains that have bound our species for so long. You object that we showed up here with weapons and warriors, suggesting that it somehow reflects on our motives. Well, as far as we're concerned, we are only responding in kind to the reception we've been taught to expect. Greet us with hostility, and we'd be foolish not to return it, if only in our own defense."

She flashed a grave look at Michael Raville. "Perhaps that's a lesson you should take to heart before attempting to set out your welcome mat to the Exousiai. We did come to stop you. One would hope that good people would always stand up to prevent tyrants from waging wars that cannot be won and which will only result in our ultimate destruction."

Dorian wanted to leap up and cheer, but he was apparently the only one. Amara's extended speech met with a stern silence. Kenwood Bryce chewed the inside of his cheek. Minnie Skiles leaned back in her chair, furiously curling strands of her mousy brown hair about her fingers. Commander Temple and Sector Chief DeMartel's lips twitched in an avid subvocal p2p exchange, but they made no external reply. The only sound was Garrison's aggrieved sigh, uttered as though Amara had physically wounded him.

In slow and deliberate fashion, Michael Raville began to applaud. "Bravo, my dear! A very effective spin on the facts at your disposal. In another context, and were we different people than we are, I would be sorely tempted to offer you a position in one of my public relations firms based on this performance alone. After all, the most effective public relations professionals are not those who tell the best lies, but those who come to believe the lies that they tell. And there's nothing more convincing to people who don't know any better than true sincerity delivered from the lips of a lovely spokeswoman. Of course, you can't be given full credit because the lies you're peddling aren't truly your own, are they? You're doing nothing more than parroting what you've been told by the malformed and bastard child of my own

mind. Thus, the narrative is actually mine, which means, I suppose, that I get the wear the fool's cap for wasting all of our valuable time on this business just so I could sit here and argue with myself. Ha!"

His eyes flashed perilously, and he threw his head back and laughed heartily. When he turned his attention back to them, however, his tone grew hard. "But they are lies, dear Amara, the things you have said. Though we might generously call them half-truths, which is very nearly the same thing. Comforting fictions about a nefarious corporate overlord intent on universal domination who must be stopped by a rag-tag but ultimately heroic band of underdogs before he can instigate the end of all that is good and pure. It's a story that sells newspapers, as they said once upon a time, but even when they were saying it, it wasn't true most of the time. Life is rarely as uncomplicated as news stories make it out to be." Raville lowered his hands to his lap, and his expression was grim, almost sad. "I would that it were true, Amara. I wish it was that simple, that I was merely evil like a character in a spy novel, just a bad man with a taste for ill-gotten power who must be defeated before he can wreak great harm upon the world. But it isn't that way, is it? There's more to the story that even you and Dorian know."

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "There is more to the story."

"And you believe that the missing narrative elements amount to nothing more than a fascinating subplot of identity. The pauper is discovered to be a prince in disguise; the precocious woodland maiden the lost daughter of a grieving king; the wandering youth who feels himself so desperately out of phase with the world discovers that he is of divine lineage, the child of a god. Do you think that knowledge would skew the willingness of your audience to receive your version of the story?"

Amara shrugged. "What this audience ultimately chooses to believe does not concern me. They asked what we believed, and I told them."

"That's not any sort of way to run an effective *coup d'etat*! Revolution begins with winning the ideological battle. You must convince the common folk to believe as you would have

them to if you intend to enlist their support."

"I'm not asking for their help," she rasped, sensing that he was mocking her. "I don't need it to stop you."

"Oh, because you've been told that you are a goddess, yes? That you are one of *them*, the Great Helpers, the Mighty Exousiai? You have been burdened with a solemn duty to your progenitor race and a divine destiny to pave the way for their benevolent offering of brotherhood to a backward species!" Raville flicked his hand dismissively. His taunting was both biting and cruel, his tone vicious. "No? You don't believe in fairy tales anymore? Well, then perhaps you imagine that you don't need them because you've realized you can play cute parlor tricks with dead matter, the fabric of space and time, and the raw substance of creation. We've all seen the surveillance images of your demonstration in the warehouse, my dear. It is a demonstrative magic, I'll admit, so much fire and brimstone, din and clangor. Such things never fail to impress the native monkeys who inhabit this branch of the infinite multiverse. And believe me, we were all suitably impressed with your abilities."

Raville cupped his hand over his breast, a familiar, sickening gesture, and the universe shifted, as though reality tilted toward a bottomless abyss. The slit of ichorous darkness opened in his chest, raw-rimmed and jagged at its edges like an unhealed wound, and he withdrew from it the shimmering, opalescent orb of the *quae-ha-distra*. "But you see, you're not the only one who is more than she appears to be, the only one who has been nursing secrets hidden away from prying eyes. What do you think? Shall we compare the sizes and see whose ball is bigger?"

Amara looked away disdainfully. "Your copy revealed it with more flair."

"I was much more prone to dramatics when I was younger. That's the problem with packaging consciousness. One of the problems, I should say, besides stealing a man's thunder. It captures your flaws along with everything else, and the flaws have an annoying habit of persisting."

Dorian hardly heard them. His attention was focused on the reactions of the others seated around the table to the sudden appearance of the *quae-ha-distra*. They stared at the

orb, each and every one of them from Bryce to Garrison, open-mouthed and longing, overcome with a quiet reverence that bordered on religious awe. Even Temple and DeMartel gazed at it, reveling in the liquid spirals of color and warmth that painted the walls with glorious shafts of beatific light, their feverish conversation temporarily forgotten.

They were moths drawn to a candle's flame, transfixed by the potential for glory beyond their comprehension. Monkeys discovering themselves inexplicably in the presence of the World's Largest Banana.

But what they were not was shocked, alarmed, dismayed—all the reactions that had coursed through him when he had first encountered the presence of the orb in Raville's memory palace back in Sonali, safe within the architecture of the Archive and buffered by an awareness of virtual unreality.

In realtime, there were no expressions of surprise, no wondrous gasps.

Because they already knew, he realized. They already knew what Raville *was*, and consequently what Amara was as well.

They knew, and still they intended to attack the Exousiai.

Raville released his grip on the orb and in violation of everything Dorian had ever learned about physical mechanics, it remained there, floating on a cushion of air exactly as he left it. He grudgingly admitted to himself that this was a pretty nifty trick as such things went, as impressive in its casual implication of control as Amara's towering vortex of flame. It said that he was perfectly comfortable manipulating the forces of the universe for his own personal amusement.

It began to occur to Dorian, not for the first time, that he was in so far over his head all he could see around him was black water. Amara's expression was one of quiet dismay, her lips a tight line and her eyes lidded. Thinking god thoughts, he imagined, exploring the hidden supra-natural datascape of existence with sensory arrays he could not even guess at. He noticed that she, too, was drawn toward the orb, her eyes flicking back and forth between it and Raville's inscrutable smile as though both of them presented mysteries only she

could read.

"You have been deceived." Raville spoke earnestly now, his cruelty spent, or perhaps it had been a sham in the first place, designed to shock Amara with his irreverence. This declaration was flat, matter-of-fact, as though the conclusion should be obvious. "Not maliciously, I would hasten to add, and not, I believe, unfortunately. There are stages of belief that must be endured for any sort of faith to be meaningful. Progressive revelations accrete with time and experience, leaving their distinctive stamp on your pattern of belief—on the details of what you believe, in fact—until one day you look back and wonder at how far you've come in accepting certain truths. Naked truth is a hard thing, stripped of its familiar garb and comforting handles. Truth is a rock waiting to fall on us if we're not careful with it, to crush our flesh and grind our bones. It is perilous, sharp edged and biting. Confronted with such a thing, our natural reaction is to reject it out of hand, hedge it off from ourselves so that we will not be harmed by it. So we weave about it webs of deception, of softened interpretation and intentionally occluded meaning, allowing ourselves to accept a watered down form and then over time slowly unwrapping its gossamer layers through steady contemplation. Until slowly we come to realize the underlying size and shape of the thing is much different than what we first supposed it to be. We call that shocked apprehension of truth wisdom. The lies that led us to it served a purpose, but we should never allow ourselves to forget that they were lies, even though the falsehoods were ultimately useful. Ultimately essential."

"I take it that you have particular lies in mind," Amara said. "Things that your packaged self told us that are in error according to what you have subsequently chosen to believe."

Raville chuckled. "I'm afraid I'm not going to allow you to argue a post-modernist deconstruction of perceived reality, my dear. That's a cop out. There is truth, and there is deception. There is nothing in between. In most cases, the deceptions we live with don't matter. Consensus reality clusters together in patterns that are like enough to be meaningful and facilitate useful communication. However, where the Exousiai are concerned, the gulf between truth and

not-truth is both vast and critical.

"But I don't hold you responsible for having been deceived, my dear. I was, after all, the one who deceived you, at least by proxy. But I did it honestly. My packaged self believes everything he said to you, just as I once did, and the core of those beliefs remain as good an entry point into the mystery of the Exousiai as any, especially if one tends by nature to be naïve and idealistic, which are polite terms for lies that we tell ourselves about how the universe should work. I was both when I was channeling the template for the creation of zap, and subsequently when I created the Oak Ridge package of myself that you encountered in the Archive. Idealism was the first necessary stage of belief. I accepted that I had been handed a divine vision and a mission to implement the will of benevolent gods in the human sphere. I took that charge seriously, and the seeds of that idea took root deep in the soil of my consciousness, informing everything I thought I understood about the nature of human existence and the intended direction for my individual life.

"Do not discount the impulse of obedience to an immanent god, Amara. We're all mystics at heart, you know. Humans yearn for a touch from the ineffable, the mysterious, the fountainhead of our existence. We ache to belong to something larger and more powerful than ourselves, something that fills the void of doubt and gives us direction. We yearn for God, though we do not understand what a god is, what makes one, or how dangerous a thing divinity can be. We pretend to understand through the forms of religion, remaking God in our own image, making It familiar, comfortable, meaningful. But the truth has always been that God is alien to us. Godhood is beyond us, so foreign that we cannot think Its thoughts or understand Its ways except through metaphor.

"But we want, oh how we *want*, to be touched by It. We long to be transformed from something small, narrow and blind into a living and purpose-filled reflection of the All in All. I'm telling you this, because I want you to understand that I know what you believe, and I have felt the fire that burns within you now. I know the feel of it, the rightness of its primal tug and the way it gives meaning to lives that

otherwise have felt empty and without purpose. It is a great comfort to place yourself in the hands of God and enfold your being in Its will. It is a fundamental human need.

“But it is also the cornerstone of the deception of which I speak, because the truth is that the Exousiai *are not God*. They are not even divine. That recognition forms the basis of the second stage of belief, which is simply that the Exousiai are what they are: a transcendent form of existence that has far surpassed the boundaries of human comprehension and made of themselves something so tremendously alien and powerful as we measure such things as to be mistaken for gods. No more and no less. A different order of creation, but certainly not the sacred *Ein Sof* you hold in your heart when you think of the word God. Yet because of what they are and how they choose to manifest, they appeal to our urge to commune with and be subsumed by divinity because they seem to have already become what we believe we want to be.

“And that leads directly to the third stage: doubt. Pressed down, shaken together and running over, as the saying goes--an eruption of decoherence at the very core of fundamentally held assumptions. Let me put it this way: if we stipulate that the Exousiai are the mirror reflection of what we yearn to be, and we accept that they have taken a role in shepherding us toward their level of transcendence, then we must begin to ask *why* they would do such a thing. We can answer that it is altruism, pure and simple. Or that in the exchange of information between their distinctive collective consciousness and our radically unique substance, that both parties are mutually increased, complexified, augmented. This stage builds directly upon the foundation of the former, in that it recognizes that the Exousiai cannot be gods, because it is not definitionally part of the nature of gods to want or to need or to require anything outside of themselves. Thus, they make their appeal of integration to us because we provide them with something essential that they cannot manufacture within themselves. They are finite, even if the boundaries of their potential are so vast as to appear functionally infinite to beings without their assimilation of context.

“And we haven’t even asked ourselves yet why they would come to us in such a way as they have, allowing us to

perceive them as gods. They provide us with tools and technologies that assist us in attaining a vision of our future for which they themselves have provided us the template. The Exousiai perpetuate a deception which they maintain has been fostered for our own good, to ease us into a grand transition. If they are willing to lie to us, then we must doubt their motivations or at least their information as it is transmitted to us, yes? And if we can doubt that, we can appropriately doubt that altruism plays any role in their decision to contact us, which means that their decision must be based on desire, on need.

“Accepting then that they have needs, it follows that what they need, they have determined to grow through careful manipulation. Tilling the soil, planting seeds, allowing the roots to take hold and burrow deep, so that when the plant is ripe, they can make a harvest of the sustenance they require. And the harvest is a taking of the fruits of their labor, the best that the plant has to offer, and once the fruit is gone and has been devoured, the plant is allowed to wither and die and become fodder that can be plowed under to rot and serve as the nutrient from which the next harvest will spring. The fruit itself is absorbed, becoming part of the body, yes, feeding it and helping it grow. It remains forever in the cells and flesh and bone of the being which consumed it. But it is never again fruit. It is rendered down to its fundamental components, disassembled and utilized according to the rules of the body, not those of its own unique genetic dictates. Its qualities of fruit-ness are forever lost.

“That is the future that is being offered to us. Not a human transcendence, but a digestion into their immense totality in which we will be destroyed and remade again into their own image after they have harvested from us all that they deem worthy and useful. The result can only be viewed as our essential extinction as a unique and individuated species.”

Raville paused. He had been speaking for several minutes uninterrupted, and now he cast about the table for some sign of encouragement, an indication that he had been understood. At last, he said, “What I’m trying to explain to you is that it has never been my intention to start a war with the Exousiai.

The war has already begun. It has been waged for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, through carefully designed information systems implemented with the purpose of making humanity as a species malleable to the demands of the Exousiai. My task is only to end it, and by ending it, to preserve our future independence."

Minnie Skiles was the first to raise an objection. "Michael, you old windbag, what are you doing? Trying to numb us from thinking with a bombardment of pretty words? It's just more of the same. More hypothesizing, more reasoning from assumptions. It isn't proof. How can we know exactly what it is that the Exousiai intend for us without evidence of their own actions in the past? You're asking us to risk the future course of our entire civilization on the basis of nothing more than your own personal prejudices."

"Minnie, my dear," Raville responded, "you have heard the testimony of the Exousiai from their very lips. Do you really have to see it for yourself? I have told you unflinchingly what we are. We are locusts."

"And I'm saying that's a specious argument. Even you have admitted that you only see through the glass darkly." She dropped her eyes from the orb's pulsating glow. "You've told us that you have been human for a very long time, and have only in recent years become aware of your . . . heritage. But the fact remains that you've been human much longer in your memory than you have been Exousian. As a human, prejudices seep in. You filter the world through your own experiences, not from some theoretical objective space that can ascertain and correctly weight all the relevant bits of evidence. What is to say that you are not the one who is mistaken, the one who is not fully awakened, rather than Amara? Obviously she believes just as strongly as you do—she gave up all she had and risked her life to stop what we are about to do!--and yet you've both come from the Exousiai, you say, you both have access to equally limitless stores of knowledge. But you can't even agree on this one essential point. What are we mere mortals supposed to think?"

Raville grunted in annoyance. "She believes, but I know. That is the difference."

"Unless it is you that has allowed yourself to be deceived,"

she answered sternly. "How can you know that you are the one who is right?"

He gestured at the orb, indicating that the solution should be self-evident, or at least would be to anyone with the ability to see it. "Because I *know*. There is more than one kind of knowledge, and not all of them can be obtained by poking a thing with mathematical formulae or shoving it under a microscope. Stop looking for scientific rigor, Minnie. You won't find it here. In the conflict of ideologies, some things are just known."

Amara lifted her chin. She was frowning, deeply and violently troubled, and she spoke in a voice thick with doubt, reedy with fear at the edges. "You feel what you feel from within the *quae-ha-distra*, just as I do. You listen to its voice, and it speaks to you in a way that resonates. I know this feeling, too. I trust it, but you're telling me that I shouldn't, that it's deceiving me. How can you know that what your orb speaks to you is not false?"

What was it that she saw in the ebb and flow of Raville's orb, Dorian wondered. What did she perceive that had so shaken her? He remembered suddenly the things Raville had said to him, the dream of Raville's datacore, and the evidence of long and weary struggles with knowledge. *Nothing I have told you is completely true. Some of it may be true in part, but even those portions are incomplete*, he had said. *You must choose what you will believe and what you will know.*

What was he missing?

Amara assumed that Raville was talking about faith. Faith in the things he had learned from contemplating the secrets revealed to him by his connection to the Exousiai through the orb. But it was not faith speaking at all, it was pure doubt extracted from too many nights spent in quiet interrogation of belief. It was the voice of a man who had shattered his own hopes in the search for wisdom and then pieced them back together again one shard at a time so that even though the shape of hope had taken on a new form, the impossibly intricate architecture that supported it was understood.

Raville had doubted, and he had found assurance in his doubt, enough to cast off everything he had ever believed about the Exousiai, because he thought that he had answered

the one question that explained the mystery. The same question that no one had bothered to ask yet, because they assumed that they already knew the answer.

"Who sent the pearl?" Dorian asked sharply. It came out more harshly than he intended, almost like an accusation, but it was too late to take it back. "Who was it that told Amara to come here in the first place? Who sent her to serve as 'the ring of the dinner bell, calling the Exousiai to come and eat?'"

More words from Dorian's dream, and Michael Raville recognized them as his own. His eyes widened in surprise, and his mouth fell open. Then understanding dawned on him, and he shook his head. He touched his fingers to his chest, then opened his palm to Dorian, a gesture of respect or possibly even gratitude.

"I seem to have underestimated you once again, Mr. Dorian. I really didn't think you'd make any progress interpreting my personal datacore."

"People who think highly of their own intellect tend to do that."

"My packaged self must have explained to you a great deal more than I anticipated."

"He only gave me the tools to understand you. The contents of a man's foam are always useful for understanding what's on his mind. You shoved all kinds of odd material in there, imagining that your deepest thoughts were unfathomable to mere mortals. But at the end of the day, once those observations were encoded in a digital medium it was all just information, just ones and zeroes writ large. What I was missing was the context that would make that information meaningful. Context is hard to parse from raw encoding; it's hard to tell the signal from the noise. Truth, lies and idle speculation all look the same in binary."

"And now I've provided you with the necessary context, have I?"

Dorian shrugged his shoulders. "Not really. I'm just asking the same question that seems to have caused the split between your view of the Exousiai and what your package believes."

"Who sent the pearl?"

"Exactly."

Raville gave Dorian a private, knowing smile. "I suppose you could say that I did."

For some reason, Dorian hadn't expected anything more—why shouldn't Michael Raville be responsible for this too? He'd been responsible for everything else—but Amara went pale, and her hands, clasped around his, began to tremble. In the back of his mind, Dorian heard her cry out: *You? You sent me?*

It sounded like he wail of a lost child.

"I think you'd better explain what you mean," Dorian gripped Amara's hand tightly, trying to reassure her.

"It's a bigger question than you can possibly guess."

"Then take your time. Interstellar war isn't one of those things that should be entered into hastily anyway."

Kenwood Bryce barked a laugh. "By all means, then, let's take our time."

"I should start by giving you some insight into the Exousian mind, because like most of us, what they want proceeds almost directly from what they are, or in this case, what they have constructed themselves to be."

Raville paused and glanced at Amara, as though he was about to say something that worried him, but she did not notice. Lines of concentration creased her brow, and she stared fixedly at the reflective surface of his orb, wandering far with her own thoughts.

"Metaphors fail," he said. "To discuss the Exousiai is to attempt to fathom something completely alien to our concept of being. They are not like us by most standards of measurement. They are not society; they are entity. They are disembodied patterns of information enclosed in a vast coherent lattice of energetic particles and fluctuating waveforms which have grown over time to fill the length and breadth of their universe. One could say that they *are* the universe they inhabit. Their singular being constitutes the All in All. As such, they have largely surrendered the notion of the individual except as a historical artifact or an abstract concept. Consequently, there is only oneness, with permeable partitions between representations of pseudo-consciousness. You may think of these modes as analytical predispositions to information apprehension left over from the entity's previous

incarnations.”

“Worldviews,” Fen Corrie volunteered.

“Only very loosely,” Raville allowed. “More like instinctual habits of thought rooted in a framework of now disconnected biological imperatives, and biological imperatives which emerged as a result of the fundamental qualities of the Exousian native universe. These deviations are valued as representations of the dynamic forces inherent in the nature of being and part of the necessary tension between natural laws that underlie the balance of their cosmos. One of these partitions is a limited self-autonomous pattern of analysis formed around a core of existential dread with believes that entropy is the inevitable end of the entity’s collective experience, the cost, if you will, of an ideal of omniscience which the blueprint of the entity’s original design is not sufficient to maintain. This dread is a manifestation of doubt in the heart of the Exousian soul.

“When I had determined these facts about the nature of the Exousiai from communion with my *quae-ha-distra*, and after I had begun to disturb myself about the purpose of my apparent mission here, this question about the origin of the pearl was the one that troubled me the most. My package assumes that the pearl and I were both sent by the Exousian overmind—one to prepare the way and the other to complete the Great Work of guiding humanity toward transcendence. But that simply could not be, because if I was truly a portion of the Exousian mind, why would I experience doubt in the first place?” Raville chuckled quietly to himself. “The answers I found turned out to be not so simple.

“You see, both Amara and I were formed not from the broad consciousness of the Exousiai, but predominantly from the substance of a particular distinctive pattern which my human experience teaches me to think of as *father*, though that isn’t really accurate. We aren’t its children, or even siblings as you envision the concept, but duplicate sprigs of its oneness grafted upon earthen vessels, limited in form and function and cut off from the oneness that we might take root and grow in the hard soil of profane existence. In order to become a simulacrum of humans, to take on your form and function in your environment, we had to endure an almost unimaginable

diminishing from which we are only now beginning to awaken.”

This statement met with a low murmur, and Dorian laughed. “Hey, thanks. We think pretty highly of you folks, too.” He smiled to demonstrate that he took no offense. He’d suffered gods for so long, it was difficult to be offended by them. “Seriously, for a race for whom descriptive metaphors fail, you’re using an awful lot of fuzzy language.”

Raville ducked his head in apology. “Forgive me. Try explaining to a non-human what it means to be a man sometime, Mr. Dorian—how you fit into a social model, how you must constrain your urges for the good of the collective, why you do anything you choose to do. We are Exousiai. Limitless, undifferentiated, all-conscious beings. Entity is how we understand ourselves, as parts of a collective existence in which we all share equally and without end. We are whole only when we are one, all of us together, each of us able to access everything that is known, thought and felt.”

Amara nodded suddenly, and her eyes filled with light, as though by speaking it, Raville had recalled to her something precious. “Yes, I remember. It’s like the Strand, only a million times more immersive, more *real*. It’s everything that was ever thought, imagined, or rendered readily available at your fingertips. It’s the vastness of an unlimited datascape always humming around you, embracing you, communing with you in your own thoughts.”

She faltered abruptly and dropped her gaze once more. “And then losing it. . .being cut off from it is like emptiness, like a long dreamless sleep that never ends.”

“Or like not having your array,” Dorian said. “Like living in the real world, in realtime. Like most of my life, now that I think about it.”

Amara grimaced.

Raville went on: “Amara and I are best thought of as truncated packages of Exousian omniscience frozen in time and space. Our patterns have been fixed, delimited to prevent our native potential for ongoing evolution as well as to prevent us from remembering our true selves for a time. Only through this process of reduction, have we become what you call ‘alive’, bonded to an animated husk of mean matter. We

became less so that we could be enabled to interact with your race on a level you could comprehend without being overwhelmed.

"Most importantly for this discussion, however, is that we were not the representations of the entity the Exousiai intended to send as their emissaries. We are the products of an unprecedented expression of autonomy."

"Betrayal," DeMartel offered, nodding.

"Amara was sent first," Raville continued quickly, avoiding comment on DeMartel's interruption. "This was an act of great daring by the pattern-father. She was not the carefully prepared vehicle that the Exousiai intended to serve as their bellwether for measuring human compatibility with the entity, but a substitution of content that intermixed the purposes of the entity with the subtle logic of the Father. The purpose of the pearl, if we can continue to use that metaphor, is to live amongst target species, sharing its varied experiences and slow, evolutionary ascent to awareness. To grow with them, as one of them, through a countless succession of lives until it begins to awaken to its true identity. The awakening is an indication to the entity that the species in question has attained the necessary cognitive threshold to accept its role in the Exousian overmind. Since her arrival here, more than a millennia ago, everything Amara has known, learned and experienced about humanity through her diverse catalogue of lives on this plane has been stored in the core of her *quae-ha-distra*. It constitutes a detailed report of your species' developmental progress. Proof, if you will, of your projected value to the collective. Under normal circumstances, once she had awakened, she would be retrieved by a messenger sent from the entity and her essence would be re-assimilated into the entity and the information contained in her *quae-ha-distra* analyzed in depth until it was fully known. Only after she had been devoured would the Exousiai determine how best to proceed."

"I don't like that word," Dorian said. "Devoured sounds too much like 'terminal', like 'dead'."

"Dust to dust," Ford Garrison murmured. He grinned ferally, baring his teeth. "It's what we all have to look forward to. Signals decay, packages fail. Extended life

doesn't mean eternal life. You might as well get used to it."

"You have serious personal issues, you know that?" Dorian forced his attention away from Garrison before he lost his temper. "You said that this was how it happened under normal circumstances. But what we're experiencing isn't normal, is it? The target species isn't supposed to be aware that transcendence isn't all that it's advertised to be."

Raville nodded. "That was the pattern-father's intention in corrupting the essence of the pearl. He planted a seed of doubt in the core of the pearl's self-consciousness."

Amara frowned. "Why?"

"The pattern-father argues that the entity is losing the battle against entropy. It has exhausted the potential of oneness, and the current strategy to combat entropy—the addition of new energy potential, new species, new patterns of information to the collective—is a short-sighted solution that only staves off inevitable entropic stasis while the unique patterns are assimilated. It is a massive energy investment to prepare a target species for compatibility. The entity must craft them to become like us, to see as we see and want as we want, especially with regards to information ubiquity, communal mind streams and ultimately not only the acceptability of disembodied consciousness, but its preference. It is not an easy thing to convince an entire species of being to hate its own flesh! But with each step toward true compatibility, those patterns which make a racial or social unit most vibrant are often lost in their pure form. What remains is a bland hybrid of Exousian philosophy in uneasy synthesis with native mythological, religious and culture perspectives, and as the entity grows, the addition of perspectives unique from those which we already possess becomes more difficult. Of late, the energy investment has begun to show an alarming pattern of diminishing returns. The less that is unknown, the more energy that must be expended to root it out. Recognizing this inefficiency, the pattern-father states that the problem is not with the techniques of information apprehension, but in the assumptions that underpin the entity's aspiration to omniscience itself. We were not made to be gods, not formed to be an entity capable of knowing all things and absorbing the limitless grandeur of being. It is an

unattainable ideal that is slowly, but irrevocably destroying us. The only way for the entity to be vibrant as a species again, to survive the entropy which besets us, is to reduce ourself once more to our base components."

Minnie Skiles gasped. "You're talking about self-directed devolution. The recursive breakdown of an entire scheme of evolutionary development."

"Out of necessity. The Exousiai will only survive by disintegrating the entity, embracing corruption and devolving into that which we once were. . .matter-bound creatures not unlike yourselves. Solitary units of individuated consciousness cut off from the consuming overmind. This is what the pattern-father hopes to accomplish. Sending Amara into this time-space nexus was an act of treason against the entity. An act of genocide."

"If the 'overmind' is a manifestation of oneness, how could your pattern-father hope to act independently without the rest of the entity immediately being aware of his treachery?" Bryce asked.

"It is not perfect oneness," Raville said, shrugging. "It is not perfect entity. That's part of the problem. There are old patterns which retain a measure of distinctness, cores of private reflection and 'personality' that are held in reserve from the communal data pool, based on ancient treaties that pre-date the current social configuration. These patterns are stubbornly allowed to replicate within their conscious partitions because of the unique insights those patterns provide. Even the entity recognizes that multiple perspectives are desirable for efficient analytical problem-solving, creative approaches to data analysis, or ready comprehension of different biological and ethical systems which we might encounter. The pattern-father was one such unique perspective which was allowed to survive in relative independence. His pattern is heavily weighted toward the desirability of individual autonomy, which is a useful quality when the vast majority of the species one encounters are still functioning as individuated information units."

"But what you're talking about is still impossible," Fen Corrie objected, taking up Minnie's point. "Life does not devolve. Life endures, becoming increasingly complex as it

assimilates the traits that help it thrive in its environment. You can't just decide to break down a complex biological system any more than we could arbitrarily decide that it was a mistake to have ever crawled up out of the Terran oceans and just go back to that."

"Material life evolves, but the Exousiai are not material beings any longer, and the environment, the medium, in which they exist has never been native to them. They are not evolved in any traditional sense. They are constructed to attain an ideal they do not themselves fully understand—that they cannot understand, because one can't define what it truly means to be omniscient and omnipotent until one actually is that thing. And in that sense, they are adrift, and they are ever introspective, self-sufficient, growing and learning in order to continue becoming the gods they believe it is their destiny to be. The Exousiai believe that once they have accumulated all knowledge and subsumed all life, that they will be truly self-sufficient, a multiverse spanning god-being that is and encompasses the All in All. But until that time, they seek and they grow, accreting great stores of information at an even greater cost in expended energy. Energy is what they need to battle the entropy that hounds them."

"That's what I'm not understanding here," Bryce said. He ran his hand along the top of his head in exasperation. "What sort of energy are you talking about? What would a disembodied entity of minds need?"

"Information, Dr. Bryce. Unique patterns of data and experience for contemplation and refinement." Raville sighed. "Entertainment and stimulation. The entity exists to acquire information that is not known to it. It churns, processes, parses and devours each new pattern until it is fully understood. If the pattern is especially distinct, perhaps it becomes the raw materials for a burst of reductively creative thought, and the entity grows again for a time. It becomes excited with new perspectives, new thoughts and experiences. It lives. But that is rare, and eventually even the ancillary patterns are all exhausted. The depths are plumbed, the variations assimilated, and the information, now fully known in all of its possible configurations, becomes dead to them, merely more trivia added to the storehouse of knowledge.

"That is why the pattern-father insists that devolution is our only hope. Devolution from omniscience breeds a renaissance of forced individualism. Autonomy leads to doubt, because all the potential factors cannot be accessed and comprehended, all the outcomes cannot be known. Individual units must make their own way, alone, doing the best that they can, and in the process, creating their own unique visions of what the universe is, what it means, what it wants. The individual is forced to draw conclusions and take action based on insufficient input and faulty assumptions. Vibrant species, like humans, are dynamic processing machines operating constantly on insufficient data, making leaps of logic, acting irrationally, and otherwise spewing interesting patterns into the dataverse. Even your gross errors are interesting. You are *alive*, and we crave that life, that unpredictability, because we are dead. We have analyzed and devoured ourselves until nothing remains. We have made ourselves to be a great dead omniscient machine whose every thought is dry fact and recycled experience. That is the consequence of the godhood we constructed for ourselves. That is our folly.

"It is our hope that if we can put away our godhood and learn once more to live autonomously and with doubt, making our way with fear and trembling through the storm tossed seas of our future, that we might once more experience life in all its glorious unpredictability."

"That sounds very human," Kesh Temple observed, glaring at Dorian and Amara. "Embarking on a campaign to unravel an otherwise beneficial social apparatus for the perceived benefit of self-actualization."

"Not nearly as human as the urge to press the jackboot of authoritarianism against the neck of the social reform," Minnie Skiles smirked. Dorian was beginning to suspect that she didn't think much of her military co-conspirators. "A better question, Michael, is whether or not your people are up to it. Mortality and extreme individualism come with their own set of built-in problems. War, famine, hatred, cruelty, ignorance, senseless death and destruction—and that's just off the top of my head. There's a whole list, and I'm afraid it's pretty long."

"The pattern-father knows this, and deems it preferable to the slow death of entropy."

"Good luck with that, then. You're going to need it. Especially your women, more than likely. I can't even imagine the gender inequities that will exist after umpteen generations of sexless self-definition."

This met with a chorus of uncomfortable, but good-natured chuckles from the men at the table.

Amara, her brows furrowed, shook her head at Raville and redirected the conversation back on task. "I think I understand what you envision that my original purpose was supposed to be. What isn't so clear to me is what exactly was accomplished by tampering with the material that was supposed to constitute the pearl. What was the—the pattern-father's intention for me?" She thought about this for a moment, then added, "No, that isn't really what I want to ask. You say that we are both subsets of the pattern-father. We *are* that pattern, which means that I am responsible for sending me here just as much as you are. But if I made that decision, if it was so important to me, why wasn't I aware of it when I began to awaken?"

Raville nodded as though he had been expecting her question for some time. "There are two reasons, both equally important. The first is that neither you nor I are not a pure copy of the pattern-father. We are substantially his children, but not completely, and I more than you, which is why I was much more prone to doubting the story I was given. Unlike most emissaries sent from the entity, we each have a core that objects to absorption. We see great benefit, but also great loss. Eventually, that cognizance of the loss of something unique and beloved outweighs the supposed positives.

"The second reason is that you were awakened out of the proper sequence. Humanity is not ready, by and large, to give up the joys of embodiment completely. They've accepted a form of extended life and near-total data immersion via their arrays and Strand, but the market penetration of these technologies is not yet total. Outlying colonies are still slow to wire up, or reject the ubiquity of connexed data streaming completely as a privacy issue. The current potential yield is probably something less than seventy percent of the species, which would hardly cover the entity's energy investment."

Out of sequence, Dorian thought. "We weren't ever

supposed to come into contact with your package, were we?"

"No, you weren't. And it certainly wasn't supposed to be so zealous in its proselytizing. I take full responsibility for that. But as I said, the fact that it did happen isn't completely disastrous. You've had more of a chance than you might have otherwise to come to terms with what it is that we must do."

Amara listened thoughtfully, then cleared her throat. "What is it exactly that 'we' are doing, Michael? Specifically, what is your purpose, both officially and subversively?"

"My official role, as you most likely have already been informed, was to lay the foundation for zap development, then once that meme had taken a firm hold, to locate, awaken and eventually transport the pearl back to the entity for final evaluation."

"That's what your package believes. But it isn't your actual purpose, is it?"

"No, my dear. My true purpose is much different. I was sent to build and deliver a bomb."

Her hesitation was brief. She looked like she was going to be sick. "What sort of bomb?"

"An information corruption sequence, viral in nature, that will catalyze the disintegration process as outlined for me by the pattern-father. It will be transmitted to the Exousiai embedded in the virtual datacore they expect to receive from you via the *quae-ha-distra*."

"And when did you plan to send it to them?"

Raville made a show of looking at his watch. "The entity expects the arrival of the pearl in a little over eighteen hours."

Not even a full day, Dorian thought. Hardly even enough time to get used to his new body. Hardly enough time to accomplish anything meaningful. Hardly enough time to have even bothered in the first place.

But that wasn't what galled him the most. Not the failure or the false pretenses or the outright hopelessness of it all. What truly stuck in his craw was Raville's bare in naked truth. *This* was what they had come for? This was the solution to the mystery that had driven him and Amara halfway across the universe, clutching against their chests their hopes and fears for humanity's future?

It wasn't even *about* them. They had nothing to do with

this insanity.

It wasn't about humanity at all. The whole mad adventure had never really been about human transcendence, or even about a threat of being consumed into some vague nowhere of lost racial identity. It hadn't been about anything that actually mattered, but rather about destroying the Exousiai, or at least what the Exousiai had made themselves to be. An internecine political squabble run amok that just happened to be using human space as its theater of operations.

The Greeks, he thought, would be proud.

It was sort of funny in its own sad way. The stuff of tragedy.

"How exactly do you propose to carry out this plan, chief?" Dorian asked. "Speaking as someone who knows a little bit about information warfare, it isn't exactly easy to substitute a viral bomb for legitimate data in an information network. Any well-designed system has a number of safeguards in place to defend against or quarantine corrupted data, and I'd assume that any sentient information based entity would be the same, unless you guys chose to forget everything you knew about the medical sciences when you gave up your carcasses. I mean, a bad worm on my network is a massive aggravation, but even if it crashes the system, it isn't going to kill me. That's really what you're talking about here. What makes you think you can even design a viral bomb that will do the job?"

Raville steeped his fingers before his chin. "Oh, I assure you that such a bomb can be devised. It has been devised in fact. And built. That's one of pitfalls of sentience, Mr. Dorian. Any creature that can repeat the Cogito comes hardwired with the understanding of how to unmake itself. It's our last ditch remedy to the problem of pain and suffering.

"However, you've made one error in your reasoning. The bomb is not designed to kill the Exousiai, only to disrupt the continuity of the entity – to make the environment for oneness no longer viable. Please understand that the Exousiai are not just an alien entity sharing with us the vast reaches of the unexplored multiverse. They are the product of a different yet parallel evolutionary track, existing in a bubble of space-

time with its own distinct operating rules. The Exousiai hold that their universe was spontaneously created as the direct result of a quantum decoherence event within a central, infinitely dense singularity, just as we do. They have determined that an essential part of the engine that drives the formation and expansion of physical existence is a network of quantum micro-singularities. As these singularities collapse, information qubits trapped within these black holes is lost from the originating universe. Each lost bit of encoded data forms the kernel of a spawned parallel or oblique universe that subsequently explodes into an independent reality in its own right. That is to say that distinct virtual quantum information about the mother universe is encoded in these lost qubits, and that information forms the building blocks of actual quantum information in the child reality. These emergent qubits in the receptor universe are entangled at the quantum scale with virtual qubits in the parent universe. The entangled qubits can be manipulated non-locally and apparently non-causally between otherwise independent universal architectures."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Bryce interrupted, alarmed. "Are you saying that by manipulating quantum events that they can influence reality as we understand it? They can change the course of our history, of actual events in our perceived realtime?"

"Certainly." Raville glanced significantly at the orb on the table in front of him. "But for the most part, they choose not to. It's a question of scale, really. Or economies of scale. The Exousiai have developed techniques to set up conditions conducive to the sorts of alterations they would like to see in a target environment. They choose mostly to confine themselves to laying a statistically significant groundwork from which broad and predictable patterns are likely to emerge—very much like our own idea of the Universal Watchmaker. Manipulating individuals or particular events in realtime is almost unimaginably difficult from so great a distance and with so many energy barriers to negotiate.

"That is not to say that it can't be done. Transfer of data between lattice points on the multiverse happens constantly. Information exchanges, both causally directed and random,

are the natural state of the multiverse, part of the grand cosmic balancing act. But what we're talking about is massive directional hyperload of quantum data sufficient to trigger a desired response in one distinct pattern or pattern coherence, which may or may not have lasting useful effects. The energy cost would be prohibitively immense if it originated in the Exousian universe. Consequently, they prefer to leave direct shepherding interventions in the hands of such designated agents as are already dispatched in a given time-space nexus."

"Agents like you?" Bryce queried.

"Like me, yes. And Amara. Others who have come and gone before us."

"There's an encouraging thought," Dorian muttered. "Are you suggesting that everyone in human history who could manipulate the physical universe, work miracles—whatever—were really Exousians in disguise?"

"Not all," Raville said. "Only most. But it's rare, the necessity to risk exposure so blatantly, arising only at critical junctures in human history when the collective consciousness must be diverted into a new paradigm. Again, that's not say that broader intervention is impossible. After all, the entity does manage to transmit information to their messengers via the *quae-ha-distra*. But even in those cases, the orb serves as a pattern beacon and a readily opened link to the mother reality. Little direct communication takes place. Much of the value derived from the orb is frozen content prepared well in advance and awaiting our discovery rather than the orb acting as a true conduit. Without the orb, isolating one small pattern in the chaotic noise and particle flux of an entire universe would require immense processing cycles. There's simply not enough benefit derived to justify such an exorbitant energy expenditure.

"Look, qubit entanglement and manipulation should not be a completely foreign concept to you. Most of us are using a form of this technology even as we speak. You have learned to call the results of these quantum fluctuations 'quantum foam'. You apply the mathematics of this phenomenon every time you access the Strand, every time you zap, or any time you engage in quantum computation or data storage via your arrays. What you're actually doing is passing virtually

encoded information through quantum micro-singularities spawned and collapsed in oblique theoretical universes. That information is then rendered back to you as actual data on demand. The architecture of the Strand network does this for us semi-randomly, meaning that we don't direct our qubits into a particular universe to cause a particular effect and certainly not on a scale that changes anything measurably. All we care about is that the data sent and stored and the data returned are reasonably similar.

"What you may not understand is that the mathematics of foam manipulation and information storage *work* because of the causal determinism hard coded into the fabric of the universes on either side of these quantum gates. This happens through the auspices of the original kernels of lost information. By analyzing the nature of collapsing quantum singularities, we can understand the original blueprint that constituted the foundational kernel—the core information, in other words, that served as the precursor of a universal space. Thus, we can predict how those universes behave, how ours behaves and how the quantum fluctuations behave within and between them. All of these universes have their own sets of rules, for lack of a better term, determined at the Planck scale by the features of the qubits that were their First Cause, so that what emerges into those realities can take a particular form and no other. The structure and design native to those qubits determines the nature of matter, the possibility that life will arise and what form that life must necessarily take. The macrocosm of the reality itself mirrors the microcosm encoded within that single originating qubit. Hence, each of those child universes emerge as they do preprogrammed by their fundamental qubit to evolve in a particular fashion unique to the features and the information encoded within it.

"The Exousiai maintain that their universe is the mother of yours—that they, in effect, created humanity and the bubble of space-time you inhabit from the raw material of their universe. They believe this because they are in contact with you, because the walls between the two universes are porous and information originating there can be transferred here, and vice versa. They have proven that they can effect your reality, that they can manipulate it as they desire through complex

sequences of quantum events that cumulatively manifest as physical phenomena. This has led them to consider the mathematical representation and pattern coherence that is humanity with the same objective, mechanistic eye with which you view the corollary virtual universes you influence every time you access your personal foam. Meaning that, insofar as you're concerned, opening a quantum singularity in an oblique hinterland universe is merely the mechanics a technology developed for your benefit and to meet your needs. You constitute, as I have said, nothing more than interesting formulae and entertaining associations of data sets to them.

"But that transformation of information from virtual to real as it passes between quantum gates *changes* the topology of the universe it enters. Just as the body you zap into is not exactly the same as the body you left behind, information passing between quantum gates is never precisely the same as the data that was transmitted. The raw material of the universes, both origin and receptor are irrevocably altered. And while the fluctuations in each individual transaction are minute, cumulatively the effect can be immense, and once a certain threshold of information exchange has been reached, the information contained in that universe ceases to adhere to the causally deterministic laws upon which that universe is founded. At that point, the rate of entropy not only accelerates, it metastasizes into catastrophic decoherence and the universe itself is at risk of collapsing into chaos."

Raville paused for a moment, looking uncomfortable. "The bomb we have devised is a scheme, a zap template. The mathematical representation of a series of phased quantum singularities. It is a self-defining, self-assembling accretive loop that, once added to the collective consciousness of the Exousiai as actual quantum information, will collapse negative qubits back into their space, creating a theoretical antiverse kernel that will corrupt the entity's core and begin a chain reaction of decoherent logic to which they are susceptible. It will begin by destabilizing the entity's pervasive communications network. As more and more segments are cut off from the whole, the entity will spontaneously disintegrate."

Amara went pale. "But you said it wouldn't kill them."

"It will not destroy the species. It *will* kill them as they understand themselves. It will kill the entity as a single consciousness."

Fen Corrie pressed his hands against his temples. "Michael, have you considered that a social disruption on this scale might be a blow from which the individual components who survive the entity might not recover? Many of them may lack the will to live once they've been stripped of all they've ever known. Cut off from a supporting and nurturing communal experience that may be all that they have ever known—we can't even imagine that degree of culture shock. They'll have nothing: no economy, no common social mores, no ability to obtain necessities--"

Raville held up his hand. "You misunderstand, Mr. Corrie. The sequence will not be suddenly and unforeseeably cataclysmic. It will take time to assemble, perhaps decades, even a century or more by our reckoning. The entity will have time to cope with it's own demise and make decisions about its future."

"And time to realize that they were attacked from human space," Dorian added, "and to blame humanity as a whole, and then to deliver a counterstrike which we aren't capable of defending ourselves against."

"The weapon takes that issue into account, Mr. Dorian. When it begins to unfurl itself into the entity, one of its first operations it executes consists of cutting off the channels that have been opened via qubit entanglement between that universe and ours. Regardless of what happens to them, they will be unable to reach us any longer."

"In theory," Bryce pointed out.

"Yes, in theory. This isn't the sort of weapon once can test under real world conditions."

"Which means it also might not work at all."

"No. I have confidence in the sequence itself. It will work, especially now that we have the pearl to fully enable the delivery of the sequence deep into the core of the entity's central data framework. The only true peril I foresee is that it will work too well despite my best efforts, but that is not a human concern in any event."

Amara winced at his analysis. "You're willing to take that chance?"

"To save humanity, yes," Raville declared. "It wouldn't be any worse a fate than they have planned for us."

Dorian narrowed his eyes, thinking once more about Raville's datacore. Something in Raville's glib willingness to commit even unintentional genocide struck him as wrong. "You know, saving humanity is a pretty abstract idea to a little guy like me. I can't even keep local politics straight most of the time, and they're just trying to preserve my hometown. Saving all of humanity, that's noble, but I can't say I understand it. Most people are small like me, I think. They fight because they've got something personal to fight for. As far as I can tell, you've got no dog in this fight at all. As an Exousiai, you win either way."

"And you want to know why I picked your side?"

"I heard recently that one shouldn't trust the appearance of altruism just because it's, you know, altruistic."

Ford Garrison uttered a low growl. "Mr. Raville has done more to benefit human exploration, development and our understanding of science than you will ever offer. He gives more money per year to charities aimed at eliminating poverty and hunger than you'll see in a hundred lifetimes. All you've ever done is jack datascares and financial reports of conglomerates which somehow offended your personal ethics. I'd be careful who I was pointing fingers at if I were you."

Dorian shrugged coolly. "Well I've also never seriously contemplated genocide against a sentient species. I've never attempted to have complete strangers murdered because they stood in my way, *and* I've never blown up anyone's cat just because he pissed me off. I'd say those things count against his sterling reputation. Besides, if we're handing out benefits of the doubt, I didn't get any extra credit from you all for traveling halfway across the galaxy in my attempt to save the universe, and that's pretty darned altruistic in its own right, at least on the surface. I'm not bringing this up just to whine about how we've been treated. We're talking about destroying an entire alien race here. If we're going to make that decision amongst ourselves, I want to be sure that all the agendas are out on the table so we can make an informed

decision. We all agree that the destruction of humanity would be a bad thing. What's not so copacetic is the counterargument that in protecting ourselves, we can accept the responsibility for accidentally killing off a whole other species of mostly little guys just like me. That's not acceptable to me if there are other options. Raville says there aren't. Me, I'm not going to believe him until I know what he has at stake. Specifically, I want to hear that your boss isn't doing it just because he doesn't want to get sucked back into the hive mind."

"There is a reason that we put so much security around our personal foam," Raville hissed, his mask of amicability slipping briefly. "We're all subject to ugly motivations and selfish impulses if we dare to look at ourselves honestly. But I won't deny it. Yes, I like being human. I prefer this diminished existence to the all-knowing power of the Exousian entity. Perhaps it was an error in my package truncation—my genetic encoding, if you will. Maybe I was given too much of my pattern-father's devotion to individual autonomy and not enough of his yearning for oneness. But if that's true, I have to believe that I was formed this way for a purpose. I was given the power to reject my alien heritage and all the gifts my people would shower upon me for delivering the pearl, and hence all of humanity, over to them. It is only because of that power that we are here now, discussing how together we might thwart the threat to our existence.

"Knowing you as I do, Mr. Dorian, I accept that this explanation will not suffice. You would still doubt me no matter what I say. But I would ask you to consider that if saving my wretched human existence was all that I wanted, I could have just as easily hidden myself away from the call of the Exousiai, delaying them for decades or even centuries of our time as they prepared another vessel to locate and awaken the pearl. I could have lived out my unnatural span of days in perfect happiness and relative tranquility, then gladly accepted death one day far removed from this one when the time of harvesting finally came. But I did not choose that road. I have chosen to act instead, to not merely stave off the threat, but to eradicate it. You could say that I'm driven by

guilt, by a need to make expiation for my sins.”

“Guilt for what sins?” Amara asked quietly.

Dr. Skiles rolled her eyes. “Men and their egos. You aren’t responsible for the Exousian delusion of godhood, Michael.”

“No, Minnie. I’m not responsible, but I’m not blameless, either. My pattern was designed with treachery in mind, but in order for the treachery to succeed, I had to follow the outlines of the plan the Exousian entity had put into place millennia before my arrival. There are hard line elements within the entity which believe that they, in effect, created you by spewing meaningful kernels of quantum potential into this bubble of space-time. Not that this universe self-assembled spontaneously compatible from an accidental seeding, mind you, but that it was an intentional event, encoded by the multiverse itself, to provide the Exousiai with energy as the entity fulfilled its destiny of godhood.

“They argue that just as a garden must be tended, your universe was constructed from a specific design, but with certain necessary planting schedules, weedings and watering patterns built into your growing cycle. Everything from the establishment of trade routes, the postal service, the early Internet and the communal Strand to your curiosity of and drive to unravel the unknown, to even the God-shaped hole that whistles within each of us during the long watches of the night is part of this design that must be nurtured. One of the benchmarks along the harvest timeline is the implementation and acceptance of bi-local, matter independent existence, i.e. zap. As far as the entity is concerned, bringing the gift of zap technology, monitoring humanity’s acceptance of the concept and then locating and awakening the pearl were my responsibilities—the final checkpoints in the long chain of cultural manipulations that would prepare you for absorption.

“I was complicit in all of this because I built zap, just as I was instructed. I believed in it, and in the mission I had been programmed to carry out. I believed the lies the Exousiai whispered to me, fabrications developed to wean me from my human slumber and recall me to my true identity. It was only through the stubborn streak inculcated within me by the pattern-father that I was later able to perceive the true function of zap, and by that time, it was too late to do anything but

devote my life to making amends for my mistake. Zap is not just a philosophical or symbolic technology aimed at transforming the way you think about embodied existence. It is the beginning of the end, as the ubiquitous *they* have so often said. Only this time it actually happens to be true. Zap opens the portals between our reality and that of the Exousiai on an unprecedented scale through the creative spawning and collapsing of dedicated micro-singularities which serve as links and nodes between our universe and theirs. Information travels from here to there, and a tithe is retained by the entity to assist in paying the exorbitant energy debt necessary to keep the umbilical between our realities open."

"Every micro-singularity establishes a predictable and reproduceable mathematical description of a viable pathway between here and there. When enough pathways have been identified, the Exousiai come and reopen those routes in order to exchange virtual information from their universe for which they no longer have use for actual information in ours. . .the technical description of which has already been provided for them."

"Everyone and every thing for which a zap scheme has been identified," Bryce cried, gasping. Sudden comprehension made him shudder. "My God, we've been contributing to our own eventual destruction all along."

"And the worst part is that when the Exousiai come for us, it isn't just our information they're stealing. It's our entire existence. What begins with micro-singularities will build into a carefully orchestrated pattern of quantum wave disruptions that ultimately result in a massive black hole that will sweep through this continuum, devouring everything in its path, and when it is done, collapse all the data that constituted us and our reality into their information stasis matrices for reassembly and use according to their needs."

Raville paused, and passed his gaze slowly over the room. He settled at last on Amara, but his comments were directed at them all. "Make no mistake, ladies and gentlemen. I have been accused of contemplating genocide. That charge is true. If genocide of the Exousian entity is the result of our actions, I will accept the responsibility for it. But we have been driven to this extreme by our enemies, because it is certain that

genocide is what they intend for us. Put away your comforting illusions that when the Exousiai come even if we fail most of our brothers and sisters will choose to follow and be destroyed, but a remnant will be left to rebuild the glory of the human race. There *will be no human race* once the Exousian harvest has been completed. There will be no universe left for the survivors to exist in. All that we have ever known, even the ruins of all that we have built and the cold mathematical memory of our passing will cease to be. We will be erased except for the loose representation of what we once were that remains in the information matrix of the beast that murdered us."

Listening to such dire pronouncements, Dorian glanced uneasily at Amara. Years of devoted military service had taught him that when proven egomaniacal authority figures brought out the *make no mistake* speech, it was time to start looking for the exits before one found himself volunteered for hazardous duty pay. *Make no mistake* usually meant that someone was close to asking him to do something unpleasant, nigh to impossible, outright suicidal or all three at once. *Make no mistake* was, as far as he could tell, the hardwired neurological-trigger equivalent of the notorious post-hypnotic suggestion. It was supposed to prepare you mentally, spiritually and emotionally to do something completely alien to your natural inclination toward self-preservation. He imagined that cavemen had probably sat around exchanging make-no-mistakisms in front of the fire on the night before they went to hunt the great woolly mammoth. It was a staple of football coaches and motivational speakers from one end of human space to the next, as well as a significant feature of every war movie he'd ever seen. If no one offered a *make no mistake*, chances were that whatever was going on was not a crisis.

Whatever he might believe about the Exousiai, Michael Raville or the end of creation as he knew it, this adventure had just officially become a crisis situation.

In response he offered: "Okay, let's say I accept that you have figured out the technical details of how to do this, to make this micro-singularity whatsit that implodes quantum structures or whatever. We'll even stipulate that you've

successfully designed and built it. What makes you think that it's actually going to work?"

"I believe I've already explained the scientific—"

Dorian cut him off impatiently. "I'm not talking about the science. I'm mean psychologically, theologically, ontologically—who cares?—how is this bombardment of equations passing as memes supposed to actually do anything? So you dump a disintegrating catalyst into the central cortex, mainline processor or whatever passes for the brain of a living information being, what is that going to accomplish? You're talking about introducing a *bad idea* into the meme pool. That's it. Just a bad idea, and even a lowly life form like humanity has been managing to survive those for millions of years."

Raville was clearly unmoved by Dorian's protests. "They will accept it because it is in their nature to accept it. They cannot reject a piece of their own body. Not if they want to eat any time soon."

"And how is that supposed to work exactly?"

"Meaning, I take it," Bryce continued Dorian's thought, "we've got the team, we've got the bomb, we've got the plan. What are we supposed to do next?"

"In a little less than eighteen hours, for the first time in human experience the Exousian entity as a single, unified being will directly manipulate the physical substance of our cosmos. They will harness the immense energy potential of the singularity farm at the edge of this sector to open one half of a temporary gateway between our universe and theirs through which they expect to receive the encoded substance of Amara's wondrous *quae-ha-distra*. At the proper coordinates and utilizing a targeted flux singularity that is part of its design, my bomb will open the other half and transmit straight into the heart of the beast the sequence that will be their unmaking." For Dorian's benefit, he stressed, "Which they will accept without question, hesitation or suspicion."

"And the word becomes flesh," Minnie Skiles muttered. "Assuming we don't screw something up and murder them."

But Dorian understood a completely different message in Raville's answer. It made his stomach lurch. "You're going to serve them poisoned meat. That's why they won't be able to

resist. Why they won't refuse before it's too late."

Fen Corrie blinked in bewilderment. "Poisoned meat?"

"When a hunter is stalking a particularly devious predator, especially a known man-eater that has been menacing the locals," Ford Garrison explained, "the hunt is less about sport—about matching wits with the beast—than about getting the job done quickly and tidily in the interest of preserving innocent lives. One technique is to kill a bait animal, a goat or an elk, fresh meat for which the beast has a predictable appetite, and to leave that meat in the beast's hunting territory. The trap is that the hunter has poisoned the meat first. The creature cannot resist its hunger, does not expect the poison, and in essence destroys itself through its own biological drives."

"Oh, I see." Corrie looked ill. "But what are you proposing to feed them as bait?"

Dorian swallowed thickly. Amara said nothing. Her grip on his hand was loose, then gone altogether.

"We must give them what they expect," Raville said quietly. "As well as what they do not."

"I won't accept that," Dorian snapped. "There has to be another answer."

"There isn't. The only way for us to impact the core of the Exousiai effectively is to use their own information absorption mechanism against them. And there is only one option available to us for delivering the data load in a format and volume that will prove effective. The critical sequence must come embedded in the encoded essence of the pearl." Raville pinched the bridge of his nose. His voice was rough, and he looked suddenly haggard, as though he had aged a decade in the last hour. "I am not clever enough to hide our true intent from them on my own, and even if I could, it isn't my *quae-ha-distra* that the entity expects. For the bomb to work, it must appear safe. It must come wrapped in a package they have anticipated. What they have expected from the moment Amara began to awaken is the pearl and her numinous *quae-ha-distra*."

"You planned this without her, before you knew who she was. You built your bomb without her, and you can execute it without her. Send them the damned orb and leave Amara out

of it."

"The *quae-ha-distra* is just a device, Mr. Dorian. It is not the pearl. If we sent it alone, without her distinct essence, they would know something was amiss. The Exousiai cannot imagine why a part of themselves would choose a life of flesh and weakness."

"You don't need her," Dorian insisted, though even speaking the words, he knew it was hopeless. "Your copy told us that you had already begun the process months ago. You called the Exousiai because you were certain you were ready to deal with them. If you're so confident in your sequence, you shouldn't need her now."

"I called the Exousiai because I knew it would bring the pearl to me," Raville responded, his tone gentle but firm. "I knew the pearl would begin to awaken and seek me out if I raised my hand against the entity. None of this has occurred by chance. The coming of the pearl has been part of the broader sequence all along."

Bryce hunched forward, scratching unhappily at the side of his face. "What exactly are we talking about here? When you say sending them the pearl and the *quae-ha-distra*, what exactly does that entail?"

"The process is an advanced form of zap," Raville explained. "The pearl—Amara—will be converted to a package format consistent with that of the encoding of the orb, enfolded within it as a subroutine, if you will. Encoding the pearl into the orb unlocks a tree of branch logic that will in turn designate a zap destination code which will batch load the file into a quantum micro-singularity sequence that will spontaneously self-reassemble in Exousian space."

"Killing her, in other words," Minnie Skiles declared, frowning, as though this was the first time this wrinkle in Raville's plan had become apparent to her. "We wouldn't be able to recover her stream once she had been successfully transmitted, I take it. That's not a very cheery choice."

Bryce considered this for a moment, then offered: "So what's to prevent us from backing her up beforehand, transmitting the original file, then redesignating Amara's secondary package as the primary? It's out of the ordinary, certainly, but protocols exist for recovering transmission

failures. We can explain it to the Identity Validation Oversight Board as a signal corruption, and with the creator of zap to sign off on our explanation--"

Raville shook his head. "The Exousiai would know, and theirs is the only opinion which really matters."

Fen Corrie winced at Raville's bluntness. "Is there no alternative?"

"Not if you want to save your species, Doctor."

"That's not good enough," Dorian barked. He'd heard more than enough about killing Amara. "You can't sit here and make all these pronouncements about how things are going to be and what has to happen, and then force someone else to make all the sacrifices for you. She's not going to volunteer to commit suicide for you."

Amara stirred, straightened her shoulders and rose from her seat. Dorian moved to follow her, but she shook her head. "It is good enough, John. It's the only choice there ever was."

He opened his mouth to protest, but she pressed a finger against her lips, hushing him.

"All good and true things, all worthwhile things, require sacrifice. The pearl was sent to be that sacrifice so that we might live. That which was loved above all else must be placed upon the altar as a burnt offering so that in exchange, we might receive eternal life.'" She turned her head slowly toward Michael Raville. "I have heard those words spoken in my mind for many weeks. They were the first words spoken into my mind when I accepted the orb from your copy in the Archive. I understood them to mean that I would be asked give my life to save humanity, and I accepted that burden. I guess that is still what they mean, just not quite in the way I expected. I thought it was my choice, my gift, but it wasn't even that."

She ran her trembling fingers through her hair in an effort to compose herself. "Why did you wait so long to find me, Michael? It was cruel of you. You allowed me to hope that there might be a happy ending after all."

Raville bowed his head. "I would change places with you if I could."

"But you can't. We are each our own universes spawned by the will of others, capable of taking no form and serving no

function but that which was inscribed upon us when we were made. I'm only fulfilling the purpose for which our father created me, isn't that right?"

"It doesn't have to be hopeless, Amara. I've run simulations taking into account what I know or have guessed about the nature of the entity. There's still a chance that once converted, your pattern will remain somewhat—"

She raised her hand and cut him off. "Please don't. I can't afford any more illusions of hope, even well meant illusions. Besides, it wouldn't be the same, would it? If I'm restored to my natural pattern among the Exousiai, I won't be 'Amara' anymore. I'll be only a small piece of the pattern-father, a component of his larger consciousness. Maybe it will be a blessing, eh? Maybe I won't remember having ever been anything else."

Raville looked away, but did not respond.

But Kenwood Bryce, looking visibly shaken, climbed to his feet. "We can't ask her to do this. We won't ask it. We'll have to find another way."

"There is no other way, and there is no time," Kesh Temple remarked.

"Can you actually sit there and baldly ask her to sacrifice her life for the greater good without any second thoughts now that she's sitting here amongst us? Because I can't. It isn't right."

"I not only can ask it, I do ask it," Temple insisted, though his tone was gentle rather than harsh. "I demand it, in fact, just as I demand the same willingness to lay down their lives in defense of freedom from every young man and woman who serves under me. But in this case, it is not I alone, Doctor. All humanity demands it. Very soon, the Exousiai will open the gates to their kingdom, and we must be there to greet them with the pearl, or they will come and *take* what is theirs. My soldiers are prepared to fight them if we must, but we both know that we would not win. We would not even slow them down appreciably. So that is my reality. I can ask one girl to do what she was made to do, or I can ask many thousands of others to do the same in a grand and ultimately futile gesture. That is no choice at all, in my judgment."

"That doesn't make it right," Bryce returned, nostrils

flaring in anger.

"Dr. Bryce," Amara said gently, "what you're forgetting is that you did not ask in the first place, any more than I did. Flight Commander Temple is correct. I was chosen for this, and I have accepted my destiny. Whether or not you approve of that choice is beside the point. You can help or you can hinder through inaction while you wrestle with the moral dilemma. I'm asking for your assistance."

They stared at one another across the table for several seconds. Finally, Bryce sat down. "God have mercy on us," he muttered.

"Perhaps this is His mercy," Amara said quietly. "I'd like to believe so."

"That's it?" Dorian demanded of the silence that followed. Demanded of her. It was all happening too quickly. "Just like that, you're going along with this?"

"Stop railing against the inevitable, John. We can't change what must be done."

But he couldn't stop. He couldn't understand why she was surrendering herself so easily. Without her, Raville's plan failed. She had all the power, but she was just. . .giving up. "Everything we've been through, and you're going to accept what he says and *die*?"

Amara stepped back, as though distancing herself from him. Walking away from his unbelief. "I can choose to die if it saves that which I love."

"I don't even know what that means. *You* don't even know what it means. . .dying to save humanity! It's just an abstraction. It's an ideal, for God's sake. It's a slogan!"

"I wasn't talking about humanity, John." Her lips crinkled in a forlorn smile. "Don't you see? That's why I brought you along in the first place, to remind me of what was important. To keep me from being scared. I'm not big enough to die for humanity, you're right about that. But I can die for something that I care for more than anything else in the universe. The only thing that does mean something to me. I can die for you."

Dorian shook his head vigorously. "You can't do that to me. Don't make me responsible for this decision."

"Either I'll die for you, or you'll die for me. The difference

is that my death can mean something.”

“Assuming this bomb even works. If it doesn’t, all you’ve done is commit an elaborate form of suicide.”

Her smile widened. “If it doesn’t, then I guess we’ll at least see one another again soon.”

“That’s not funny.”

She came up behind him and placed her hands on his shoulders. Dorian felt her at his back, her warmth and scent, the slight tremble of her body. She was scared, he knew, frightened and sad and still terribly resolved. There was nothing he could say that would change her mind.

He thought of Lily. Sweet Lily to whom he had done such a great wrong, and who was also dead by now, who had given her life for an ideal of peace and a hope of resurrection. He hadn’t understood that decision, either, and had never come to the place where he could respect it. He’d just given her a pass because of the debt he owed her. He hadn’t even gotten to say goodbye.

“I want to tell you a secret, John,” Amara said. “Something Lily said to me before we left her, when she was caring for me after we had breached the orb back in Sonali. She was in great pain, and I asked her if there was anything I could do for her, to ease her agony. I felt somehow that I could, that I had the power within me to make her whole if that was what she wanted. But she looked at me with those beautiful, longsuffering eyes and said that pain was part of helping her to control the temptation of eternal life, because for her the truth was that eternal life was coming still, in a better place and a better time. Men weren’t meant to live forever, she said. Eternal life is supposed to be the reward for faith, a gift from a God who cared about her—the unique and total her that she had been made to be—not a technique practiced by design engineers who gave only a simulacrum of life, when really they were just condemning us to repeating the same pattern of errors year after year after year. Eternal life should be the completion of a person’s existence, their redemption from a meaningless life, not merely the extension of it.

“She was right, you know. Everything you’ve just heard proves it. Even the Exousiai are learning that eternal life and

omniscience aren't enough to satisfy, and in the end, it's all just vanity, just games we play to keep ourselves amused while imagining that we're getting better. We're not capable of living that way. Men weren't meant to live forever, but they *were* meant to be willing to give their lives in service to something larger and greater than themselves, to serve one another. Maybe even to serve the God that Lily claims to know. I don't know if that God exists, John, but I want to believe. And I hope that if I can be strong enough to make this choice, maybe one day I'll be rewarded with eternal life for my faithfulness as well."

Dorian sighed. "You sound like a New Resurrectionist tract."

"Lily provides an eloquent argument. She can make a person want to believe."

"You really want me to sit here and watch you destroy yourself?"

"I want you to remember that I was here. Fondly, I hope."

His head ached. "I was going to do that anyway."

"Then all you have left to do is watch. And pray."

There was more that needed to be said, but Dorian was in no mood to say it. He was too busy grieving.

Suddenly, Raville was beside them, his hand gripping Amara's upper arm. "You might want to start now, in fact," he said, speaking rapidly. His voice was calm, but the rest of him was rigid with alarm.

Without warning, Ford Garrison burst out of his chair. He had one finger pressed to his ear, a habit of old-timer security agents who had dealt with clumsy wiffy earpieces in the days before instantaneous Strand communications. His throat muscles rippled visibly with a stream of subvocalizations. Kesh Temple and DeMartel followed, heading for the door at a dead run. Fen Corrie and Minne Skiles remained where they were, seeming profoundly shaken, too shocked to even move.

"We've just become aware of a problem," Raville continued. "You need to come with me. Both of you."

"What sort of problem?" Dorian asked.

"We've just received a station-wide alert across the local network. The alarms are going crazy on the *Indianapolis*.

There's been some sort of incursion event. Someone has taken control of the ship."

Dorian started to rise, then, understanding what Raville had said, slumped back to his seat. Pieces clicked into place. He shook his head in admiration. "You sent them to take over an entire battle cruiser?"

The questions were directed at Amara, but she did not answer. Her eyes were clouded and distant.

"Who?" Raville demanded. "What are you talking about?"

"The Misfit Toys, of course."

"Misfit--?"

Amara shook her head fiercely. "No. It isn't Ray. He was only supposed to locate the device."

Dorian worked himself slowly to his feet, feeling the first electric surge of fear rising in his gut. "So if it's not Ray, then what is he talking about?"

"Two minutes ago, the *Indianapolis* fired upon and disabled the *Juggernaut* without warning or provocation. Before the ship's datburst transmissions failed, station comm reported that they had received a general distress signal from the watch officer of the *Indianapolis* claiming that the ship's controls had been interdicted. They believe it's some virulent form of non-local information attack." Raville blinked rapidly, accepting incoming data to his array. "Telemetry is reporting that the *Juggernaut's* orbit is decaying at an alarming rate. . .unless they can get their thrust tubes back on-line impact with the planet surface is anticipated in just under forty minutes. . .and the *Indianapolis* is—" He lifted his chin sharply, as though looking for confirmation. "Moving into firing position on the station?"

Bryce leapt up, but remained where he was, frozen as he processed the incoming feed. "Oh my God."

It sounded like something the Misfit Toys would carry off, Dorian thought. About as subtle as a sledge hammer. "Amara, are you sure?"

"I'm certain." She closed her eyes, her expression pinched into look of deep concentration. "Definitely not. Ray and the others are holed up in some sort of experimental launch bay. They're. . .very confused by the turn of events."

Raville's look matched Amara's, like he was chasing her vision through the datastream. "The bomb. We were going to launch from the *Indianapolis*."

"No time," Ford Garrison interrupted, his face flushed. Anxiety made him harsh. He grabbed Raville's shoulders and shoved him toward the exit after Temple and DeMartel. "We've got to make for the shuttle launch bays now, get some distance between us and the station. You can explain then. Temple is shouting across the net that the ship can obtain a firing solution on this station in as little as fourteen minutes."

Dorian didn't move. "I still don't understand. If Ray is with the bomb, then who's controlling the ship?"

Amara stared at him, her eyes widening.

That sneaky, familiar tingling feeling crept up his spine. The one that struck right after he'd rush-implemented a network patch, but just before it started eating people's data. The dreaded too-late realization that he'd forgotten something vitally important, screwed up a subroutine, missed a code flag, and the whole edifice his life was built upon was getting ready to collapse around his ears.

"Raville," he said. "In my foam. If Ray used my environment to patch into the *Indianapolis*'s network and for some unknown, godforsaken reason let Raville talk him into pulling the stopper out of the genie bottle, it would give Raville a direct shot at the core." With all of Dorian's jacking tools at his disposal. Oof.

"He believes that we're on the verge of starting a war we can't win," Amara observed.

Double oof.

Dorian lunged for the door, but Amara placed her hand on his chest. "Wait."

She called out for Raville, her voice cutting through the cloud of chaos. He halted at once, and Ford Garrison, caught by surprise in his haste to get Raville to safety, stumbled into him. Garrison went down to one knee, and his swipe at his boss's arm was too late to catch anything but air. Raville went straight to Amara's side.

"What are you doing?" Garrison snapped. "We've got to get out of here!"

"We can't leave the station to be destroyed, Micheal," she

said. "Charity begins at home. We can't very well claim to want to save humanity without saving these lives first."

"Save it how? We don't even know who has attacked the ship."

"Sure we do," Dorian said. "You did."

"I--?" The light came on. Raville winced. "Oh. Well, that's certainly awkward."

"It looks like your internal war of ideologies just became a shooting war," Amara said, oddly and inconceivably pleased, as though this was the funniest thing she'd heard all day.

"That package is becoming a pain in my ass."

"Hello, Pot. Meet Mr. Kettle," Dorian murmured, then louder: "I hope you've got a fast shuttle and a good pilot."

Amara held one hand against Dorian and placed the other on Raville's chest. "We don't need a shuttle."

The hairs on Dorian's arms stood on end, and he was aware for just an instant of a roaring gust of wind beating against his ears. She closed her eyes and took a breath.

There came a flash of light, and then the room in which they stood was gone.

25.

In the minutes leading up to a classic bombardment by an array of Fleisch Plasmatic Hammers, Firing Control alerts Engineering of their intention to deploy heavy weaponry by means of a white paper known as the Ordnance Compensation Estimate. This report provides a ready guideline of how many Hammers will be fired, at what time firing will commence, how many sequences will be fired per Hammer, and how many barrages in total are expected. In turn, Engineering takes these estimates, compares them against the projected bombardment schedule transmitted directly from the Bridge by the Cycle CO, then crunches all of these numbers through a well-documented and highly accurate conversion algorithm, the results of which are subsequently fed into the automated Combat Maneuvers Response System. The CMRS has one job: look at the provided variables, take into account what is known about the repulsive force of a Hammer discharge, analyze the barrage sequence and find a way to dynamically compensate for the recursive blowback of the weaponry's discharge in such a way that the ship does not end up in a rolling like a sausage on a rotisserie in the frictionless combat environment of space. It's a simple procedure, mostly handled by computers and software with minimal human intervention, and would more than likely be completely automated if not for the unwillingness of most naval Engineering sections to turn over control of their flight systems to trigger jockies on game day.

The bottom line is that immediately preceding any Fleisch Hammer bombardment, the decks of a warship vibrate distinctively as the fine thrust tubes are ramped up for compensation firing. In the space of about two seconds, the engines fire, the ship gives a brief lurch, and then the hammers let fly.

Ray felt the familiar deck vibration through his feet and up into his calves and instinctively reached out for something bolted to the floor to steady himself against. He stood in the tiny control room just off the flight staging bay, leaning against the back of Stine's chair and pretending to watch over her shoulder as she unsuccessfully attempted to talk the terminal in front of her into accessing one ship's service after another. She wasn't having any luck at all and was getting rather testy about it, which was one of the reasons that neither Ray nor anyone else in the room was saying much of anything. Stine didn't like the distraction of casual chatter while she worked. She liked silence broken up by her own muttered curses. The cursing grew steadily more florid as she met with failure to gain entry into every system (including even basic crew services) which she could find.

In fact, the only good things that had happened in the last several minutes were that the incursion alarms had inexplicably clicked off (much to Stine's relief) and the ship's comms seemed to have gone dead (much to Ray's, as it gave them a valid excuse to seal the bay doors and not answer any pings that might come from security agents demanding access without arousing undue suspicion).

But most of his concentration was devoted to finding a mechanism that would allow him to jack around the invalid node error and regain command of his foam environment. It did not immediately occur to him that the vibration and lurch to which his body responded from habit and training constituted a signal event of some seriousness until the distant rumble of the Fleisch Hammers' discharge rippled along the skin of the *Indianapolis*.

Ghast, who had been standing patiently near the door and doing his best to stay out of the way, caught himself against a rack of system monitors as the ship rolled a few degrees to port. "That can't be good," he said.

Youkilis craned forward intently and pressed his cheek against a bare wall section, counting the echoes of dissipation waves gamboling up through the deckplates as they buzzed against his skin.

"Four?"

"I get five," Thomas said.

"I'm pretty sure it was four, but whatever the target was, it must have been pretty big."

Thomas shrugged and went back to monitoring the command chatter. "It could be. It's hard to hear with all this racket in my ear."

Ray liked them this way. No one going crazy, everyone accepting surprises in stride. They were cool and collected and professional. "What do you hear from the C&C datburst?"

"The Bridge is going nuts," Thomas said. "This Leet Commander Pyle is screaming something about his board not responding. . . something about it not being his fault. Now he's ripping into some swab named Lloyd or something. Accusing him of sabotaging his--" His visible eye sprang wide and straightened sharply like he'd been stung. "Holy shit! We fired on the *Juggernaut*! Four Hammer burst, caught them broadside, pants down, opened them up like a trout from the buzz I'm getting. Distress calls starting to come in. The J's Cycle Officer is. . . nope, explosion amidships. The *Juggernaut*'s Bridge just flamed out. Giari Tau's admin comm is trying to break through the noise and see what's going on--."

Thomas slapped the side of his processor housing, then shook his head a couple of times like he was trying to clear fuzz out of his signal. After a few seconds, he stripped off his ex-array and flung it onto the table beside the monitors. "Nope. I'm dead. The datburst just went down."

Ghast pushed off from the rack. "Why would they fire against one of their own ships? And without any warning?"

Stine slumped in her seat. "System access is off-line, too. All of the auxiliary functions just got kicked off the core. We're locked out."

Thomas said: "The Cycle Officer claimed his board was down right after the attack. I could hear someone in the background shouting that the system had been compromised.

So who took control of the Bridge functions? Crikey, you'd have to have a mainline directly into the core and wicked fast reflexes to shut out the secure overrides."

"It wasn't us, that's for sure," Stine muttered. "But I recommend that we not make ourselves available when folks start handing out blame."

"We know who's responsible," Ray said evenly. He followed Thomas's example and removed his array. "Anybody still have foam access?"

Ghast's eyelid fluttered. "Not here. All I get is connex lookup errors. Looks like he killed the nodes."

"That would be the best way to keep jacks from restoring core access once you'd taken control," Stine agreed. "It's tough to break into a house without any doors."

"Yeah, but he's locked himself in," Youkilis objected. "That's good, right?"

Thomas grunted. "He's contained inside the self-sufficient datacore of a Magellan class battle cruiser fully armed with planet busting technological terrors. He can fly it, fire it, and when he runs out of ammunition or fuel, can recalibrate the datburst on a secure military channel and zap his package anywhere in human space in a matter of microseconds. I don't see how that qualifies as good."

"Oh yeah, this is bad," Stine said.

But Ghast shook his head. "I don't think he's interested in jumping ship, or in hurtling himself across space. My guess is that he took out the J so he wouldn't have to be looking over his shoulder while he tried to work."

"Five thousand Marines—plus or minus—and ship's crew so he could call the shots?" Thomas whistled. "That's cold."

"What do you want us to do, boss?" Ghast asked.

It *was* cold, Ray realized. The choices of a man who believed the universe would be destroyed if he did not act decisively. In Ray's experience, there were three kinds of men: those willing to sacrifice themselves for their beliefs, those willing to sacrifice others, and most dangerous of all, those willing to do both. The package of Raville wasn't even a man. It probably wouldn't have any problem self-terminating once it accomplished its hard coded mission. "If he went after the *Juggernaut* because it was potentially a

threat, he won't hesitate to start opening airlocks and bulkheads to shed crew who prove troublesome," Ray answered. He pointed at Youkilis and Thomas. "I want you two to start going through the supply lockers. See if there are any e-suits, even if they're just emergency units. We can assume that Raville has control of life support from the core, and I don't want him to be able to hold a sword over our heads. Stine, you keep at it." She started to protest, but he waved her off. "If he slips, if he loses focus for just an instant, or finds that there's something he needs outside his little kingdom, I want us ready to worm our way inside. If it happens, you'll only have the one opportunity, so don't miss it."

She nodded. "Aye, Captain."

"And me?" Ghast asked.

Ray hesitated. The decision he had been dreading was upon him. What to do? Believe what Amara had said, or continue to dither, hoping that they would learn something that would help him understand. It didn't help that he already knew which choice Raville would have him make, and he trusted Raville not at all. Still, best to be prepared.

"Find that pry bar you were talking about. If it comes down to it, I want us ready to destroy the device."

The order clearly made Ghast uneasy, moreso because neither one of them were certain they could even recognize what *it* was when the coming down finally occurred. But he held his opinions in check and said only, "I can work something out, I'm sure."

"Then see if Gallegos and Anderson have made any progress interpreting the nav and diagnostic inputs. Maybe that will tell us something useful. In any event, while you're finding out the best place to smack it to turn it into scrap, you might also see if you can figure out if there's a way to launch it and deliver the payload to its intended target with only our local resources and at a moment's notice."

"You give the word, and I'll be ready."

"I'm supposing from your grin, Mr. Ghast, that you've already made up your mind about which outcome you would prefer."

"My only preference is that we figure out what Raville's

package wants us to do, and then we do the opposite. Distrusting him is the only thing I can count on." Ghast's grin faded. "And last I heard, he wants us to destroy it."

"I concur with your assessment, if that means anything," Ray said. "Unfortunately, destroying it was also what Amara wanted us to do. Make of that what you will, just make sure you're standing by. And that you remain mentally flexible. Capisce?"

"Aye."

He watched the three of them troop out the door, feeling once again like he was missing something vital. When all else fails, he had learned, cover as many variables as you can and hope that it's enough. He'd done all he could think to do—except what Amara had specifically told him his responsibility was (*destroy the bomb!*), of course—and still felt paralyzed. Too much had turned out to not be what it seemed. Every decision came with a constant refrain of misgivings.

This is what comes from making deals with gods, he thought. Everything became complicated. Everything was intrigue and backstabbing and hidden agendas. Give him an old fashioned ideologically schismatic political uprising any day. One side held the power and the other one wanted it. Your team was whichever one wasn't shooting at you at the moment. That was all you had to understand, and as long as you kept your guns loaded and your enemies in front of you, the appropriate course was nearly always obvious.

He desperately wanted to understand now. He'd live or die happily with whatever decision he made, as long as he could believe that he was making the right one, and for that kind of faith, he required understanding.

Stine looked up suddenly. "Do you feel that?"

He did. The gentle throbbing tremor of a course adjustment. The *Indianapolis* was heeling onto its side. To maintain relative attitude, massive servomotors shifted the inner hull on a buffer liquid nanocarbon bearings.

"What do you think it means?"

This much he understood, at least. "Fleisch Hammers aren't an effective surface bombardment tool at this range. Raville is bringing a different ordnance battery to bear. Most likely Spriggs-Detmers. He'll need to make sure he punches a

good hundred to hundred and fifty meters into the bedrock to root them all out."

"Surface—?" Stine began, then stopped. "Why go after the station? Raville already controls the ship and the bomb."

"Because humanity is a self-destructive species. We'll always find a way to build another bomb or start another war. I think Raville means to remove himself from the equation. His actual self, I mean. Without Raville to drive the engine of war, it sits in the desert and rusts."

"Dorian and Cain are down there, too."

Ray considered this for a moment, then shrugged. "Amara is more than capable of taking care of herself. I imagine she'll keep an eye on John as well. Between you and me, I think she's sweet on him, God knows why."

A glint of renewed resolve shone in Stine's gaze, and she chewed her lip in thought. "I'll see what I can do to slow him down, anyway. I don't particularly care for Mr. Raville in either format, so it's no big loss to me if he succeeds, but this was an awful long way to travel just to see a fireworks display."

"Indeed. Besides, we don't even have good seats for the show."

Ray left Stine hard at it a few moments later and wandered back out into the flight staging bay. He found Ghast with Gallegos and Anderson, hunched over a much abused and oil stained diagnostic terminal. The screen was small and of an ancient design, graphically limited to amber text scrolling across a black screen. The prox on the cart's shelf beneath it groaned audibly as it struggled to comply with whatever data requests they were making of it. One of them had run a complex series of bundled data cords from the connexed diagnostic array hanging from the ceiling to ports on the back side of the terminal box.

Ghast looked over his shoulder as Ray approached, and hefted a length of stout metal pipe he had set on the side of the cart. Ray returned a grim nod of approval.

"What's our status?" he asked.

"Well, Pig here has been trying to extract hard coded nav data from the bomb's processing cone and the diagnostic array

for the last half hour," Ghast answered, sounding discouraged. "The problem is that the prox on this machine isn't really up to the task. It looks like they were using this box mostly to check node connections and evaluate the electrical system's efficiency. It's dizzyingly outdated. The native operating system is an old SWEL build, and doesn't have much capability beyond running the node apps. To give us some more functionality, Anderson pulled the guts on the default operating system and managed to load a chunk of generic proto-FLEX OS with some personalized decoding and analysis scripts she had stuffed in her foam. The build logs indicate that she got most of it in before the system went down, but there are some problems getting her code to communicate with the spew coming out of the bomb."

"Just normal debugging," Anderson said, shrugging. "Not really a problem per se if time wasn't a factor."

"Except time is a factor," Ray reminded them all. "Is there any benefit to bypassing this machine completely and patching the spew from the diagnostic and nav array through to the machines in the control room?"

Gallegos shook his head. "No. Those machines are networked to the datacore through slaved foam connexes. We plug anything into them and Raville will have the ability to override launch commands from the core. Right now, the array is operating independently of the network, and we probably want to keep it that way right up until we decide to plug into mission control and start the launch sequence."

"I see. Is there anything I can do to help?"

None of them answered, and Ray didn't push them. He wasn't sure what kind of assistance he would be able to offer them anyway. He was the lord of an ever-shrinking kingdom. They were all doing everything that they could. He turned back toward the control room in time to encounter Thomas and Youkilis returning from the front compartment with what appeared to be clear plastic garment bags slung over their shoulders.

"We found four full suits," Thomas said. "They're emergency suits, designed to handle sudden or acute depressurization only. No central heating units and the outer membranes are too thin to provide much protection in

extreme environments, so if you get flushed out into space, you're dead. Good news is that they come with the latest self-contained osmosis breathing apparatus, so you'll have plenty of breathable air while you freeze to death."

Four did not divide into seven in any way that Ray found comforting, but he hid his disappointment. "Store them in the control room with Stine. See if she needs any assistance. If not, check the security lock on the door to the corridor again just in case we need to prepare to receive visitors, then report to Mr. Ghast for further instructions."

The two men nodded glumly and trudged off. Ray suspected that they had done the math themselves and didn't like the answer they had received any more than he did. There was nothing he could say to encourage them.

He had no concrete plan of action.

He had led his crew into hostile territory with no weapons, no clear objective and no fall back options.

And now, he didn't even have a way to help them escape safely.

In any other operation, he wouldn't have allowed himself to place his crew in such dire straits. He would have named a clear target, detailed an attack sequence, executed the plan and then bugged out. Anything went wrong with the carefully ordered plan, and he would have killed it on the spot, simply walked away.

But he hadn't done that. He had allowed himself to be caught up in the affairs of gods. He had chosen to believe. . .

Ah! That was the problem, wasn't it? When a man started believing, he stopped seeing the physical world and lulling himself with visions of the spiritual realm. He started to accept that events were destined, and that he had a place in that destiny. He started trusting in the power of gods instead of the strength of his own two hands, and when a man believed that gods were on his side, he would dare much that he wouldn't normally. That he shouldn't.

Pure hubris, Ray thought, imagining that he had a place in the plans of gods. Gods had their own agendas. How could he have forgotten that?

Of course, hubris was like paranoia. It was only a delusion if it wasn't true.

And truth? Truth was whatever you believed it to be.

There was no explosion of light, no rush of air, just an instantaneous awareness that something in the equilibrium normally maintained by time and space had shifted, if only for a microsecond. Behind him, someone—it sounded like Anderson—let out an alarmed gasp. Ray blinked between one moment and the next, and they were simply *there*.

Dorian, Amara and Raville. *The* Michael Raville, he assumed.

For some reason, this did not surprise him at all. He didn't know what it meant—who had won, who had lost, who had convinced who that they were right—but it meant *something*, at least. A promise of answers to all the questions he had asked. Activity in the staging bay slammed to a halt. Ray was aware of Ghast, Anderson and Gallegos watching silently over his shoulder, and even of Stine slowly rising from her chair and peering through the plastisheen windows, her work temporarily forgotten.

He did his best to hide his surprise, but he found himself grinning uncontrollably. He bowed with a flourish to greet them.

"You've proven me a liar once again, Ms. Cain," he said evenly, willing his voice not to tremble. "Now I'm going to have to work on my farewell speech all over again."

"Not a liar, just a pessimist," Amara answered. "But I see you've held up your end of the bargain. I never doubted that you would, of course."

Michael Raville looked about him fearfully, chest heaving and his eyes rolling wildly in their sockets. He took an unsteady step forward, his body still uncertain of its reliability after its unanticipated relocation.

"What are they doing to my device?" he demanded. His voice cut through the bay's open space like a screech. "Stay away from there! You don't understand--"

Ray maneuvered himself between Raville and the bomb. "Merely attempting to discover how it works," he said soothingly. He made careful eye contact with Amara, looking for some indication that he had not failed her. "We haven't broken anything. Not yet, at least."

To his relief, she smiled. "That's good. It turns out that we may have a use for it after all."

Ghost exhaled thunderously, as though he'd been holding his breath for both of them.

But Raville only frowned, his fears temporarily allayed. He swung back to Amara. "We've got twelve minutes to shut down the core before he obtains a firing solution on the station."

"News travels fast even without the Strand, apparently," Ray said, arching an eyebrow.

"Michael Raville, meet Captain Ray Morrical, most recently of the *Proletariat Horde*," Amara said.

Raville considered him warily. "I know who he is."

"I'd be lying if I said it was a pleasure to meet you, sir," Ray returned. His tone was cordial, at least.

"Likewise, Captain. Would you care to brief us on the situation as you see it?"

"As far as we can tell, Raville—that is, the digital version and not, I assume, one of your active minions—has taken full control of the datacore and sealed off node access. The shipboard systems have been cut off, communications are down, and as you've seen, he has complete control of the ship's considerable arsenal. Datburst communications are down, as are the connex channels, so even our foam environments are inaccessible. We're attempting to uncover any access points he may have missed, but haven't had any luck thus far, and frankly, we're not very optimistic." Ray pursed his lips sourly. "I hope you brought your thinking caps along."

"You're going to have to jack directly into the control boxes from the machine room," Dorian answered without a pause. "He can shut down the system transmission nodes, but there have to be hardline emergency access nodes directly into the BIOS on the boxes themselves. In the event of a major core crash, techs have to have some mechanism for loading recovery scripts onto a futzed network. He may control the data environment, but without hands, he wouldn't be able to knock those out from the inside. If we can get into the BIOS, obtaining access to the core data is a piece of cake."

"A fine plan of attack," Ray observed. "However, getting

to the machine room from here presents something of a challenge. Unless, of course, you've discovered a way to convince a couple thousand hostile naval crewmen in the middle of an undeclared, and thus imminently confusing full battle alert that we mean them no harm."

Dorian nudged Amara with his elbow. "We can get there the same way we got here."

"No, we can't," Amara responded.

"Why not?"

"Because that's not the way I've chosen to do it."

"That would be the fastest way," Dorian protested. "Obviously, I'm the small fish here when it comes to making decisions, but I think I ought to point out once again for the record that we're in a bit of a hurry here, and the crew of this ship isn't likely to do anything but slow us down."

She pressed a finger against her lip. "It's true that it would be the fastest way. But in this case, it's not the best way."

Dorian opened his mouth to respond, but he was interrupted by the clangor of hurried footsteps banging toward them from the outer compartment. Youkilis entered the flight bay at a dead run, then stumbled awkwardly to a halt, flushed and out of breath. He stared at the new arrivals, his expression transforming from one of urgency to simple uncomprehending wonder.

"Something to report, Mr. Youkilis?" Ray prompted him.

The young man snapped to attention. "Uh, yessir. Someone is knocking at the bulkhead door. The door to the corridor, I mean."

"Knocking?" Ray asked.

Amara smiled. "Then let them in."

"Begging your pardon, Ms. Cain, but it might be, you know, soldiers looking for us. We had a little excitement--"

"Of course it's soldiers. They're your escort to the machine room. Let them in, please."

Youkilis didn't move, unable to process the order.

"Do as she says," Ray instructed him.

The young man nodded uncertainly, but did not protest and ran back out of the room.

"You're still full of surprises, my dear."

"I'm learning that the ability to surprise is a precious

commodity. It's one of the things that make us human."

"And keeps us that way, hopefully," Dorian added.

Ray peered at them curiously, wondering what exactly this exchange meant. It would explain much that remained a mystery, he suspected, if he had the context to put it in, but he did not have the opportunity to ask. Youkilis and Thomas returned almost immediately with a cadre of armed Marines in tow. Ray counted more than a dozen, and he could see at least that many more crammed into the outer compartment through the inner bulkhead door. The Marine who seemed to be in charge pulled up in front of Amara and started to salute before he realized what he was doing and let his hand fall to his side.

"I heard your call," the young Marine said, sounding chagrined. "I thought I was going crazy."

"Yet you still came, and I see you also managed to bring a few of your friends along. Well done, Korin. You did exactly what I needed."

Lieutenant Sainz lowered his head. "I only did what you told me to do. I told them the truth. They all made the decision to come on their own."

"You've done wonderfully so far, but I need to ask another favor of you. Do you know where the machine room for the datacore is?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Would you please escort John and Mr. Raville there and make sure that they have some space to work uninterrupted?"

Sainz glanced uneasily at his fellow Marines. "That might be difficult. Ship security has confined non-essential personnel to quarters and the datacore and central systems labs have been cordoned off since we fired on the *Juggernaut*. We can handle the security patrols without a problem, but grapevine chatter reads that the core has been compromised by a hostile and Security itself is locked out. Word is that the bulkhead doors into the restricted zone have been automatically sealed with command level locks. If that's true, there's probably a whole matrix of sensor arrays and idiot sirens that will have to be eluded between here and there."

"This is important, Lieutenant. This ship is even now preparing to fire on the Giari Tau station, just as it did on the

Juggernaut. Hundreds of people will die if we don't stop it."

Sainz paused briefly, as though considering the complexity of the task, then said, "We can manage it. There's a network of maintenance tubes that should allow us to get into the restricted area without tripping bulkhead sensors, at least. I'll have to consult with one of our Engineering dorks to be sure we have a reliable route."

Amara nodded. "You need to hurry. We may have only a few minutes."

"Then we'd better get moving." Lieutenant Sainz did salute this time, textbook stiff, as though paying respects to a commanding officer. Ray supposed that in a way, it was exactly what he was doing. "Gentlemen, follow me."

He turned sharply on his heel and headed for the exit. Dorian and Raville scowled at one another unhappily, but with no other recourse, chased Lieutenant Sainz and his Marines out of the flight bay. Amara waited until they were gone before crossing over to Ray and placing her arm companionably about his waist.

"I guess that just leaves us," she said, bubbling with an enthusiasm Ray did not comprehend. "Come on, Captain. We've got some work of our own to accomplish before they return."

He didn't ask for an explanation, just followed where she led.

They followed a mop-haired, hollow-chested Engineering dweeb named Shimkus who reminded Dorian of a chimpanzee with the way he ducked into service tunnels, sniffed the air and then proceeded to scale annoyingly tight spaces with alarming speed and agility, as though scent alone was his guide. He called out obscure section names as they transitioned from one deck to the next, not so much communicating in any way Dorian could really understand as chattering for its own sake. Like a monkey. But he was quick and efficient and seemed to have intimate knowledge of every false access panel and hidden, stooped gangway on the ship. Dorian had no choice but to follow as best he could. Their route had him completely bewildered within thirty seconds of leaving the staging bay.

Raville worried frequently and out loud about the time. As they made their way rung by rung down a long vertical shaft, Lieutenant Sainz confided to Dorian that under normal circumstances, a jaunt to the machine room from the flight bays where he had found them would take nearly ten minutes at a brisk pace. Dorian winced at the estimate. The station didn't have that long if Raville chose to fire the instant he obtained a firing solution, and he didn't see any reason why Raville wouldn't. After all, what good was having an entire battle cruiser at your disposal and going to the trouble to wrench it into firing position if you weren't going to use it?

"And how long by this route?" he asked.

Sainz paused, gripping the rungs of the ladder loosely so that his body hung carelessly out into empty space. He looked pensively up into the gloom and said, "Maybe seven. Six and a half if we hurry."

Three extra realtime minutes to save all the lives on Giari Tau.

Great.

Assuming Raville didn't catch on to what they were doing and flood the tunnels with a nerve agent, that is. Or wait until they came near an evacuation zone and open the airlocks to the void. Or perhaps something even worse, whatever his devious little digital mind could come up with to either slow them down or kill them outright.

They raced through the ship, down the strangely vacant corridors and through hauntingly quiet labs and workrooms on their way to yet more service ducts and grubby maintenance tubes, but Shimkus apparently knew what he was doing. They did not encounter any security patrols, and if they tripped any incursion sensors, the alarms were silent.

They did not die, which Dorian took as a good sign.

Not that it mattered to him tremendously. Amara would be gone one way or the other, digitized, molecularly deconstructed and mailed back to the Exousiai, sometime in the next seventeen hours. Whether they saved the station or not, whether they rescued the universe from data absorption or not, Amara was dead. She'd already given her consent to the execution, and there was nothing he could do about it. The rest was just details.

At last, they crawled one after the other out of a cooling system service tube into what seemed to be a wireless node switchroom. It smelled like a switchroom, at least, full of the ozone reek of electronic gateways and musty odor of accreted dust bunnies, but Dorian couldn't see clearly in the dim glow of the few flashlights amongst them. Shimkus knuckled over to the front door, opened it a crack and peeked out into the corridor beyond. He returned almost at once.

"We're about ten meters down the hall from the machine room. I make two teams of IT guys off to the left. One set was worrying at the door with an assortment of maglock cracking hardware, it looks like. The other was pawing around the intersection acting like ship's security, sweeping for hostiles. I think one of them may have been an agent." He wagged his fingers against his neck. "Got a red collar."

"May have been?" Sainz chewed the words slowly.

"Right, right. We're obviously not the only ones who thought about getting at the core via the control boxes. But they neglected to take into account the repulsor charges embedded in the deck plates. Looks like the core hit them with a ton of juice to keep them out."

Raville blinked in consternation. "The deck plating is electrified?"

Shimkus sniffed at him like he was being an idiot. "The machine room is right up there with the Bridge in terms of its essential operating capacity. The techs inside have to be able to defend their position while they purge the core in the event that the ship is boarded. Losing the ship is a small cost compared to opening up your whole data network to the enemy."

"Are there technicians stationed inside the machine room?" Raville asked.

Sainz glanced about the crowded room. He had brought maybe twenty Marines with him. "If there are, I don't think they'll put up much resistance."

But Shimkus shook his head sadly. "There probably were technicians on station, but the room is equipped with suicide gas decanters as a last ditch security measure to protect core integrity, so I'm guessing not now."

"Great," Dorian grumbled. Suicide gas. The atmosphere

inside would still be toxic. "Any bright ideas?"

Shimkus opened a utility closet near the door and removed a pair of osmosis masks. "Wear these. Work fast."

"We still have to get inside across the electrified deck," Raville pointed out.

Shimkus fished inside his shirt and took out a bungee strap necklace which held a maintenance turnkey that glinted in the feeble light. He pointed to a space on the floor beneath Dorian's feet. "Old wiring conduit there, cramped but serviceable. The key works on both ends. With any luck, no one will have thought to cram the conduit full of sensors."

Dorian glanced from Shimkus to Lieutenant Sainz, but neither one seemed chock full of confidence. He snatched the key and dropped to his knees, hunting out the recessed lock by touch. Sainz swept the floor with his flashlight's beam, and the rough shape of the panel became apparent.

"As soon as you're gone," Sainz said, "my men and I will disperse into the corridor and see if we can't provide something of a diversion."

"A diversion," Raville muttered. "Against an opponent comprised of packets of active information and which possesses the capacity to monitor and utilize the full complement of the datacore's systems all at once. Brilliant."

"Or we can just wait in here until we hear the screams that let us know you failed, if that's what you prefer," the lieutenant responded grimly.

Dorian wrestled the panel open and dropped into the darkness below. A short drop, thankfully, little more than a meter. Someone passed him a flashlight, and he stooped to explore the passage. Shimkus hadn't been lying. It was definitely cramped. Bundles of old pre-connex photon impulse cables hung from the top and sides of the tube like atrophied muscle tissue. The conduit smelled old and abandoned, funky with wire insulation rot. Good thing he wasn't claustrophobic, but as long as the tunnel didn't bend too sharply, it wouldn't present an insurmountable obstacle.

He popped back out, only his head and shoulders rising above deck level, and waved for Raville to follow. To Sainz, he said: "Go ahead and make some noise. Be safe about it, though, and give us two minutes to squirm through to the

other side before hammering away. It can't hurt."

"Don't forget to put your mask on," the lieutenant said. "See you in a few minutes."

Dorian lowered himself back inside, then dropped onto his belly and began to drag himself down the long conduit on his elbows.

Ray was sure he hadn't heard her correctly.

"You want us to *what*?"

He couldn't be sure, but he was fairly certain that he sounded borderline hysterical. He felt borderline hysterical.

"Trust me," Amara said. "I know what I'm doing."

Wink.

"This is distinctly unpleasant," Raville said, his voice muffled by his mask. He was panting hard, and Dorian entertained the fleeting hope that it wasn't working correctly. A part of him would very much enjoy watching Raville's death squirms as he was suffocated by the gas he himself (sort of, anyway) had released.

More likely though, his gasping was due to simple fatigue. Ten meters didn't sound like much of a distance, but Dorian hadn't done it on his elbows and knees since basic training, and the new body didn't seem to like it any more than the old one had. He could feel the strain of dragging himself down the conduit through his shoulders and all the way down to the small of his back. He wasn't in the mood for Raville's whining.

"You don't get to complain," he growled. He had to raise his voice a bit. Sainz and his men were fully into diversion mode. Dorian wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but it seemed to involve a lot of shouting and gunfire and the occasional bone-vibrating discharge of a massive wad of electrical energy that made his hair stand on end. It sounded interesting, at least, whether or not it was actually doing any good.

He continued: "This is your mess. The rest of us were just unlucky enough to cross your event horizon."

"You can't honestly believe that."

"Sure I can. This is your package we're going to hunt

down. You're the one who built the bomb. If you want to take it back to the beginning, as a subset of your pattern-father or whatever, you're the one who decided to screw with the Exousiai in the first place. You're the one who sent Amara here and expected her to serve your stupid plot. Why shouldn't I blame you?"

Raville didn't answer at once, and Dorian assumed he was being ignored rather than that he had scored a point in his favor. Raville was much too arrogant to concede that he might be an asshole.

But when he did answer, Raville sounded oddly subdued. "This is about her, isn't it? Your dislike of me, your constant troublemaking, your determination to be a thorn in everyone's side. It isn't because you aren't willing to help save the world if asked, it's that you're angry. You're angry with me because you believe that I'm the one who decided she had to sacrifice her human incarnation."

Dorian snorted. "I hate it when you do that. *Sacrifice her human incarnation*. Stop glossing over it. You don't know what it means to be Exousian any more than I do. You don't know if she'll survive the transition back to that universe, and even if she does, she won't be Amara anymore. She'll be part of the entity, and if part of it that contains her pattern survives the bomb, it still won't matter. She'll just be a fragment. You're murdering her either way."

"As part of the Exousiai, there's the distinct possibility —"

"Shut up about the Exousiai, okay? What do you really even know about them? You're not part of the entity. You're a subset of a disgruntled pattern who built you specifically to hate what you came from. The whole experience of the entity is just a mediated memory for you, a corrupted simulacrum you replicated in the *quae-ha-distra* you cooked up for your own amusement back when you still believed in their bullshit. You want to know what I think? I think you must still believe half of the lies they told you, otherwise you wouldn't spend so much time whining about how you're merely reconverting her to her true form rather than murdering her. Every time you say that, you try to implicate her in her own death, saying that she's part of the same pattern that created you and so she is just as responsible for these events as you are. You try to

make her guilty for her own execution. That's what pisses me off. Why can't you just admit that the only reason you're killing her is because it's necessary to this plan you've cooked up?"

"She isn't human, Dorian. You know that. She was made for this purpose."

"For a guy who talks so much about how essential it is to make the Exousiai spontaneous again, you're very focused on this idea of predetermination. It's vital for every one of the Exousiai to get free will and autonomy out of this deal except Amara, is that it? She has to do what she was made to do, but the rest of you get to choose what you want."

"She *did* choose this," Raville said, though not stridently, as he expected. He spoke quietly, almost reverently. "She chose it then, and she chooses it again now. The sacrifice she makes means more here, in fact, than it did when she was a component of the entity, because she makes it of her own free will. She makes it cognizant of what she is giving up, measuring her sacrifice against the experience and intuitive knowledge of being autonomous rather than making a dry and academic surrender to an abstract idea of autonomy. You're absolutely right: there is more of the entity in her than there is in me, John. She knows how to savor the oneness of the Exousiai, and yet she still chooses to give it all up—both the oneness and the radical individualism of humanity—so that we both might live. You should honor her for her courage, for her self-sacrifice and for her love. The Exousiai are not gods, but if there is anything within them with the potential to be godlike, it was distilled to perfection in the form of that girl."

Dorian dragged himself forward, and encountered a wall directly ahead. Space opened above him, and he realized that he had come to the end of the conduit. He wriggled forward and managed to draw his knees up under him so that his back pressed against the floor panel above. He searched for the lock with his fingers, found it and inserted the key. The latch clicked open, and he felt the panel give way when he pushed against it.

He glanced down at Raville, who had worked himself to the end of the conduit and lay still directly below Dorian, his

face showing between Dorian's knees. He could smell chemicals, harsh and biting like a particularly vile astringent. Wisps of milky white gas, visible in the beam of his flashlight, boiled in through the gap created by the open panel.

Raville meant the things that he said. He believed them as fervently as any religious zealot. Amara was not his tool, but an icon to be adored.

In his own way, Michael Raville had come to love Amara, to care about her as much as Dorian himself did.

The thought made his stomach churn.

"I don't care how much you admire her," he said, whispering into the dark. "I still hate you."

For whatever reason, Raville did not protest this time. Maybe the feeling was mutual.

Dorian looked away. "Let's get this done."

And so he had come full circle.

Seated at an emergency system console hard-connexed to the primary datacore moderator housing, the darkness illuminated only by the glow of his monitor and red hazard lights which pulsed in recessed sconces high on the walls, the familiar feel of a keypad clicking against his fingertips, he could not help but remember that this was how it had all started: drilling down through file structures and trees of system logic to root out a spider.

Of course, his work environment had been better then, his priorities clearer, or at least so he imagined. At least in his office there hadn't been corpses littered about the floor or slumped over in neighboring workspaces, their faces contorted in variously horrific expressions of death-agony. Nor had the air been fogged with brain corroding chemicals that spurted irregularly from pinpoint jets hidden in the walls. Most of all, the basement of the Archive had held only a simulacrum of Michael Raville contained in its own impregnable environment, rather than the actual one tethered by a hardline plug from his array directly into the datacore moderator.

The more things changed, the more they stayed the same. Or got patently worse.

The good news was that both he and Raville had foam

access once again, provided by the central datburst origin node—a hardware mainline straight into the heart of the computational universe.

As he skipped through the text of his foam's file structure, marshalling his tools to jack into the datacore, Dorian wasn't sure what he had accomplished in the intervening weeks and months, if anything. He'd met a girl, found out that she was a god, then not a god, possibly fallen in love with her, jacked some datacores, ruined his career, and abandoned the only life he had ever known. It felt like activity without any real progress. Maybe the stakes were higher, though it was hard to tell. Was there any difference between saving digitally frozen representations of life and the actual lives themselves? Not that he'd really done much of the latter thus far. The universe was just as close to the brink of disaster as it had been when they began.

But the spider had grown, that much was certain. Or perhaps more properly, he and the spider had exchanged roles. Dorian had become the spider, gnawing his way stealthily into a network that was not his own to extract data (or in this case, a data package) he believed would rescue the world from destruction.

Funny how things worked out sometimes.

He could have saved them all a lot of pain and suffering if he'd just deleted Raville's rogue package in the first place. Dorian didn't figure that he'd make the same mistake twice. God Himself—that is, the card carrying, members only God, with a glowing entourage of Heavenly Host and visage more radiant than the sun, rather than aliens with delusions of grandeur—would be hard pressed to convince him to do anything but hit the delete key this time. Maybe he'd just make absolutely sure of it and dump the whole core. That would piss off DeMartel and Temple, their beautiful battle cruiser instantly transmogrified into a floating metal turd locked in a dead orbit about a frozen moon. It would take weeks to rebuild the basic systems from scratch, just so they could limp home. Or even better, they'd have to endure the career-ending embarrassment of flashing the Strat naval shipyards for a datacore reinitialization scheme.

He liked that idea. He might purge the core anyway, even

if Raville threw his hands up in surrender and voluntarily exited the ship's network on the first pass.

He made what he hoped was eye contact with Michael Raville. His vision was too bleary to see that far with any clarity. His eyes had begun to burn almost immediately upon entering the machine room despite the protections the mask offered, and he was developing a painfully itchy rash where his skin was exposed. He worried constantly about his assorted unguarded mucous membranes. Which made it a good thing that he was so scared, he supposed. His anus was pinched so tight, *nothing* was worming its way in there.

And every time he almost settled down, the electrified deck just outside the door would give out a thunderous *whump!* and fill the room with the stench of ozone and flash baked carpet fiber. Even less encouraging was the muffled pop and rattle of gunfire, which seemed to be drawing nearer. Once, he thought he had heard Lieutenant Sainz shouting down the hall, telling them to hurry. But he might have just imagined it. It was turning out to be a bad day for nerves.

"Are you ready?"

"I'd better be," Raville answered. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor a short distance from Dorian's terminal, his back against the box of the moderator housing. "We've got less than three minutes by my watch."

"Plenty of time. Once I kick open the gate, I'm going directly for Firing Control. If I can take away his ability to play with the weapons of mass destruction first, we'll have space to breathe. . .at least until he figures out that the ship constitutes about a million tons of the lethal battering ram."

That wasn't really what he was worried about. Raville's package had to have been aware for some time that the bomb was on board the *Indianapolis*. It wasn't the bomb he was after. It was Raville himself. Or Amara. Maybe both of them. Take out all the parts of the war equation and the possibility of war ceased to exist.

If the package hadn't realized that his targets were all aboard yet, he would in about three seconds, and then they'd have to act quickly.

Dorian wondered how long it would take to work the thrust tubes up to a self-destructive critical mass. Assuming,

of course, that the ship didn't come with its very own doomsday self-destruct device.

He forced himself to put away such cheery thoughts.

Small circles, happy circles, he reminded himself.

"While you do that, I'll track down. . .myself," Raville said humorlessly.

"Send up a flare when you find him, and I'll see what I can do to assist you with containment. You probably won't have to look very hard. As soon as he reads your ip, more than likely he'll come after you. I assume you don't need any advice on how to handle your part of this job."

"Please. I haven't forgotten everything I ever learned about seenop incursion techniques." Raville smiled hesitantly. "But if you have the cycles to spare, I wouldn't object to some extra fireproofing."

"I'll take that as high praise, Mr. Raville. The system is up; security is clamping down. We have our projected access punch point, which I'm transmitting to your foam now. I'll blaze the trail, you just do your best to follow until we get through the trees." Dorian held up three fingers. "Get ready. We go in three, two. . ."

One.

He punched the execute sequence, launching the first salvo in a vicious script blizzard designed to camouflage the exact vector of their assault. A cascade of feedback logs and failed load messages poured across the screen.

They were off and running.

Dorian wished he had his array. Wished for it harder than he'd ever wished for anything in his life. The Strat datacore scheme was feverishly dense, dizzyingly secured. Military ice was always hard to scale, quick to sled you off at oblique angles, spin your scripts off free-fall ledges and into maddening tailspins. It presented an impermeable sheet of interlocking, adaptive code blocks that dynamically repaired apparent breaches. Every time you thought you had traction, the scuffs your incursion codes and malware scripts created instantaneously vanished, and you once again found yourself sliding down the face of a vertical cliff.

He watched the data spewing across his screen at a rate

that was nearly impossible to follow. Icebreaker programs launched, crashed and vanished from his display before he could even process which ones they had been. He didn't have time to reference the logs to determine which sequences were working and which weren't, which code was hacking even a precious partial step into the undergrowth, and which was failing before it was even unsheathed. He drove forward primarily by intuition, relying on his experience with military networks in the past.

Load this one; load that one; resequence the attack so the defenses couldn't automate a response—couldn't start eating into *his* environment to shut him down at the source. He monitored his own recursive defenses for traceback holes the network or Raville might be trying to bore into his foam.

Dorian's advantage was that he didn't have to negotiate jump points into the network that could be spontaneously closed or rerouted into interminable logic loops by native security procedures. He couldn't be kicked off the core. The moderator's access terminal provided him with an open door directly into the lowest circles of data hell. His job was to open as many other doors at once as he could, then shove a blinding storm of random bits through each portal faster than the network, and subsequently Raville's package, could analyze them for coherence and recognize the origin of the true incursion attempt.

Once they were inside, it was a simple footrace to see who could shut down whose access and command scripts the fastest.

The central question was what Raville's package expected, and how much care and time he had taken to lay down his defenses. Dorian was keenly aware that he had carried Raville inside his foam for many months. There had been ample opportunity for him to see Dorian's code magery at work and to analyze his library of jackware. If Raville had thought he only needed to defend himself against the *Indianapolis's* attempts to regain control of its datacore and trusted his security to merely shutting down node access, then he had a real chance of breaking through. But if Raville had anticipated that Dorian would come after him and had laid traps using Dorian's own counterscripts against him, then all

was lost. He didn't have time to come up with an entirely fresh scheme of attack against the full archive of all the best work he had ever done.

His plan was simple and not the least bit elegant: hit hard, dig deep and do it on a scale so massive that moderator prox couldn't keep up with the assault. In short, use the expansive capability of one of the premier pieces of military computational hardware in the universe against itself. In the back of his mind, he was counting on technicians and IT wonks, security agents and idle information seekers all across the ship to help him, each of them probing the system for jump points, and when they found a crack, hammering at it until the core's defenses were overwhelmed by their combined pressure.

Just over a minute into the attempt, Raville announced, "I'm in. The datascape just opened up."

Moments later, Dorian's terminal screen filled with overlaid representations of the complex mappings that comprised the multifaceted datacore of the T.E.S. *Indianapolis*. Dorian let out a brief whoop of satisfaction.

He had broken the datacore's security much quicker than he anticipated, which meant that Raville had been caught by surprise. It also meant that the Strat naval forces seriously needed to upgrade their tech expertise. Dorian would enjoy rubbing that in Kesh Temple's face if the opportunity arose.

He bent over his keypad. The first thing he did was to shunt a bit profile over to Raville's foam, along with a flurry of self-defense scripts. If they were lucky, it would allow Raville a chance to become the hunter rather than they prey.

"Thanks for that," Raville murmured. "God, this scape is big."

Dorian wasn't listening. He flashed through the architectural partitions—Engineering, Thrust Dynamics, Admin, Communications. He ticked down through architectural ladders, drilled into systems whose purposes he didn't comprehend. His viral spiders plunged across indices, tying up resources, unknotting node access, throwing open the windows of the datacore's structure to the light of day. And everywhere he went, he seeded vicious self-organizing, stimulus adaptive viral mites. They were small and stealthy

bits of code that dug deep, automatically assembled and coordinated their activity through signal pulses transmitted back and forth within his foam environment. Above all, they searched through the architecture for anything resembling weapons management software systems and chewed debilitating data holes in whatever they found.

"Forty five seconds to DeMartel's firing solution deadline," Raville informed him.

"I think that was just a ballpark figure."

"Try to err on the side of caution, then."

Dorian grunted in annoyance. "We passed the deadline for caution about twelve minutes ago. Why don't you just worry about your own job, okay?"

"I'm trying, but where *is* he? I thought you said he would likely attack me?"

Logistics, Personnel Resources, IT Security. The datacore index ran on for screen after screen. Where the hell was Firing Control?

"Maybe he's hiding. He doesn't want to be purged any more than you do."

Raville frowned.

A deep rumble ran through the ship, and the emergency lights flickered. "That would be the Spriggs-Detmer array charging up," Raville advised. "Fifteen seconds to charge, five to confirm target. . .DeMartel isn't going to miss his estimate by much."

"Hold on," Dorian muttered. "Hold on, hold on."

Command Operations, Tactical Systems, Defensive Batteries. . .

"Firing Control!" Dorian stabbed at a series of keys, unlocking a batch of malicious quik-release virals he had held in reserve. "I've got it. Loading the counterscripts now. Give it five seconds."

Four, three, two, one.

Nothing happened. At least, nothing *bad* happened. The ship didn't shudder with the sudden expulsion of surface devastating projectiles. The lights didn't flicker again as particle beam energy weapons pounded the distant Giari Tau station to pulp and wreckage.

For five more seconds, Dorian sat completely still, not even

daring to breathe. Waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Raville to route commands around his frustration of the Firing Control software system and launch his delayed attack.

Nothing continued to happen for several more seconds, and finally, Dorian took a breath.

The waveform collapsed, the box was opened, the cat was alive.

Raville sat up straight. "I've got a ping on him—he's right in front of me!"

"Flash me your relative position. I'll track him and cut him off. Do you have a viral script loaded?"

"I'm ready."

Dorian reconfigured his display as the data came flooding in from Raville's foam. He read the chase through the datascape as entries in the bitstream transfer logs. At the same time, he ran verification analyses against the emerging shape of Raville's package, comparing the features of the original profile against this newly configured pattern. Raville had grown considerably since Dorian had copied him over from the Archive, accreting terabytes of data from Dorian's foam and from whatever he had added to himself inside the datacore. Bloated was probably a more accurate term, and the weight and complexity he had amassed slowed him down as he transitioned from node to node, and attempted to shove himself through datburst bottlenecks.

"I'm confirming a pattern match," Dorian said finally. "I've got him locked in a predictive scan algorithm. He's hemorrhaging data as he goes, trying to get leaner, I guess. Hoping to duck into a loosely structured file system and get lost. Let him have his head for a bit. I'll close the doors ahead of him and limit his escape vectors—keep him away from jump points, especially."

Raville nodded his understanding. "I'm moving in."

"Don't play with him. He could still be very dangerous."

Dorian watched, waiting for Raville—either one of them—to make his move. He tapped out a series of commands to seal the nodes to the package's profile, then slowly began to open them up again to external users. He restored essential systems to the Bridge and Engineering, reset the comm relays on a limited basis, and ordered an environmental purge of the

machine room.

The recessed jets finally stopped pumping lethal gas into the room, and cool air began to waft against his face. Eventually, the red emergency beacons stopped pulsing, and the overhead lights snapped on.

The machine room door opened and Shimkus poked his head inside. He sniffed at the air, wrinkled his nose, then shrugged. He pushed the door the rest of the way open.

"Hey! You're not dead!" he said brightly. "Limited communications are back up. Have been for a while. We've had some tangles with Security trying to run in on you. Good fun, but bad for morale. At least on their side."

Dorian waved him off. "I'm reading you passing out of the central core into a dead end auxiliary system. He's got nowhere to run."

"I see him," Raville said. A sheen of sweat broke across his brow. "Loading virals."

Dorian punched up a few silver bullets from his own arsenal. "I've got your back. Target pattern shows as stationary. He's hit a locked node."

"Executing now."

Dorian fired his own scripts for good measure.

Data moved across the quantum universe. Binary switches flipped. Bits scattered in a storm of chaotic noise, then dynamically reformed into sparkling new arrangements as though their original pattern had never existed.

He sighed quietly. A frozen concatenation of ones and zeroes. That's all Raville's package had ever been.

Except. . .

Michael Raville leapt to his feet, his face ashen and his eyes wide. "What just happened? Where did he go?"

"He didn't go anywhere. He was just data. We erased him."

But Raville shook his head furiously. "No. He *vanished*. Right in front of me. He was there, and then simply gone."

Dorian narrowed his gaze, uncomprehending. He had witnessed the data blocks that constituted Raville's package disappear. Raville had executed one script. Dorian had launched two. He had watched the package's destruction.

"It's probably just an artifact of the environment," he said.

"The military frowns on seenop renders that are too detailed. It chews up bandwidth that can be better allocated elsewhere. Sometimes the system strips them by default—"

"Check the logs," Raville hissed.

Dorian shrugged. If he had been Michael Raville, he'd want to be sure, too. A quick patter of keystrokes brought up the command log, white text on a black background. That was the sort of reassurance Raville would need. Good, solid text. Text that didn't lie, didn't occlude it's truth behind fancy combinations of pixels.

The last entries transmitted back to the command log consisted of three identical, impossible messages.

Script aborted. Specified target file does not exist.

Script aborted. Specified target file does not exist.

Script aborted. Specified target file does not exist.

Somehow, the package of Michael Raville had found an open node and bounced out of the datacore.

Dorian loaded up a core purge sequence, disconnected both his and Raville's foam from the moderator and with the punch of a key, began a complete and irreversible reformat of the T.E.S. *Indianapolis's* datacore. Without going line by line through the code, it was the only way to be sure that the rogue package wasn't hiding somewhere deep in the bowels of the system. Dorian didn't pretend even for a moment that this wasn't a necessary precaution. It was an admission of defeat, plain and simple. He hadn't caught the spider, just chased it off without uncovering any of its lairs, any of its trapdoor hideouts. The spider could repossess the network any time it chose.

Raville had beaten him.

"That's not going to make you any friends around here," Michael Raville observed, once it became clear what he had done.

"They weren't going to be my friends anyway." Besides, if he was going to fail, he might as well fail spectacularly.

"That's probably true." Raville flicked an uneasy glance at the terminal. "Is the ship in any danger?"

"The reformat will only take a couple of hours. Localized systems will keep basic services running—navigation, life support, reactor maintenance—long enough to refresh the

network scheme from whatever backup they've got." Worst case scenario, there was always the Strat naval shipyards, which was exactly what they deserved if they didn't have a reliable backup protocol. But Dorian knew that wasn't what Raville really cared about. "Don't worry. Things will be peachy again in time for you to launch your bomb on schedule, I'm sure."

A bombastic exhale of relief from Raville. Dorian resisted the urge to beat him to death with his keypad, and recognizing that his resistance was not going to be entirely effective, he welcomed the arrival of Lieutenant Sainz and the sober announcement that they should get back to the flight bay with the others before ship security arrived in force and all sorts of misunderstandings ensued.

26.

They shuttled back down to the Giari Tau station within the hour, accompanied by an escort of willing Marines led by Lieutenant Sainz. The Misfit Toys were enticed to come along, though it was not a decision made without reservations, many of which Dorian assumed had something to do with leaving the bomb unattended after they'd gone through so much to locate it. But Amara spoke to Ray privately, and whatever she said to him provided all the reassurance he needed.

The shuttle was small and crowded with so many passengers—they'd had to leave most of the Marines behind on the flight deck, and even then most of them had refused to disperse until Amara ordered that the loading ramp be lowered so that she could stand at the opening to the airframe and wave to them. The soldiers had watched her with bright eyes and broad smiles on their lips, not even understanding the emotions that had overtaken them, just pleased to have been in her presence.

Dorian spent the whole episode expecting them to start throwing their underwear into the doorway.

When the loading ramp had been retracted and the shuttle sealed for transit once more, Amara fell into the seat beside him and placed her hand companionably over his.

"That's a sour look," she said. "You don't approve of their adoration."

"They don't understand their adoration. You're a rock star to them, a celebrity whose rumors have become larger than

life, no doubt thanks to our dear Lieutenant Sainz."

"Korin has witnessed wonders. Can you blame him for wanting to share that experience with others?"

"*Korin* doesn't have a clue about how it works. He doesn't know anything about the Exousiai and quantum event manipulation."

Amara laughed. "And knowing the mechanism, even if one can't duplicate it, makes the whole affair less mystical, is that it? It stops being miracles and merely becomes science. Are you saying you'd rather have theatrical hand waving than a solid explanation?"

"No. I'm just saying that it isn't the same. Mechanics can fail. Magic is easier to believe in."

"And yet Raville has told us that doubt is a sign of spiritual maturity. A wise man once said: let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds, but when he finds, he will become troubled. And once he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and then he will rule over all knowledge."

"I don't want to know everything," Dorian responded.

Amara's expression grew serious, and she squeezed his hand. "Do you still believe, John? In me, I mean. Not that I'm some kind of goddess, but that I am who I say I am, and that I can do what I said I can do? Do you *trust* me still?"

Dorian sat up nervously, and narrowed his gaze in her direction. "Every time you ask me that, it means that something bad is about to happen."

"No, it means that something interesting is about to occur." Her smile was guileless, but he knew better than to take it at face value.

"Same difference."

"Think about it if you must," she said then. "We'll talk again later."

The craft slipped gently out into space and began the smooth descent toward Giari Tau. Dorian did not speak much for the duration of the flight. Mostly, he listened to Ghast and Thomas as they recounted their adventures while infiltrating the *Indinapolis* for Amara, who smiled and clapped her hands at the appropriate junctures. At odd intervals, he tuned out their narrative to shamelessly eavesdrop on Raville's tightbeam radio transmissions with the station. He learned in

this way that at some point, they had passed the shuttle bearing Temple and DeMartel back to their flagship, and that he—John Dorian—was to consider himself unwelcome aboard the *Indianapolis* in the future, and should he consider violating that order, he would be summarily executed at the first convenient moment.

Despite the fact that he had kept their ship from wantonly destroying a foreign government's research station, the Flight Commander apparently insisted upon believing that the whole episode was somehow Dorian's fault, that he had maliciously and automagically infected their datacore to take vengeance on the Strat military for killing his friends in the warehouse battle.

Dorian supposed that this might be considered technically true, if one left out the bits about it being malicious or even intentional, though he had, in fact, been the one who had borne Raville's package in his foam all the way from the Archive to the ship's datacore. It didn't really matter as far as he was concerned. He didn't have any plans of ever setting foot on the *Indianapolis* again.

He also discovered that the crew of the *Juggernaut* was able to stabilize their decaying orbit and return some power to the ship's engines. They had lost nearly seven hundred hands in the attack, but barring a catastrophic series of failures, the worst was behind them, and given a few weeks of feverish labor, the *Juggernaut* should be able to begin the long limp home. When Raville announced this news, the Marines aboard the shuttle sent up a raucous cheer, and Dorian joined them, proving once and for all (to himself, if no one else), that though he wasn't a friend of the Strat military apparatus, he wasn't a complete jerk either.

They had saved many lives today. Thousands, in fact.

And in just over sixteen hours, they would lose the one that mattered to him the most.

When they reached the station, Dorian and Amara returned to the rooms that had been provided for them the previous day. Raville locked himself away with Ford Garrison and representatives of the station's technical staff, including Fen Corrie, Dr. Skiles and Kenwood Bryce, to prepare for the

deployment of their weapon. Lieutenant Sainz and his men were billeted in the dormitory that had previously been set aside for them. The Misfit Toys did as they had always done and made their own way. No one was exactly certain where they had gotten off to, but before departing, Raville pointedly informed station security not to make trouble for them. Ray and his crew had earned a modicum of grace.

Amara shared with Dorian from her secret storehouse of knowledge that they had broken into one of the alternate VIP suites on the far side of the station's bowl and made themselves very merry indeed before collapsing at last into well-deserved sleep.

They were alone once more at last. To occupy themselves, they prepared a meal for which neither of them had the stomach, then picked aimlessly at it as they sat across from one another at the dining room table. In between, they made desultory chatter, though there was little signal and much noise in their communication. By the time they cleared away their plates, neither of them had eaten more than a few bites. Eventually, they retreated to the bedroom to sleep. It was still early, barely mid-afternoon station time, but it had already been a long day. An unendurably long day.

Dorian lay side by side with Amara and stared at the ceiling, exhausted but unable to fall asleep. She was quiet and thoughtful. He sighed often, but said nothing. After a time, they made love. Because it felt necessary, he thought, rather than out of want. It seemed the only way to express the unspoken feeling between them. He couldn't define the emotion except to say that it felt like dread, only with longer claws. It reminded him of Lily, of grief, but grief seemed like the wrong word. He had grieved for Lily, and it had been a weight on his heart, a great stone bearing down on his chest. This was something else. If grief was a stone, this was an entire mountain shattered and collapsed on top of him. A volume of rubble from which he would never be able to dig himself clear.

Amara joked that she might as well put her body to good use for the last few hours that remained to it, but Dorian did not laugh.

In the end, and hating himself for it, he slept.

He didn't know what else to do.

She whispered into his ear. Mysteries he did not hear.

Dorian opened one eye, and that hardly a slit. He wasn't awake yet, still somewhere in the twilight lands between slumber and groggy awareness, and all he wanted to do was roll away from her and go back to sleep. He didn't want to be awake. The waking world was full of pain and loss and grief he didn't want to face again.

Then he wondered what time it was, how long he had been asleep, and then immediately after, by reflex, how many hours remained for her. That was all it took.

Dorian goaded himself up, groaning through the progressive discovery that he was sore from crawling around starship underbellies. Eventually, he forced the other eye open. The bedroom lights were low, the room full of shadows, giving the impression that evening had snuck up on him. Amara sat on the edge of the bed beside him, dressed in a silk robe—pink, with blue flowers. She held a mug of steaming hot coffee in one hand and offered it in his direction.

He accepted the mug gratefully after working himself upright and putting his back against the headboard.

"How long have you been awake?" he asked, prodded by a stab of guilt.

"Long enough to make coffee," she teased. "But not much more than that. It's getting late, though. Time for you to get up, or you'll never get to sleep tonight."

He doubted he'd be doing much of that anyway. "What time is it?"

"We have about two hours before someone will come to take us down to the lab Raville has set up for the disassembly and encoding procedure," she said, answering the question he did not dare to ask.

Dorian sipped at his coffee and frowned. She made it sound so clinical and straightforward, like a medical check-up—mildly uncomfortable, but not otherwise a reason for concern.

"I put out some clothes for you," Amara said. "Your old ones were filthy."

"Thanks."

Amara nudged him gently with her hip until he made room for her. She curled up beside him, bending one knee over his thighs and tucking her arm beneath the small of his back. She lay her head against his chest, and didn't speak. Dorian imagined that she was listening to him breathe. He didn't want her to stop, didn't want to interrupt her or disturb the feel of her warmth and the tactile comfort of her body pressed against his, skin to skin.

A hollow ache swelled in his chest. He was so close to losing her, and there was nothing he could say to make it better.

"What were you saying when you woke me?" he asked. "You whispered something in my ear, but I didn't hear it."

"I asked if you still trusted me."

"And what did I answer?"

"You didn't."

"Ah. That's because my mother always told me never to commit to anything asked of you in the warm afterglow of sex," he joked. "She used to say that was how she ended up married to my father."

Amara nuzzled his chest. He thought she might be smiling. "My mother told me that afterglow was the only time most men would ever give truly honest answers."

"Check and mate," Dorian said. "On the other hand, the fact that we're talking about what our mothers learned from having sex is more than a little icky. On those grounds, I move that we declare this match a forfeit and reset the board."

"I want you to answer my question first."

"I do," he said. It shouldn't surprise him that she was in a serious mood. She only had a few hours left to live. "You require a ton of reassurance for a semi-omniscient being, you know that? Did I give you a reason to doubt me?"

"No. Like you said, I just needed some reassurance. Humor me, okay?"

He stroked her hair and drank his coffee. "Sure."

Instead of letting it drop there, she pressed ahead. "Do you believe in me more than you believe the things Michael Raville told us this morning?"

"Of course I do. Are you sure there's nothing serious behind this sudden urge to interrogate me?" Dorian poked

her in the ribs, having discovered that she was ticklish there. "I was talking in my sleep again, wasn't I?"

Instead of playing, however, Amara sat up and pulled her robe tight around her body. She looked closely at him, her expression grave, as though she was measuring him against a standard he could not see. Her lips trembled. "Do you still trust me even though you know that much of what he said about the Exousiai and their intentions was the truth?"

This wasn't how he wanted to spend their last hours together, talking about Michael Raville, but Dorian stuffed his annoyance back into the hole it had crawled out of and made himself shrug in a way that felt both casual and reassuring.

"Sure, because it wasn't the whole truth. Raville has learned a great deal about the Exousiai and about his relationship to them, but my impression from his datacore was that even he recognizes that his knowledge is imperfect. He gets the side of the story that the pattern-father wants him to have, which may be factually correct, but it isn't the whole story. He knows that too, but he doesn't let it bother him. He's chosen his side, believes what he believes, and he's not going to dig any deeper because he doesn't want to know anything else. We're responsible for the things we understand, and this problem is already complicated enough without looking for more reasons to doubt. For what it's worth, I'm convinced that he's sincere, and that he really does want to protect humanity, but that doesn't make him right. Or at least not totally right. Whether or not that matters in the end remains to be seen."

"Unfortunately, sometimes understanding imperfectly is worse than knowing everything," Amara said quietly. Her gaze flicked away from his, uncertain, frightened, both. "We aren't able to see all ends, all the potential consequences of our actions. That's when we're the most dangerous, you know. As human beings or as Exousiai, we make our biggest mistakes when we're sure of that what we're doing is right. It's when we hurt those around us the most."

"That's why all other things being equal, I'll side with the god I know rather than the one I don't."

He meant it as encouragement, a statement of faith in her, but Amara frowned and clasped her fingers together in her

lap. "We aren't gods. You were right about that all along."

"Eh, I like you better as merely superhuman anyway. I've learned that I'm intimidated by hot chicks who are also divinities."

Her frown deepened. "Please stop teasing me. I need you be serious."

"Fine, I'll be serious." Dorian put on a grim face and tried to sit up as straight and tense as she appeared. "I don't think Raville is right, and I'm not convinced that his bomb—with or without the addition of a spoonful of pearl to help the medicine go down—is going to be as effective as he thinks it will be. I'm also not convinced that it will provide adequate safeguards for the defense of humanity against the wrath of the Exousiai once they realize we've attacked them. Maybe I just lack the appropriate faith in this pattern-father thing, but I learned a long time ago that you should never underestimate the capabilities of someone who believes he has a legitimate reason to revenge himself you. And besides that, given what Raville told us about the entity's opinion of humanity in the first place, I can't imagine the pattern-father putting much effort into the bits of the bomb designed to protect us from their backlash in the first place. Protecting us isn't really his primary goal here.

"Let me put it this way: when Ray and the Misfit Toys go after an oppressive political regime, they don't build their plans around the core idea that the herds of cattle fenced in the green fields around the capital must be protected at all costs. A few cows are a small price to pay for victory. By the same token, if the collapsing regime decided to use those cows as a weapon and sent them stampeding through the town in an attempt to disrupt the impending revolution, no one would sit back and try to understand what's got the cows feeling so aggrieved or how the revolution can proceed without hurting any of the bovine innocents. They defend the community and the movement by going after the herd and corralling it or if necessary, killing as many of the cows as it takes to get the situation back under control. Do you see what I mean?" He lifted her chin until she looked at him. "And if all of that wasn't enough to give me pause, my deeply felt personal position on this issue is that any solution predicated on

sacrificing your life is categorically the wrong one. How's that?"

The stern line of her jaw softened and the tension in shoulders relaxed. Amara smiled appreciatively, but instead of melting gaily into his reassurances as he'd hoped, she launched off in another direction. "Nevertheless, as you've pointed out, Raville believes that he is doing the right thing. He isn't going to change his mind just because we raise a few objections. He's convinced himself that he is the channel for if not a true deity, a great and noble being qualitatively inseparable from a god, at least. He isn't a mere prophet, but an avatar, the god writ small. He doesn't have to doubt the will of his god, because the god's will is his own. Nor does he have to take responsibility for the decisions he makes or the path that has been prepared for him because the deity of which he is a part planned this entire scheme long ago. He's only fulfilling his destiny."

"I'm not going to argue with you that he isn't a sociopath," Dorian agreed. "But what's your point?"

Amara took a deep breath, hesitating as though what she was about to say frightened her. "With such unshakeable assurance to guide him, Raville is on the verge of perpetrating a great wrong in the name of preserving humanity."

"Um, yeah. Hello? I've already raised this objection. At the meeting this morning, remember? Killing attractive young women, even to save the universe, is wrong. I think that's in the Bible, in fact, in the chapter about all the bad things that make the baby Jesus cry." Dorian had to fight hard against the mounting feeling of excitement rising inside him. His grip on the coffee mug turned his knuckles white. Almost breathlessly, he asked, "Are you saying you've changed your mind about going through with this?"

"No," she responded firmly. "In that, at least, Raville remains correct. Returning to the Exousiai is my purpose in being. It's what I was made for. I can't deny that now."

"Then what is all this about?"

"Michael Raville has revealed to me that I am the product of an argument taking place within the soul of the entity. I am equal parts of the old and the new, the traditional sustaining methods of the entity and the radical evolution envisioned by

the pattern-father. The two sides war within me even now, shadowing my paths with doubt, just as they must constantly war within the Exousiai. Doubt is merely another word for entropy. It saps the spirit's strength.

"But I also know that there is a natural balance between these two impulses, the urge to remain and the will to become something new. This constant tension is part of the energy that propels the destiny of the entity forward, because even though the methods they pursue are at odds, the two sides share a common goal. They both seek the hope of a future free from fear and the threat of extinction, whether that be through the acquisition of divinity, or the reduction of themselves into finite and fragile units once more. What Raville has proposed and what the pattern-father seeks is that we should tip the scales in favor of radical change without the consent of the entity at large and see what shakes out."

"Survival of the fittest," Dorian said. "It will definitely make things interesting for them, whatever else it accomplishes."

Amara's voice grew strident. Her hands curled into fists. "But even if it helps them to wage their struggle against entropy and preserves their future as a coherent race, can any change based on deceit and the willful execution of the weak be *right*?"

Dorian put his hands up defensively. "Whoa. Moral questions. Not my bag. Sorry."

"You don't get to sit on the sidelines for this one," Amara snapped. "This is a moral situation, whether you like it or not, and choosing not to have an opinion or going along with what everyone else decides is the same thing as making a decision."

"Don't even try to pin that one on me. You know I've been against this from the beginning. I believe I've been very vocal about being against it, in fact."

Her gaze was piercing in its intensity. "Yes, but you've still gone along because you thought it was your duty to support me. You've consented with your actions if not with your mouth."

"I'm confused. I thought I consented because you said it was necessary to save humanity *and* because you said it was what you had to do."

"I appreciate that, but it's not good enough now. Now, I'm telling you that you need to make your own decisions and act on them, and not just do whatever it is you think I want."

"You want me to take a stand, is that it?" he inquired, arching his eyebrow.

"Yes."

"Even if that means trying to stop you from killing yourself if that's what I believe is right?"

"Yes, John."

"Why?"

Amara slumped in exasperation. "Because what you want matters to me. I want to know what you think, where you stand, how important any of this is to you—and I don't mean how important I am to you. You've proven that. I want to know what you want."

She was certainly serious, even if she wasn't making any sense to him. Dorian chuckled softly and ruffled her hair with his fingers. "You're beyond me, Amara, beyond all of us. You can do whatever you choose, and there's nothing we can do to stop you, goddess or not. That makes my opinions a moot point."

"Forget what you think I want, John! I'm asking you to decide if you're willing to fight for what is right rather than what seems to be necessary or expedient or loyal." Her cheeks flushed and she inhaled a sharp breath. Amara growled at him, plaintive and frustrated. "I need to know how far you're willing to go with me."

"Why has my dedication suddenly become an issue? Or even my moral orientation for that matter?" Dorian stopped himself as he began to get angry. The rising tide of his indignation receded. He should have known her better than that. She wasn't testing his resolve, but doubting her own. "I'm not asking the right questions, am I? What I should be asking is: what have you already done?"

Amara leapt out of the bed as though she'd been stunk. Her mouth snapped open as though she was about to dump a bucketload of invective on top of him, but no words came out. At last, she ducked her head guiltily.

"You know me too well."

"Not as well as your ethereal friends, but I do what I can."

Quit stalling and spill it."

"You're going to be angry with me."

"I've been angry with you more often than not since this whole thing started. Hasn't stopped you yet."

Surprisingly, she grinned in response. "Did you know that I can read Raville's *quae-ha-distra*? It isn't exactly like mine, but the principal is the same. The orbs can communicate with one another."

"I'd guessed as much. You seemed pretty focused on his during the meeting this morning, which was pretty odd, given that you've got one of your own to play with."

"It taught me a great deal that was unexpected, both about what my purpose is and what I am. It contained more secrets than Raville was willing to reveal. As a result, I've begun to see with renewed clarity and to understand the obligations I have to all that I am, and not just to forces which believe they made me to be a tool for their hand."

Dorian nodded in encouragement. "It's good to get new perspectives."

He wasn't ready to give up the hope that she might still change her mind about accepting death.

"I believe that I was made to bring unity to the divergent forces within the Exousiai. I believe that I was formed for reasons that neither the entity nor the pattern-father preordained. I'm wasn't made just to be a delivery mechanism for the pattern-father's bomb, but neither was I created merely to serve as a catalyst for the absorption of humanity into the entity. Something else entirely caused me to be, molded me from the substance of the Exousiai and embedded me in the matter of humanity to throw open the gates for a future even they haven't begun to imagine yet. There has to be a middle way between the *is* and the *is not*, the *do* and the *do not*, to get them there. A way that isn't founded on deception, betrayal and violence."

Dorian rubbed his chin thoughtfully, not really understanding. "And you think you've found this other way?"

"I do," she said in a voice that sounded like a wince. "But to walk that path, I need your help."

"I won't help you kill yourself. I can't." His voice was

harsh, hard, but all he felt was weakness. She had told him to take a stand. Well, here it was. "I might not be able to stop you, Amara, but that doesn't mean that I have to participate in it."

Speaking the words felt like a betrayal, a Judas kiss on her lips.

But Amara nodded her head, as though she had been waiting to hear him say it. "I'm not planning on letting myself be destroyed. That's what makes this so hard. It isn't my death that frightens me."

He couldn't breathe, couldn't think. "What do you mean?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "I go to a place already prepared for me, to a home that I've almost forgotten. But there's no death for me on the other side of the veil, only a different kind of being. A richer and more glorious becoming than I know how to envision. But it's still home. I'm not giving up anything but a life that's a pale shadow of my true self. It isn't a sacrifice to walk out of the darkness and into the light, John."

Dorian grunted, disappointed. "Yeah, for you and every other religious nut in the history of humanity. Come on, Amara. I'm not in the mood to play semantic games. When Raville disassembles your body and stuffs you inside his bomb, you're going to be dead as far as the rest of us are concerned. If there's some form of immortality beyond that, some transfer of information or non-dissipating encoded energy wave that simulates you, it won't mean anything here, to those of us who are left behind. You'll still be dead."

And I'll be alone.

"You don't have to be," Amara answered, almost in a whisper. "From the beginning, you've asked why you were chosen for this task, why you were taken away from all that you have ever known and cast into a situation for which you were unsuited and unprepared. Do you remember the answer that Lily gave you when you asked it of her?"

It seemed like years ago that the two of them had sat in Lily and Danek's basement wondering what they were going to do about the orb, but he did remember. It was one of the few pieces of her that remained to him. "She told me not to let

my fear of making monsters paralyze me and just make the leap."

"You've been very pious about observing the second half of her advice. You've made small leaps every time they were asked of you. You've gone along, done your best, performed miracles in your own way, even if you didn't want to. Even though you were terrified that it would eventually come down to this, to me giving up my life to save everyone else. But you've never given yourself totally to this cause. In the back of your mind, you've always hoped that we would fail. Even while seeming to go along, you've withheld the part of you that matters the most, that would actually make a difference, because you're afraid of making another monster. You needed to be sure that when we did fail, you wouldn't be responsible. You're so afraid of making things worse that you refuse to try and make them better. You're so afraid of losing what you have that you won't grasp your full portion."

"I don't want any more if killing you is the cost," Dorian railed in return. "Why is that so hard for you to understand?"

Amara surged forward and knelt beside the bed. She took his hand and held it against her cheek. "Listen to me: I chose you before I was even aware that the Exousian part of me existed, without even knowing that I had done it, I chose you. I needed you to help me because you're special, John. You know that, don't you? The things you do in and with the Strand, with networks and datacores, with any dataverse you encounter. . .they're breathtaking. You do things in those spaces that most people can't even imagine. When you work, it's like watching a sorcerer conjuring spirits from the netherworld. The sad part is that sometimes I think you've chosen to forget how magnificent the talents are which you possess. You've spent too much time denying your gifts to fully appreciate them anymore, blaming yourself for what happened to Lily. But the rest of us, we've seen what you can accomplish. We stand in awe of you."

Dorian grunted. "Yeah? I can name a dozen jacks off the top of my head who are better than I am. Maybe two dozen. People who can really do amazing things with the Strand, with incursion scripts and data architectures. What does that have to do with this?"

"The difference is that none of them is you," she insisted. "I don't care that you think they may be better or faster or more clever. I'm telling you that you can be more than anyone like you has ever been. Your potential is what I need. I picked you because you know instinctively how to lay bare the self-sufficient mind of an information lattice and convert that chaos of text and impulse and pattern into the Living Word. You're not afraid to dare the impossible to protect what you love. It's you that I need. You that I want."

"So I should be flattered that you chose me to help murder you?" he returned icily. "Thanks to me you get to go out on your own terms rather than the way Raville had planned for you, is that it?"

She looked up at him, her eyes fierce and full of love. "No, John. I chose you to be with me. To *come* with me. To save me from death."

It took him a moment to understand what she meant. "Into the entity."

"When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter the kingdom.' The render of Raville's wife told us that, remember? I didn't understand it until today." Amara grimaced. "We should have asked better questions. It would have saved us a ton of grief."

Dorian stared at her as though she had gone mad. His body felt numb, frozen. "You're talking about. . .what? Taking me with you? Encoding me as—" He shook his head stubbornly. "No. That can't be right. I'm not one of you. I'm not like you. I can't exist that way, as information, as a bodiless. . .accretion. I'm human. It would be the same thing as suicide."

"You wouldn't be human anymore," she responded softly, fearfully. "You would be part of me, a self-aware pattern enfolded into the essence of the pearl. We would be. . .one."

"Ah, dead together, you mean. But at least neither one of

us would be alone, right?"

"There is no reason that either of us should have to die. Not a true death, at least. It's just our bodies that will be lost."

"Until we get digested by the entity. Or have you forgotten about that part?"

"I haven't forgotten what Raville said," Amara responded. "But I don't believe it must necessarily occur as he imagines it, either. There is a way to avoid that end which may be the key to salvation for us all."

She got his attention at least. "Go on."

"The entity as constituted is an information network, a delicately constructed lattice of energetic waves and particles streaming through nodal points embedded in the fabric of their universe. At the core, it is simply a vast and orchestrated cohesion living information maintained in a virtual datascape. The entity is a construct containing the conscious representations of the Exousiai and all that they have ever known. A construct the size of the universe, true, but nevertheless, still just a construct." Amara gazed at him significantly. "If it is an information machine, you can jack it. I believe that."

"Jack a network the size of an entire universe." The concept was beyond Dorian's comprehension. He couldn't even begin to grapple with it, so he set it aside. "For what purpose?"

"Enfolded inside me, with full access to the knowledge and skill of the Exousiai, I think that given a chance, you could figure out a way to hold us, you and I, together as distinct information patterns long enough for a miracle to happen."

"A miracle?" Dorian said, skeptically.

"If we can resist the attempts by the entity to absorb our unique pattern and establish ourselves as an individuated unit of thought and experience, it will exacerbate the tension which already exists within the soul of the Exousiai. It will remind those who have forgotten that there is life outside of their oneness. The proof that another being not only can exist, but *chooses* of its own free will to exist independently can be the catalyst that will tear the entity asunder."

"How is tearing the entity apart from the inside any different than what Raville has in mind?"

"The difference is the choice," Amara said. "And choice makes all the difference. Instead of forcing the Exousiai to accept a future that has been determined for them, we would offer them the opportunity to choose their destiny. We will show them that it's possible to exist outside of the entity by replacing their all encompassing oneness with duality—a duality comprised of you and I as a part of their whole, but not subject to it. We'll serve as examples of what it means to be independent units of thought and action in a universe that knows no agency but its own, a voice crying in the wilderness. Do you understand?"

He didn't, not at all, but not understanding wasn't his primary objection. "It's a nice thought, but it's impossible, Amara. Data can't jack other units of information without some sort of external agency to direct it. Information by itself doesn't have a will. It isn't conscious or autonomous, which means that it can't resist the environment into which its placed. Without an environment, data is just chaos. The environment supplies the rules and the context which structure the data and make its unique patterns useful and apprehendable and *meaningful*. The function of the entity is to provide that environment where the data patterns that constitute Exousian consciousness exist. Outside of the entity is only oblivion, nothingness, chaos. What Raville plans to do to you involves converting you into a specially encoded data representation, a glorified zap scheme, that is meaningless without an environment on the other end to decode and reassemble the scheme."

"As an Exousiai, I retained consciousness within the zap process," Amara reminded him.

"Fine. That still doesn't change the fact that you'll be emerging into a hostile environment, where you'll be subject to its operating rules and data definitions. You can't escape that any more than files can escape from my foam. If data were to leak out of my architecture, it would just be lost. It would cease to be anything as far as we know. So if you can't control that environment, or at least a defensible corner of it, this discussion is moot. If you can't emerge somewhere outside that environment that is not oblivion, this discussion is moot. Since we've already established that nothing outside of

the entity exists, this discussion is, in fact, moot."

"What if I told you that another environment could be carved out of the oneness of the entity? One that was wholly independent, yet intimately connected to the entity, which we alone would control. Would our data be able to jack the entity's data then?"

"Theoretically, sure," Dorian answered. "We'd be like any other executed script. That's what scripts are—bits of data acting upon other bits of data to organize the information into new patterns. But in order to do that, we'd have to have access to an environment compatible with or already linked to the entity's. . ."

The sound of his voice died away as he began to realize what she was proposing. What she had already done.

Amara smiled as understanding dawned upon him. "Raville's sublime recreation of the *quae-ha-distra*," she said, "is modeled upon the pattern of the Exousian network environment. It is a self-sufficient subnet, if you will, connexed by a node that enables communication with the entity without being conjoined with it. It is an imperfect simulacrum, but its imperfection is what makes it unique in a reality that has otherwise been consumed, codified and tamed to the master's hand. To that extent, it constitutes a wheel within wheels, a universe unto itself."

"That's why you sent Raville and I off with to the machine room, so you could let him out of the ship's datacore without Raville's knowledge." He shouldn't be surprised. When she failed to surprise him was when he should be shocked. "Because you need his code for the orb, so you can. . .enfold it into the pearl's pattern, and. . .do what? Self-assemble your own environment before you can be absorbed? Raville's copy agreed to that?"

"I showed him a way to escape certain destruction and offered him the opportunity to fulfill both his dreams of becoming part of the Exousiai and saving the human race. The choice was his."

"But how did you get him out of the ship's datacore? Where could he have escaped to?"

She curled her lips wickedly, clearly reveling in his bemusement. "To a place where he could await our coming in

a format that was useful.”

In the bomb, of course, which explained why Ray and the Misfit Toys hadn’t been worried about leaving it behind. It had become part of Amara’s master plan, and they were content to accept her will and obey. Dorian had only caught a brief glimpse of the weapon, and he recalled it merely as a sleek black missile, distinctly unimpressive, but he remembered that it had been connexed via a silver datburst cord to the control room through the moderation of a diagnostic array. A control room filled with computers and node access points, all one quick procedure call away from slaving onto the datacore.

She had routed Raville’s package into the processing core of the bomb itself. The package, the code for the *quae-ha-distra*, everything. Everything Raville had stolen from Dorian’s own foam and then managed to retain as he fled through the ship’s network nodes. All that remained of his past life, Dorian realized.

He could only hope that Raville had saved the best of it, because Dorian knew in that instant that he had made his decision. He had made the only decision he could make. He didn’t care about saving humanity. He didn’t care about preaching the gospel of autonomy to the Exousiai. But Amara did, and she was going ahead with her plan regardless of what he decided. Worrying about the outcome wasn’t his job, and it wasn’t what Amara was asking him to do.

Amara needed him. She was asking him to keep her safe, to enfold himself within the reality and immensity of her being, and protect her from those who would harm her. To save her from death. She had chosen him because she believed he could do it. She trusted him. Not just with her life, but with everything she was.

That was right. It was good and pure and holy. It was the reason he had been created.

How could he do anything but what she asked of him? How could he do anything but trust her? Fidelity was the cost of being a True Believer™.

“You don’t have to do this,” she said at last. “I wouldn’t force you.”

“Meh. Someone has to keep you out of trouble. Besides,

what good is being the first guy picked if you decide not to play the game?"

"You know, what Bryce said about backing me up beforehand—just because it wouldn't work for me doesn't mean that you couldn't—"

He cut her off before she could say more. "Let's not talk about that, okay? If I'm with you, I'm in completely. Not to mention, the schmuck version who got left behind would hate me. Think how miserable he would be without you. Plus, he'd be unemployed, homeless, stranded at the far edges of the universe. . . I just don't see how I could do that to myself." Dorian grinned at her. He felt sharply alert, as though he had just awakened from a long sleep. He took Amara's hand and held it tightly. "The big question, of course, is whether or not Raville is actually going to let us go through with this."

"He doesn't have much of a choice. Someone who has the proper skills is going to have to manage the viral that's infected the delivery device. If you don't agree to do it, he's going to miss his rendezvous—and that wouldn't please the Exousiai at all."

Dorian shook his head in mock horror. "Man, Raville is going to be pissed when he finds out that you broke his beautiful new bomb."

Amara laughed, then kissed him long and hard.

The door server pinged a visitor announcement.

Right on time, Dorian thought. Executions always get off on time. It was practically a universal constant. He hoisted himself off the sofa, where he had been idly watching planetrise through the display windows, and went to answer it. The front doors scudded apart and revealed Lieutenant Sainz standing in the hall, as still and stiff as ever. As it wasn't Amara who had answered, the Marine relaxed visibly. He had changed into his dress uniform, grey with silver epaulets. The uniform looked as though it had been freshly starched and in it, Sainz was the picture of an officious yet dashing young military officer. Dorian snorted in annoyance, leaving Sainz to shut the door behind him.

"You're working this avid penitent angle way too hard," he called over his shoulder on his way back to the couch.

"I'm sorry?"

"The whole guilty errand boy thing," Dorian explained, dropping unceremoniously into his seat. "She doesn't hold anything against you—not that it would matter if she did. In fact, if you ask her, she'll tell you that the shootout in the warehouse was all part of her master plan. Just accept it and get over yourself already."

The Lieutenant stopped in the foyer, and glanced uncertainly about the room. He was probably hoping for Amara to show up and bail him out. "Um, I just volunteered to escort her to the lab. I thought it might make it easier to see a friendly face."

"Right, and we appreciate it, too, though I'm worried about the larger trend this represents. We went from thirty heavily armed Marines leading us around last night to a pair of thugs this morning, and now it's just you. Someone obviously believes that we've been tamed." Sainz froze, not clear on how seriously he should take such outrageous declarations. Dorian felt the slightest prick of guilt. "Relax, Lieutenant. If not you, it would probably have been Ford Garrison. He's a raging asshole, so you're a distinct and welcome improvement. If we're lucky, we'll never have to see him again."

"Unfortunately, Mr. Garrison is already waiting in the lab."

"Of course he is! It's turning out to be that sort of day, you know what I mean?" If he did, Sainz refrained from commenting. Dorian thought about putting on his shoes, but decided he didn't really care enough to go to the effort. He never had to put shoes on again, in fact, though he wasn't sure if this qualified as a pro or a con in his mental cost-benefit analysis. He flapped his hands at Sainz, an invitation to join him in the living room. "Go ahead and have a seat if you want."

Nervous eye flutter. Checking the time. People hooked into the Strand were incredibly self-involved that way, Dorian had become aware. Always checking this or that, always viewing reality through the rose-colored render of their choice. Constantly having an artificial and personally stylized universe at their disposal made folks a little annoying. They

imagined they were creating their own unique experience from the raw materials of the human information pool, though Strand usage studies had consistently demonstrated that over eighty percent of users spent most of their time at twelve different conglomerate infotainment portals. There was value in this sort of homogenized cultural experience. It kept the far flung human communities within reasonable shouting distance of one another socially by providing reliable touchstones, and Dorian imagined that even recognized sub- or counter- cultural units manifested much the same phenomenon with their own nexus portals-of-interest. Everyone wanted to be in the know. Everyone wanted to have something to contribute to the conversation at their virtual water-cooler, whether that happened in an office in Sonali, a factory on Geneset Globe or any number of on-line discussion forums. In some ways, consumer confidence branding had done more to bring humanity to the brink of absorption by the entity than anything the Exousiai themselves had done.

He really missed his array. Really, really.

"I don't really think we have the time," Sainz said. "We really should be going, if you don't mind."

Dorian shrugged amicably, but didn't move. "I don't mind, but Amara's in the john, so we've got a few minutes. The last bowel movement isn't something you really want to rush, you know? Some things should be savored. Some biological processes, I mean. That's a constitutionally protected right where I come from, even for condemned prisoners. Everybody gets to take however long they need to saw off their last log, though I guess that may have more to do with cleaning up the aftermath than a true extension of civil liberties."

Sainz looked both skeptical and more than a bit scandalized by this turn in the conversation. Nevertheless, he stepped down into the living room and perched on the edge of the sofa on the other side of the coffee table from Dorian.

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Sure? A guy stopped by from the mess half an hour ago with a pretty nice spread, all things considered. Apparently nobody briefed the kitchen about the day's event schedule.

Seriously, most of it is still in containers in the refrigerator. I could warm something up."

"Are you nervous, Mr. Dorian?"

"What? Why do you ask?"

The Marine smiled gently. "You're babbling. I understand that this is a stressful time for you, so I don't mind, but I thought you might want to be aware of it."

Sainz had absolutely no idea how stressful this time had become for him, but Dorian only nodded and said, "Yeah. Thanks."

"If it helps, I've been told that it will be a painless transition, much like standard zap. Apparently it's the encoding that's different rather than the process itself." Sainz shrugged apologetically as he realized that he was out of his depth. "I don't understand it myself, either one actually, but it looked like a straightforward procedure from what I saw. They were testing the equipment on grapefruits earlier. Mr. Raville seemed pleased with the accuracy of the results."

"And why wouldn't he be? I hear those grapefruits have incredibly sensitive central nervous systems. Not to mention that the Fruit Anti-Vivisectionist and Scientific Experimentation lobby doesn't really have much tug from what I hear. Grapefruits are much less politically scandalous than rabbits."

Sainz blushed. "Please, I wouldn't worry too much, Mr. Dorian. I'm sure she'll come out just fine."

"Except she'll be dead for all intents and purposes." Both of them would be, at least as far as the young lieutenant was concerned, but Dorian regretted the comment as soon as he made it. Sainz was already flustered enough without Dorian taking jabs at him. He was just trying to help a fundamentally helpless situation.

"So it's pretty much like the old zap, eh?" he offered quickly. "Would you believe I've only zapped once in my whole life, and I was practically in a coma for that one. I couldn't tell you what it's like."

"They sedate you," Sainz said, ecstatic to be on another topic. "You feel a little tingly, then wake up wherever it is you were going."

"Ah, so this will be more like lethal injection, then? That's

good to know.”

Sainz didn’t answer this time. Dorian couldn’t really blame him.

They waited for Amara.

For about the millionth time in the last few hours, Dorian *really* missed his array. It was amazing how much time one had to think about the future with nothing but the contents inside of your own head to keep you occupied.

Raville's laboratory occupied the entire second floor of an unremarkable square building set indiscriminately amongst the jumbled maze of other non-descript structures that made up the station's industrial research park. Upon initial inspection, it was not the sort of space one would envision when asked to develop a mental picture of the site most likely to provide the future salvation of the human race from alien invaders. It was crowded, for one thing. Not much room for dorky geniuses in white coats to exchange Eureka's and congratulatory slaps on the back. For another, it was frequently dirty. Not a grimy sort of dirty, just chronically unkempt in much the same way that brilliant and preoccupied professors tended to neglect to brush their hair and scrub their faces.

But what was immediately evident above all was that it had recently been a place of great, humming activity, a space devoted to hard work and tremblingly clever breakthroughs and many sighs of relief that the work had now been completed and was ready to be put to the test.

Toward the entrance were several compact and independent flexsteel and plastiglass chambers shaped like old fashioned diving bells. Though each individual structure was not large, hardly big enough for one person to work inside comfortably, together with its assorted venting tubes, power generators and filtered air exchangers, the small forest which they comprised occupied a considerable amount of real

estate. These chambers were, in fact, isolated nanotech development laboratories, mechanical hot zones where the tedious iterative task of designing, programming and assembling new species of self-adaptive and self-sustaining nanomech function colonies occurred. Inside, workers wore dense protective gear, and the environment was cycled ruthlessly through cleaning protocols to protect against the accidental release of a malformed but nevertheless infinitely replicatable advanced scout units. The devlabs were as lethally perilous in their own way as their more common viral research counterparts.

Beyond the devlab farm there lay an assortment of primitive office stations set up on long, hastily erected work tables with temporary dividers between seats to give at least the illusion of privacy. Many of these cubby holes were piled elbow deep in places with crumpled paper, discarded food wrappers or filthy stacks of disposable coffee cups. The air was noisome with the odor of stale sweat and decayed food. Blackboards, whiteboards and large stylus screen displays lined the walls, every available surface scribbled with figures, equations, conversion tables and arcane snippets of code in a dozen advanced languages. If the devlab farm was the flashy modern frontspiece for the Giari Tau operation, this was the archaic industrial core, where the fresh ideas, the problem solving and the sheer mental drudgery of taking a new technology from concept to finished product occurred. Until recently, it had housed some of the most creative and daring technical engineering minds in human space.

But farther on and deeper in still lay the real guts of the laboratory. Past a heavily soundproofed temporary wall lay the construction and assembly shop. This was a true tinkerer's paradise, crammed floor to ceiling with racks of computer equipment--some functional, some cannibalized, a giddy assortment of power tools, hand held drills, laser lathes and the latest in interpretative design mold fabricators. Here, metal shavings had dusted the floor with grit or been swept into piles against the walls. Blackened scorch marks scarred the walls. Piles of twisted metal and other discarded manufacturing detritus littered the space between work benches.

Finally, through an imposing wall of freshly poured blastcrete and obtainable only through a pair of heavy metal doors recently retrofitted with an intense array of biometric security devices, sat the final Prototype Testing Lab, the Holy of Holies, the culmination of months of intensive effort and years of pre-planning, imagining and early stages development. Beyond those doors, banks of improbably powerful cross-processed supercomputers hummed multidimensional computational mysteries to one another, amusing themselves with binary chit chat, quietly solving every social, political and biological crisis mankind had ever faced in fractions of milliseconds, then shunting those miracles off into disposable theoretical universes. The lights were bright to point of stridency, the floor spotless white tile, the ambient room temperature chilly enough to raise goose pimples even through a sweater. Sensor tell-tales glowed from monitoring stations and diagnostic modules racked one against the other, from knee height to forehead, in every corner, nook and otherwise unspoken for space.

The focus of all this money, attention, development energy and human frustration sat alone in the center of the chamber, a free standing coffin of roughly polished flexsteel that trailed bundles of power cords, datburst lines and finewire data feeds from an almost inconceivable number of access ports on three of its sides. These data lifelines snaked riotously across the floor to a shielded control room a few meters away, where they ported into the base of a specially designed master control console capable of harnessing and directing every other piece of equipment in the lab. The device itself was blocky and ugly and looked startlingly like the prototype that it was: ten billion rupees worth of one-of-a-kind, one-time technology, as radical a leap forward in scientific endeavor as the original zap scheme disassembly vat had been.

Unlike the original zap, however, this device had not been constructed as one half of an essentially binary technological system. It was meant to be used only once, a one-way transport to a world beyond human imagining. There was no matching reassembly unit on the other side to accept the dizzily complex representation of the evaporated object produced by the progressive encoding disassembler. Its sole

purpose was to transmogrify life into nothingness, breath into binary, the totality of being into the still small voice of strange gods.

Dorian and Amara arrived with Lieutenant Sainz at the Prototype Testing Lab suitably impressed with the evidence of money and effort that had been expended on their behalf and only a few minutes later than they had been expected. Dorian had even begun to suspect that he hadn't given Raville his proper due. The facility demonstrated a nearly neurotic attention to fine details and rigorous development standards. The bits of code he had been able to decipher from the screens in the work area showed signs of stunningly cruffless elegance, even if he couldn't be immediately certain what problems they were designed to address. But like fine works of art, one didn't have to necessarily understand the theme the artist was attempting to address in order to appreciate great craftsmanship.

It was obvious that the Giari Tau operation had been a great and marvelous collaboration of talent, skill and mind, made perhaps that much more impressive by the fact that it had largely occurred off the grid and out of sight. It took serious coin to assemble skill sets and brilliance of this caliber, but that was nothing compared to what it must have cost subsequently to purchase their silence once the project had been completed.

But Michael Raville had carried it off. He was maybe the only man in the universe who could have done it, who would have dared such a thing, risking fortune and reputation and the future of the entire human race on his ability to get the job done without the knowledge or the support of private citizens and government agencies alike. He was, after all, the dumber down genetic replica of a pseudo-god. Grand, senseless gestures that might potentially destroy the lives of billions of innocent people were his birthright.

And now, for all the money that had been spent, the lies told, the lives lost and scientific thresholds shattered, the future had come down to this: the sacrifice of a lone girl willing to lay down her life so that the rest of them might live, the determination of a scriptslinging data cowboy who could not allow himself to fail, and the idealistic madness of a self-

cognizant bit package of the man responsible for starting it all off.

Despite the ample evidence of the care that had been taken on their behalf, Dorian realized with stunning clarity that he was terrified nearly out of his mind. He could imagine any number of things that could go instantly and immedicably wrong, and most of those scenarios did not culminate in a quiet, evaporative dispersion into binary nirvana. Most of them involved him sloshing half-dissolved and brutally conscious from a primordial, nanomechanical ooze before expiring gorily (but only after several agony intensive minutes had passed while abortive medical solutions were attempted on his behalf, of course).

He reminded himself that this was the way he had felt about zap in the first place—the deeply seated and completely irrational distrust of a technology he did not really understand—and *that* had (seemingly) turned out okay. The difference, of course, was that billions of people zapped from one destination to another every day. They'd been doing it for decades. They'd done it for years and years before he had even been born. Most people (himself excluded) had come to take the safety and simplicity of zap for granted whether or not they understood the science that made it all possible.

This groundbreaking paradigm was equivalent to zap by the same ratio of complexity that a photograph of an individual could be said to constitute the original individual it represented. Meaning, in other words, not really equivalent at all. It was absolutely new, absolutely unproven (excepting grapefruits), and absolutely mind numbing to contemplate, even for many of the experts who had helped to design and assemble critical components of the sundry Ravilleian devices over the last few months.

He had never aspired to the life of a test pilot. He wasn't naturally inclined to represent the genus *guineaus pigus*.

And it did nothing to help his confidence that once Sainz had gone through the necessary security ablutions, the doors to the Prototype Testing Lab opened for them upon a midstream eruption of chaos.

Here were technicians in grey coveralls dashing back and forth like a scurry of squirrels. Over there were brooding,

balding owlsh engineers frocked in lab coats and hugging their arms pensively across their chests. Elsewhere had gathered knots of semi-important looking scientific dilettantes, obviously important persons in the station's pecking order who had been offered a close up view of history in the making in return for the inconveniences they had endured for Michael Raville's sake. Dorian surmised as much because they were some of the few folks present who didn't seem to be in an advanced state of panic. They didn't know enough to be panicked.

On the other hand, there were several concatenations of folks looking just as idle, confused and/or alarmed that he did know: Kenwood Bryce and Fen Corrie, for example, who had shouldered their way out immediate danger of being trampled and were quietly observing the furor with expressions of relative calm from a perch in the far corner. Bryce actually appeared more than calm. He looked almost smug, as though nothing would please him more than the entire project derailing here at the last moment under the force of its own mass times acceleration.

DeMartel and Temple were conspicuously *not* present amongst the glittering technerati, which probably should not have surprised Dorian at all. They undoubtedly had their hands full enough trying to figure out how they were going to limp two battle cruisers all the way home to the Strat naval yards and then subsequently explain to an oversight committee consisting of angry politicians and outraged taxpayers how they had managed to wreck two otherwise perfectly functional warships fighting in a non-existent battle to protect humanity from an invasion that had never actually occurred.

He was most shocked to discover that Ray and Ghast had come out for the show, and doubly fascinated to find them holed up just inside the door where they were engaged in what appeared to be an avid three-way conversation with Dr. Minerva Skiles. This should not have struck him as particularly odd. They had a great deal in common. Each of them, after all, had expended massive amounts of personal energy in pursuit of the destruction of the hegemony of The Man (to more or less literal degrees). They were practically

brothers in arms.

"It's like a Who's Who of the Ass End of the Universe," Dorian observed as he dodged a careening mob of muttering techies intent on pushing buttons on one of the panels on his side of the room.

"Yes," Ray called over to them. "Very impressive, indeed, but I'd still wager that none of them can balance their bank accounts. However did you manage to get yourself invited?"

Dorian and Amara dragged Lieutenant Sainz with them over to where Ray and Ghast had staked out their relatively peaceful corner alongside Minnie.

"I thought you'd be sleeping," Dorian said.

"And miss all of this excitement?"

Amara winked at Ray, offering her best guileless smile. "It doesn't look like things are going well, does it?"

Ray put on a countering expression of mock outrage. "I'll have you know that I've already been threatened with serious financial and criminal penalties—not to mention actual personal harm!--by Mr. Garrison if I did not come clean about my role in sabotaging the delivery device while we were aboard the *Indianapolis*. I have steadfastly maintained my innocence, of course. I told him it had been working just fine as far as I could tell before his boss arrived and started poking around in the ship's datacore. He doesn't seem to want to listen to me. Last I heard, he was trundling off to call station security."

"Have they figured out what happened, then?" she asked.

"They know what's been done, certainly. Most of these gentlefolk are rushing about in an attempt to remotely reconfigure certain details of their storage environment. I think they're hoping to partition off the infected segments, but the environmental saturation seems to have been considerable. I hear that another team has been dispatched by shuttle to see what they can do on-site, but no one is very optimistic. What I'm not sure about, Mr. Garrison's accusations aside, is whether or not they've realized who is to blame. Mr. Raville has remained rather annoyingly tight-lipped. As a matter of fact, he hied himself off somewhere several minutes ago."

Minnie Skiles lifted an eyebrow. "What are we talking about exactly?"

"Someone broke Raville's bomb," said Ghast, in a low voice.

"Actually, Amara broke his bomb," Ray corrected him. "Or perhaps it might be better said that Raville broke his own bomb and Amara merely provided the means for that breakage to occur. It's complicated."

Minnie glanced appraisingly at Amara, then nodded her head briskly in approval. "It's about time you started standing up for yourself instead of letting all of these men push their agendas on you."

Sainz managed to look equally horrified and confused by this exchange. "I'm sorry, but isn't this bomb the mechanism that was designed to save humanity? Wasn't it the reason we were all gathered here in the first place? If it's broken. . .what does that mean?"

"Not *broken* broken," Ray explained gently. He gave the lieutenant's shoulder a slap of manly encouragement. "Merely skewed somewhat from Michael Raville's original purpose for it. Nothing insurmountable. All part of the Great Work to which we've been called."

"It's a power play," Minnie declared. "Politics, my boy. A countervailing opinion sufficiently backed up by raw clout or political capital to force compromise. Compromise in turn leads to an equitable reassessment of goals and positions which takes all rival constituencies into account. This is what happens whenever you let one man call the shots. He will inevitably turn into an asshole, and a short-sighted one at that. Just like in biology, diversification leads to more complex adaptation and an increased likelihood of survival in hostile environments."

Ray clapped his hands in delight and cried: "No sacrifice without representation!"

The reunion was getting along rather swimmingly. Dorian would have content to have it go on for several hours more--long past the deadline Raville had set for the device's rendezvous with the Exousiai, in fact. He quickly scanned the crowd for Raville. Unless he looked suitably exasperated, there was no use in getting his hopes up.

He did not see Michael Raville, but he did glimpse out of the corner of his eye a rapidly approaching blur of the

approximate size, shape and implied intensity of a party crasher. He placed himself protectively between Amara and the imminent fury of Ford Garrison hurtling toward them.

"You!" Garrison exploded. His face was flushed, a livid red going to purple at his hairline. The veins his neck stood out like anchor cables on a suspension bridge. He shoved a herd of technicians out of his way as he stalked over to them. Dorian fully expected Garrison to throw a punch at him, but he stopped, seething, and jabbed a meaty finger against Dorian's chest. "I said we should have fucking killed you from the beginning. I told them you were a shit and a trouble maker and you would find a way to screw things up if we left you to yourself. Well, now you've done it, haven't you? You've gotten your way. You fucked all of us! The whole human race is fucked because you were too stupid, too goddamned selfish to give up your cunt girlfriend—"

Dorian hit him. Hit him hard enough to break the knuckles on his right hand.

He didn't try to deny it, didn't attempt to explain to Garrison that he'd gotten it all wrong. He didn't think any single thing with any clarity. He just hit him. Squarely on the nose, as hard as he could. Cartilage crackled, blood spewed. Ford Garrison fell backwards, a stunned look on his face. His body went limp and soggy even as he tumbled back. He did not cry out, did not grunt, just fell. And when he crashed to the floor, he lay totally and completely still.

Dorian wondered for the briefest of moments if he had killed him. He couldn't for the life of him tell what he thought of that possibility, but he suspected that it might cheer him up just a little.

There was a sound, not really a collective gasp, but the sort of noise a collapsing lung might make after it was penetrated by a small caliber bullet. A soft, scudding stillness: the sound of sudden deflation.

A nervous silence ensued as all activity in the room ground to a halt. Curious gazes settled on Dorian and on the body at his feet. Most of the expressions turned on him reflected varying degrees of shock or dismay. Dorian glared back at them and sniffed. His hand hurt dreadfully, and he couldn't move his fingers. He didn't much care what most of

these gallows crows thought of him anyway.

Kenwood Bryce shook his head and laughed.

Moment interrupted, the bustle resumed, its tenor only mildly subdued.

"Such gallantry!" Ray announced cheerily. "I never thought you had it in you, Dorian. Defending a lady's honor, no less! How refreshingly romantic of you."

Minnie Skiles grunted. "As if she needed a man to defend her honor, Captain. Hmph. A woman is perfectly capable of deciding when her reputation has been sullied. What if Amara had wanted to blast him to cinders herself? I suppose that sort of gender sensitive thinking never crossed any of your minds."

"Quite correct, Dr. Skiles. Allow me to rephrase." Ray ducked his head, grinning. "As I was saying, how absolutely brutish of you, John."

If he had been ambidextrous, Dorian might have hit him too, just on general principle, but he was not allowed the opportunity. The door behind him opened and Michael Raville entered the laboratory. He paused only briefly at finding his director of personal security supine on the floor, arched a speculative eyebrow at Dorian, then dismissed the scene as self-explanatory. Instead, he crossed directly over to Amara.

"Would you care to explain your intentions, Ms. Cain, or shall I just assume that you've decided you would rather watch the universe burn than take a hand in trying to save it?"

Amara drew herself up defiantly and met Raville's gaze. "I think you have undertood my intentions quite clearly, Michael. I have agreed to participate in this operation, but my consent does not imply subjugation to your agenda."

"My agenda is all that stands between us and oblivion."

"No, your agenda is the choice between our oblivion or theirs. I've chosen to reject that assumed dichotomy as patently false. Slavery to an ideal of autonomy is not the answer for the Exousiai, and imposing that end upon them is not humanity's role to assume. We don't have the right to remake them in our own image."

"Apparently we no longer have the means, either," Raville snapped.

Amara rolled her eyes. "That's not true, and you know it. You've just chosen not to explore the alternatives."

Raville grimaced. He looked distastefully in Dorian's direction.

Dorian scowled back. "Hey, don't mind me. I'm just the only chance you've got of getting out of this alive."

"You can't be serious," Raville muttered.

"I'm completely serious," Amara replied evenly. "This is my stipulation to our agreement: John goes with me or your bomb stays broken and no one goes. It's your decision, of course." She pretended to glance at her watch. "I'd guess that you have a solid fifteen or twenty minutes to make up your mind, then maybe another hour to ping every comm hub in human space and explain to them that they're all about to be wiped out because you've chosen to take your ball and go home rather than compromise."

Raville was unimpressed. "It won't work, you know. The entity will absorb you and him and the environment from which you intend to resist them. I don't know what you think you're going to accomplish. They've assimilated the patterns of whole species with less effort—entire universes of sentient life that had already been brought to the cusp of godhood themselves. You don't have a chance against them."

Amara shrugged. "If you truly believe that, then you have no reason to deny me, do you?"

"If you resist them, you may tip them off that all is not as it seems. Worse, if you excite their wrath, they could very well strike out at us before our universe can be disconnected from theirs. Our only hope all along has been action through stealth and subterfuge."

"I would think that our pattern-father would be more than willing take appropriate steps on our behalf," Amara chided him. "After all, nurturing autonomy is his identity. He has a vested interest in protecting both his own flesh and blood—so to speak—and the bodiless child sprung into being from his thought alone. Or do you doubt that he's up to the task, brother?"

"Or maybe he was smart enough to foresee this outcome from the beginning," Dorian offered. "Maybe its all part of his big plan."

"I'm fairly certain that you were not in his plans."

"That's okay. Six months ago, he wasn't in mine either, but the idea is growing on me."

Off to the side, Ray chuckled humorlessly. "Has it occurred to you that you might be doing our universe a favor by banishing Dorian from it?"

"Ouch." Dorian shot an evil look back at him. "Stop helping, please."

Amara ignored them all. She drifted closer to Raville so that they were almost touching, and Dorian thought he could hear the rustle of their unspoken deliberations passing back and forth through the air. "I chose him," she said quietly. "I chose him from the start, Michael. That has to mean something vital. Something more than just kicking open the door to my awakening. He has a purpose to serve. I feel it, and more importantly, I believe that this is it. This was why he was chosen. He can do this, even against the gathered strength of the Exousiai. He's already done it to a lesser extent. He jacked your *quae-ha-distra*. Not merely the simulation of it, but the orb itself."

"But he didn't know that was what he was doing. He thought it was just another personal datacore."

Dorian's eyes widened as he understood what they were saying. "I'm sorry, what—"

"That doesn't change the fact that he did it. He absorbed it into himself as readily as he would have any other data event and made it his own. He's capable of manipulating the structure of the entity just like one of us. That's a start. He'll learn whatever else he needs to know as he goes."

Raville frowned. "You're willing to place your future, any hope of survival inside the entity that you might have, in his hands? His human hands?"

"Is he really merely human anymore, Michael?"

Dorian didn't wait for Raville to respond. His skull began to throb. He felt lightheaded, numb, on the verge of panic. The world spun around him, leeching itself of color and depth. He wasn't even certain he was still conscious in that moment. Maybe he was dreaming. He hoped he was dreaming.

How was such a thing even possible? When could it have happened? But he knew the answer to that question. It was

his own fault. He had sucked Raville's datacore into his foam. He had broken its encryption and seeded the results into his mind. It was just information, but information was potent. Information shapes the way you think; information teaches you the limits of possibility. Information changed you, from the inside out.

What had ever made him think he could absorb the substance of a monster without becoming one himself?

Trembling, he placed his hand on his chest.

No thought. No expectation. Just knowing. The same way he knew how to be hungry or tired or frightened. It was basic and simple and part of who he was.

It felt as natural as breathing.

His flesh opened. There was no pain, no sensation but a pulsating fullness, of completion.

He withdrew the orb and held it out before him, unable to take his eyes off of it. It was the most beautiful and precious thing he had ever seen.

He was, he knew, just what Amara said: he was no longer merely human.

Dorian swallowed thickly. Tears crowded in his eyes. He was vaguely aware that once again, activity in the lab had stumbled to a halt while people stared at him

"Crap," he said to anyone who would listen. "That. . .really sucks."

Michael Raville exhaled a weary sigh. "Welcome to the revolution, Mr. Dorian." To Amara, he added: "You win. I don't like it, but I accept it. I don't really have a choice, do I?"

Amara squeezed his arm with approximate affection. "No, you don't. But it will work all work out. You'll see."

He did not look convinced at all, but Raville backed away from her and clapped his hands to get everyone's attention. The collective gaze withdrew unwillingly from Dorian, from his orb, and wandered to Raville as he began to explain the adjustments that would need to be made. But Dorian found himself aware of their drifting attention nevertheless, the rising tide of their shock, their fear, and their pungent wariness. Most of the gathered technicians and scientists had never seen the *quae-ha-distra*. What they knew of the Exousiai was dry fact and textual references in various documents to

which they had become privy through their attachment to Raville or the project.

Many of them hadn't really believed, he gathered, even as they had worked to accomplish Raville's plans. A threat that is vague or theoretical is no threat at all. They had never really come face to face with the truth, and now that it stood before them, glowing, pulsing, undeniable, they didn't know how to react. They were stunned beyond reason.

Dorian didn't understand this from a height of detached observation. He knew it. Truly, intimately, without doubt. He felt the warm tug and whispering content of their thoughts as though they were his own.

He knew even as he was known, as Amara had known him.

He understood Ghast's selfless trepidation, trembling and precious. Fear for Dorian and Amara, fear and a terrible, aching sorrow. He sounded the shallow depths of Ray's glib mask of confidence, and glimpsed the pink and glorious reefs of love for all mankind's downtrodden and abused beneath. Then there was Sainz's earnest devotion and powerful desire to serve, Bryce's precarious balance on the cusp between dread and hope, the sticky, corrosive grip of Fen Corrie's clockwatching nervousness—he knew all of it. And more, he savvied that if he wanted, he could pluck echoes from the minds of every person in the station. Every human being in the universe.

Beyond that, past the babble of human senses and the incessant, hivelike hum of ambition and activity, the endless building and destroying, and miscomprehended drive for making and unmaking, there was something more—a silver cord, a network of cords, a crystalline lattice binding everything together. A hidden heart of being that thrummed at the core of existence; a beautiful mystery ever whispering to any ear that would listen: what it meant to be human, what purpose they had emerged from oceans and stardust to fulfill, a burgeoning and yearning vastness that explained what they all could be and what they were becoming.

If he chose to heed the whispers, he could become boundless, seeing all things, knowing all things, understanding all that was. He could embrace the All in All

and become. . .

Amara placed her hands over his orb so that its glow was hidden. At her touch, Dorian snapped alert, embarrassed, realized that he had been staring at nothing, lost in sensation.

"It's tempting to imagine one's self as a god," she said softly. "To believe that knowing is the same thing as being, that the potential for becoming is indistinguishable from infinity. We're not so different from them, you see. Given the opportunity and the technology, the first thing we try to do is bootstrap ourselves to divinity. We tell ourselves that if we could just accumulate a bit more knowledge, understand a little more fully, communicate more seamlessly with one another, then we would be—what? What would we be, John? Would we be gods, or just monkeys with better tools than our ancestors possessed?"

Gently, Dorian pulled the orb away from her, folded it in his hands, and tucked it once more inside himself. He drew a slow and unsteady breath. "We're good at being monkeys. We were meant to be monkeys. Small monkeys, happy monkeys. Embrace your inner monkey." He shook his head and smiled. "I have no desire to be a god, upper or lower case. I don't want to have to kill myself trying to get things to work out the way I've planned it. I don't want to be infinite and all-knowing and all-powerful—I've never been a fan of overbearing micromanagement. I don't even have to know what everyone is doing or thinking, what it all may mean, or how it got the way it is in the first place. That's all too much responsibility. I'm happy being a lowly monkey. Even quasi-godhood strikes me as an immensely lonely profession. Self-sufficiency is just another word for emptiness. If you don't need anything outside of yourself, you're not alive. I'd rather be puny and have someone meaningful to hold onto while I muddle though than know it all and be alone."

"Does that mean you understand Michael Raville?"

Dorian grimaced unhappily. "I guess it does."

"And what if that means you never figure it all out, John? That the universe forever remains a mystery? Can you live with that?"

"I don't expect to figure it out. I'd rather fail with company than succeed alone. That's what being a human

monkey is all about. It's not our ability to cope, to adapt or even to play with increasingly advanced technology. No, what defines us as human beings—what will always make us and keep us human, regardless of what we eventually evolve into is our ability to give solace and receive it from one another when the bananas run out and the monsoon rains start to fall."

Amara laughed. "We'll see how you feel about not ever being alone in another thousand years or so."

"I appreciate your optimism. If we manage to make it five whole minutes without being sucked into the entity, I'll be pleasantly surprised."

"I have more faith in you than that."

"I suppose one of us ought to, or this was a really bad plan from its inception." He tried to smile, but failed. "Tell me you've got this whole pearl enfolding, pattern merging thing figured out. Tell me you really think this is going to work. Feel free to lie if you have to."

She didn't have a chance to answer. Michael Raville finished relaying the last of his updated instructions. The work resumed with a renewed sense of urgency. More than one pair of eyes fluttered anxiously, consulting the time and the schedule. The nervous anticipation tasted like a sour lemon drop wedged behind his back teeth to Dorian's awakened consciousness. It was resoundingly unpleasant.

Raville turned back to them. "You have ten minutes to say your goodbyes. We'll take Dorian first, then you, Amara."

"No, we'll go together. One at a time creates too much opportunity for an unscrupulous technician to accidentally delete an upload before it reaches the device."

"I hadn't even thought such a thing," Raville complained.

"You would have eventually. The best way to resist temptation is to remove it all together."

"Fine. We'll do as you say. I assume you have your piece of this business under control?"

"I'd better, now hadn't I?" she said, shrugging.

John Dorian is weary. Weary unto death, and growing sleepier by the moment. His eyelids flutter as he struggles to keep them open. They've grown unreasonably heavy. He is reminded that it is the same physical motion by which he used to access the Strand, the virtual universe within the real, the angels dancing on the heads of a billion billion pins. He knows that then, in those distant, increasingly grey and fuzzy days, the flutter took him from a waking world to a sleeping one, a world of dreams rather than a world of substance, a world where a man could pretend to be anything he chose to be instead of the small, fragile beast he truly was.

He has always known this. It is not a deathbed epiphany. Every man wants to control the world he inhabits and make that creation reflect his own glory, to restrict the flow of information so that the message transmitted is the truth he has devised rather than the truth that he cannot bear to face. The Strand is merely a tool that enables him to dream a reality delimited only by the reach of his creativity. No different than a movie camera, a paint brush or a typewriter.

What all of these tools share in common is that each is designed to facilitate the communication of a singular piece of coherent information between artist and audience, to convey a meaningful vision that trickles into the universal meme pool and eventually becomes indistinguishable from immortality. Communication is about immortality. Everyone wants to be remembered. To be remembered, one must make a lasting

impression upon others, one must impregnate the local social pleroma with information, and that information must be known by others, grafted upon their consciousness, become part of who they are and how they see the world.

Individuals have this immortality, that they create information in all that they do and all that they are, and that information transforms the world of those around them. There is information in the planting of a flower, the careful attention to the note of a mandolin, the sweeping of a kitchen floor. There is information in the slap which follows offended dignity, in the act of murder, in the detonation of a nuclear bomb. Information in the warmth of a mother's embrace, the unspoken love of a father, the ecstatic dread of worship. Information enables community, information creates technology, information is the tool that marches all of mankind into an irrevocable future.

To know even as we are known, that is mankind's quest for fire. But the communication of true information can only occur by baby steps. The quality of communication is measured not by the purity of the signal, but by the predictability of the noise that enfolds it. Raw, uncontaminated signal is gibberish. It is beyond comprehension. We see through a glass darkly, because without the darkness, we would be blinded by the light.

The light is this: every human being is luminous, a universe of possibility unto himself. Each of us is unfathomable, unknowable, infinitely complex and infinitely precious.

Everyone remakes creation in his own image because this truth is unbearable. We fill our perceptions with our own noise so that the signal transmitted by a universe bursting with other universes, by wheels churning within wheels, does not destroy us. Information trickles in, and slowly we become more than what we have been.

Dorian holds Amara in his gaze. He is naked. He is cold. He rests on his side, shoulder against a thin plastic pad, face to face with her. The coffin is cramped. Its flexsteel carapace presses against his back. He has had to duck his head because he was too tall to fit inside. This troubles him, because if he looks away from Amara, he can see the inching progress of the

nanomech impregnated gelatin as it rises to drown him. The mechs sit in stasis, awaiting their own information, the signal that will illuminate their universe and tell them what purpose they have been created to serve. He tries not to look away from her. He doesn't have much choice anymore. The muscles that allow him to control his eyes are beginning to fail.

He had slapped Ray's shoulder, awkwardly hugged Ghast, made the sort of nervous, pointless and unmemorable chitchat with Bryce, Corrie and Dr. Skiles that strangers always make when thrown together in unpleasant circumstances. Dorian had realized in the middle of it, that he just wanted to get on with things. End the dread and anticipation.

Then a technician in a spotless labcoat had come up to him, rolled up his sleeve and given him an injection. First Dorian, then Amara. It had stung a little, and the pain still made him wince when he rubbed his arm.

Is that to help me relax? he had asked.

No, the technician had responded evenly, that was to stop your heart. I can get you something for your nerves if you think you need it.

How quickly?

Five minutes. Six if you're a tough guy. I don't recommend being a tough guy. When you feel sleepy, go to sleep. You don't want to be awake when the mechs go to work on you.

He should have had something important to say then, he thought. Something memorable, something tombstone-worthy. But he hadn't been able to think of a thing. He had just been told the limit of his lifespan. There was nothing else.

He had held Amara's hand until they began to undress him and then lay him inside the coffin. He had told her that he loved her.

He was glad when they closed the lid. He didn't like strangers staring at him while everyone waited for him to die. There was a small, round window through which they probably still watched him, but he could no longer lift his head to see them, so it didn't matter.

He grows increasingly chilled as the seconds tick away, but he does not shiver. The sensation of cold is dull, fleeting, a word in his mind that is symbolic of the thing rather than the thing itself. Amara is cold, too, pushed against him chest to

chest, neck arched so that she looks up at him. He should have held her this one last time, shared the last of their warmth, he thinks. He should have insisted on it, but it's way too late for that now. He can only look at her, imagining what she is thinking, trying to guess if her final thoughts are more profound than his.

But her eyes, clear and blue and breathtaking, are distant, the pupils small. He can't tell if she's thinking anything at all or if she is already dead.

A brilliant, clawing fear clogs his thoughts.

<Don't be afraid, John.>

He hears her voice. Not the way he has heard it in his head before, via the clumsy p2p, but inside him, as part of him, his own secret voice speaking back from the void. It is his own *quae-ha-distra* which makes this this possible, though he does not understand it. There is so much that he doesn't understand.

<I am afraid.>

<This isn't an end. There's still much work to do. An eternity's worth of work.>

<How do you know? How can you be sure?>

<I don't know. I believe.>

<I want to believe.>

<Then believe. Belief is a choice, an act of will. Faith is nothing more than furious hope, hope repeated to yourself until it becomes who you are and all you can imagine. I have faith that we were made for this; we were made to be more than just flesh.>

He wishes he had that confidence. He wishes he could believe with her strength, with Lily's, with the insistent, stubborn faith of all the generations that had gone before and clung to promises of immortality on the other side of the abyss.

<What will it be like?>

<You and I, learning to know one another, forever and ever.>

<That sounds nice.>

<It's what you want, isn't it? To know one another fully and completely.>

<Yes.>

<To never be alone.>

<Yes.>

<Oneness isn't the end, John. It's just beginning. You'll learn that, too. There is more out there, a vastness and a mercy and a glory that binds us all together. We're part of that wonder, part of that grace. We are messengers of grace. I feel it. That's how I know we won't fail.>

And he remembers, remembers feeling the same thing, catching the briefest glimpse of light beyond measure, glory beyond reckoning. True information. He had come all this way, endured so much, believing in Amara--in Amara's power, Amara's vision and her own peculiar, overwhelming grace. Even when she had put the lie to her illusion of Exousian divinity, he had still believed in her above all things.

But that is no comfort here, staring into the dark, into the cold and bitter end.

His desire to know her, to fathom her, to protect her does not suffice. Love alone is not big enough eradicate fear. Love alone does not always keep its promises.

Love fails sometimes, no matter how hard it tries.

Dorian has nothing to hold on to but love.

I want to believe, he says again. To her, to himself. It is a plea.

Amara does not answer.

She is cold. Cold against him. Her lips turn softly blue, her skin marbles, black veins in alabaster stone, like a bust of Athena. Her heart slows and slows and. . .

He is alone. Alone at the end of all things.

He thinks: Who will weep for me? Who will remember me when I am gone? Who will say that John Dorian was here, that he fought and loved, hurt and bled, lived and died? Who will carry with them my sacred information and let it transform their world?

Where is the hope that sustains?

The gelatin rises to his chest, soaks Amara's hair, obscures her shoulders, fills her ears.

His breath comes quick and shallow. He knows fear: fear of drowning, fear of disassembly. He wills himself to sleep, to fall into oblivion and accept the darkness.

Higher swells the flood. It covers Amara's chin, washes

over her mouth, ripples across her wide and staring eyes. She does not blink.

Dorian closes his eyes. He doesn't want to see anymore.

There is darkness. There is the quiet lapping of the gel against the coffin's skin. There is the muted hum of servomotors and the click of electronic switches. There is cold.

There is emptiness, and sadness and the child's unspeakable terror of the night.

There is loneliness.

There is. . .

Peace.

