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Suicidal necessities in the twenty-first century

Todd Marvin
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Suicidal Necessities in the Twenty-First Century. [Original short stories]

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San Jose State University, 1989

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SUICIDAL NECESSITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A Creative Writing Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State Univeristy

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of the Arts

By

Todd Marvin

August, 1989

ABSTRACT

SUICIDAL NECESSITIES IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

by Todd Marvin

This creative writing project consists of six original short stories. The stories share a common setting, that of Twenty First century San Jose. In addition to the stories, there is an introduction which analyzes some of the thematic connections between the stories and contemporary literary theory.

The stories are divided evenly in chronological order before and after the Ten Minute War of 2041, a limited nuclear exchange which, combined with environmental erosion, renders the metropolitan habitat particularly hostile. Major themes which are discussed include sexual alienation as the price of space travel, the forging of a new corporate identity replacing old patriotic values, the fracturing of the male psyche by the first extra-terrestrial encounter, and the emergence of a new personal identity in the face of threatening technological emasculation.

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Dedication

This collection is dedicated to three people:

Mike McGinn
Heather Carroll
Vanessa Newell

Each of whom helped shape this work. Blame them if you must.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following people for their help and advice:

Craig Strete and Barbara Hull for their readings and insights, Cousette Copeland for her support and encouragement, and Lou Lewandowski for her exhaustive reading and the valuable time she spent working painstakingly through each draft of the manuscript.

And my parents, of course.

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Introduction

There is a Judeo/Christian tradition of attempting to control and order the universe. The Elizabethans went so far as to concoct an elaborate chain of being, with God at the top, followed by the angels, mankind, and the lower animals. Every living thing had its place in this chain. All of Nature functioned within this balance. Often the theme of Elizabethan theater consisted of the disruption of that order, such as the separation of lovers in the comedies and the usurpation of the throne in the dramas. By the end of the play the audience is usually witness to a restoration of that order, a renewal of youth and an affirmation of life presented in a jubilant wedding in their comedies, or a corpse-strewn stage in their tragedies centered around the violent demise of hubristic hero, symbolizing death and a recognition of mortality. In the end, order is restored.

Philosophers from Aristotle to Descartes to Nietzsche have struggled to define the concept of God and make that concept relative and functional in their time. Humanists place man at the top of the chain, and regard God as merely an extension of man. All conflict then is derived from the self. Once you define God, you define order and Nature, and thus man's place in nature. If we invert this supposition,

we arrive at the conclusion that Nature is an extension of God, and God is a projection of man's inability to come to terms with his world. God serves a higher concept to which we can appeal and thus take the responsibility from ourselves for our fall from grace. So we see in twentieth century literature a heritage of disharmony and disorder as a way of sustaining conflict and exploring current insights into the human condition.

Great writers have always manipulated environment to provide their characters a stage appropriate to the themes the writers wished to tackle. We see innumerable examples throughout modern literature: Faulkner's ghost-strewn South; Steinbeck's deceptively pastoral Pastures of Heaven; Melville's use of the numbing expanse of the deep ocean in Moby Dick; Conrad's use of the Congo as the home for man's innate evil in Heart of Darkness.

Although the stories of Suicidal Necessities of the Twenty-First Century are thematically linked by the common setting of a future San Jose, the major conflicts are not those of Man against Nature. The conflicts are more of those of Man against Himself in the sense that these characters struggle constantly with the various elements, both psychological and social, that directly shape their own personalities, expectations, and their anguish. Each of these stories shows a part of a world where the technological achievements of our conscious mind have far outstripped the

ability of our unconscious mind to cope with them.

Put in heavy-handed literary terms, twenty-first century downtown San Jose is reflective of a splintered human psyche, a landscape where technology has driven a wedge between the conscious and the unconscious. We see Nature as a reflection of man's corrupt state. My approach to the subject matter is Jungian, imposed on situations which on the surface appear to be essentially existential in nature. But it is essence and not existence I am concerned with. While man is directly responsible for the conditions of his physical world, these conditions come from sources much deeper than man's conscious realization of them. I present these conflicts, these explorations, not by telling a history of how the world has come to this point by directly showing its effects through the actions and thoughts of the characters and exploring my theme in two of its most contemporary manifestations: sexual and societal alienation.

In the last twenty years a certain pop philosophy has developed that God is both love and sex. We can take this a step further. If God is a concept derived from the mind of man, and God is sex, then sex is the ultimate form of self-worship, an act performed to come closer to God. Although there is never a conscious recognition of it, my characters struggle to come to terms with this conception. In "Hound" I explore the parasitic nature of some sexual relationships. Wilson, while unable to sustain a

relationship of his own, still must use other people to survive. He looks for more than just a quick pay off from his mark. He is looking for completion, for something that a woman has that he lacks. This is what makes him vulnerable, and in the end traps him when he lets his guard down. Karen, in "China," is the flip side of Wilson. She purposely keeps herself walled away from people, allowing only an occasional lover to fulfill her sexual needs. The fact that the one man who truly does break down her walls can not enjoy the experience forces her into the self-realization of how the selfish sterility of her own life mirrors the outside environment in which she lives. And while Stephen of "The Post-Possession Blues" is unable to sustain a relation which exists on more than a physical level, the narrator of "Suicidal Necessities. . . ," the final story in the collection, has come to terms with his.

Visually, the landscape these characters inhabit is an anomaly, in that the reality of day-to-day life clashes with the appearance of a bustling futropolis. Architecturally, the monolithic skyscrapers which populate our great metropolitan centers today are part of a post-modernist vision, born in the thirties and continued today, meant to be a place where large numbers of people can be brought together to work and thrive in a limited space. But instead of representing a technologically conceived utopia, these settings show that just the opposite has resulted. Cut off

from sunlight, what is left is a visually bleak concrete desert, where the appearance of human life and activity seems accidental and out of place. Twenty-first century San Jose is the logical manifestation of the urban blight brought to an extreme. It is in these lifeless canyons that Rail attempts to achieve his manhood and that Wilson hunts to stave off the little death his abusive lifestyle is inflicting on him.

The stories, placed here in chronological order, cover roughly a period of fifty years. The first three take place before the Ten Minute War of 2041, the final three after the war. I have tried to sustain a circular movement in the characters' development as the years progress and the environment becomes increasingly hostile. This is most apparent in Stephen's inability to function in a much less unpleasant landscape compared to narrator's acceptance of his surroundings in "Suicidal Necessities. . . ." At the collection's end the narrator is at peace with his world such as it is. Ultimately, this is demonstrated by the simple fact that he has stayed alive, a feat Stephen is unable to accomplish.

Obviously, I am writing in a speculative vein. It is the perfect vehicle in which to explore the peculiar problems of my characters. Any post-graduate creative writing project must have at least two major goals. The first is to represent accurately the level the student is writing at

present. The second is for the project to be a learning experience in and of itself. The most important lesson I have learned is that an extra burden falls on the Science Fiction writer.

There is an internal integrity to any fiction that must be maintained.

Often in Science Fiction, there is a tendency to allow invention and theme to override plot, character, and drama. Compared to mainstream literature, Science Fiction appears to offer its writer great freedom in devising plot, setting, even the range of character. It is true that one can dare more in the genre, but Science Fiction's lack of limitations is both its bane and salvation. At the genre's worst, the characters are stereotypes, the plots merely tired rehashes existing for the sake of displaying the latest gadget, socioeconomic theory or scientific phenomenon. Yet the same basic components which comprise quality fiction also comprise quality Science Fiction. A compelling story must still be told; the integrity of drama and comedy, of scene, and characterization must still be maintained.

The best Science Fiction writers such as Samuel Delany, Philip Dick, and William Gibson twist, fragment, or isolate reality to allow us to look with a new perspective into the human condition. These are writers who represent an ongoing movement of the last several decades, a movement whose goal is to elevate the genre from its pulp origins. I write in

this spirit and tradition, trying to apply the lessons I have learned from studying literature as both a undergraduate and graduate student.

The Post-Possession Blues

Naked, Hanah stands by the window and looks out over the city below. It sprawls and glows and throws up neon. Her left hand is intertwined with the soft gauze of curtain. Her body is tan and without mark: a petite, rounded, and unintimidating kind of beauty.

"Over. . . ." Her voice is high and soft, piercing, but without edge.

He hitches himself up from the bed with angular grace, moves broad hands with spindly fingers down his thighs, rubs life into his legs.

"Yes," he says, although he doesn't really understand. Days later he will agonize and brood and imagine connections and relations that never existed. But now he only words compliance; it costs him nothing now.

"Okay. . . ." she breathes out, and only then does he realize the tension that was there. Stephen knows she has more to say but instead allows the emotion to drift out silently. She had expected something else from him. Perhaps the anguished hints at violence he always seemed to threaten. Violence, but never towards her. Always towards some intangible. But she never sees it materialized; it only mixes and gels inside of him.

Stephen jumps abruptly up, watches her for a scant

second, then moves to the window. He stands beside her, tracing a hand from between her shoulders down to the small of her back. He leaves the hand there. She is absolutely still under his touch.

Hanah will leave soon, return to her parents. He knows this, but the knowledge leaves him surprisingly numb. We're friends, she'll say, convincing herself that their intimacy was only a failed experiment. She'll feel uneasy but the source will go unidentified. She will attribute it to an incompatibility in their personalities. She will be as friendly and as open to him as she has always been, but what they have just shared will be forever barred.

He sees all this in her as she stands perfectly still in the early summer evening. But he is helpless to change it.

The compound of luxurious apartments is quiet, for the most part deserted. The majority of the possessed have already exorcised themselves and returned to their former lives. But not the Devil, as his friends in the city call Stephen, he remains.

He watches the city, which stretches out below the compound, following Suncrest Avenue as it drops into the valley and meshes into the smear of light. The night traffic is just beginning to pick up. His old friends will have begun to come out. He holds this thought in his mind as he would an uncertain taste in his mouth. A solution, albeit temporary, lays for him down there in the city. There was a

time he would have turned inside himself for the answers, to the stories, the poems, his art. But that was a million years ago, before his possession.

"I'm going." He turns, steps into his pants, and pulls them up. "I'm going down into the city."

She hears him but is intent only on watching the lights below. When she turns, he is already gone.

Shilo and Fat Tony both buzz with anxiety. But the emotions are different. Shilo is pumped with momentary adrenaline, but not fear. Fat Tony feels fear and self-incriminating anger.

They should have known better than to come this close to the Towers. They stand trapped in the alley running between two old warehouses. Tony knows now he should have said something when the place for the pickup had been decided on. But he didn't. He figured the chances were slight for hell to boil up and throw out its king.

Stephen walks casually down from the compound.

Fat Tony sees him, but there is nowhere to go. "Shit . . . man, c'mon." The heavy man backs up to the wall. He sets his feet. Accustomed to violence, he knows what to expect. His fear is pragmatic and very real. "Hey, look, whatever happened, whatever set you off, I didn't do it. I never fucking do it!" He screams this last sentence.

Lean Shilo steps out of the alley. His hair flops wildly. His bangs are slicked to his forehead with sweat. "Devil comin' down. Shit almighty! The devil's comin' down tonight."

Stephen stands in front of Fat Tony. His body is relaxed, hands loosely at his sides.

"Look, Stephen," Tony spits out. "We're just up here to hock some junk. To meet some people. No big deal. We haven't done anything. You can't be angry at that. Hell, you used to do some of my shit before. . . ."

Stephen moves quickly, shoving his hand palm-up into Tony's jaw. Teeth bite tongue. Stephen throws his elbow up under Tony's chin, pushing him into the wall. Methodically, Stephen brings his knee into the other man's gut. Air and spittle explode, but before the blood can seep, Stephen grabs a handful of dirty hair and slams Tony's head into the concrete. He watches, but Tony doesn't move. There's no point to it, Stephen thinks.

"Hey," Shilo says agitatedly. "You done it. You got your fix, right? Leave the Fat Man, Stephen. That's the third time you've busted him up this year. It don't prove nothing. I don't know why you choose him. You used to run with us before your possession. Weren't we friends then?"

Stephen waves Shilo to silence and kneels down to Tony. The violence is a removed, distant thing for him, something that just happens, not something he does consciously.

"That was only for a short time," he says gently.
"Sometimes you let your memory grow out of proportion, Shilo. We were barely out of high school." He pushes aside the heavy flaps of Tony's jacket and retrieves a plastic-wrapped bundle.

He fishes out one red capsule of methamphetamine inhalant, crushes it under Tony's nose. "This'll help with the pain. Fat Tony always does sell the best."

Tony stirs.

"Here." Stephen tosses the package of drugs to Shilo. He takes out a five hundred credit piece and places it next to Tony's head. The blood begins to pour more freely now. The money is far too much for the one capsule. He smiles a tight-lipped smile after one last survey of the unconscious body.

"Somethin' wrong with ya!" Shilo shouts as Stephen walks down into the city. "Ya used him like a whore, don't ya know that? Jesus, Stephen, they left three years ago. When are ya ever gonna be normal again?"

But when Stephen doesn't say anything, Shilo shakes his head and looks to Fat Tony who begins to groan with the awareness of his pain.

After Stephen has left, Hanah moves from the window. She scoops up a t-shirt he left on the bed and drapes it over

her body. Her mind is surprisingly empty of conflict. She feels very little at the moment, except perhaps a fleeting sense of loss. She doesn't know exactly what she is giving up, but is content to let the knowledge catch up to her at its own pace.

She walks to his desk. A dozen papers and computer flimsies are scattered around Stephen's word processor. She scans the manuscripts. Poems, but none are completed. Some consist of only a few hastily scratched lines that seem to go nowhere. She is intrigued by his art, by the reputation he gained before the Xltaus came when she was only fifteen. She stands just outside this part of his world. At the same time it is as much barrier to her as it is to him. Since now it is foreign to both of them.

A beige folder containing computer printouts lays in a half-open drawer. She reaches down and lifts it out. It is a progress report from Stephen's court appointed psychiatrist.

She reads:

. . . has continued to show signs of a manic-depressive cycle. This disorientation and bitterness follows the previously chronicled patterns resulting from his tenure as a host for his alien benefactors and from the mental blackout which accompanied the five weeks of his "possession."

Feelings of inadequacy are manifested in signs of projected resentment towards several specific members of the patient's former peer group. Often these episodes erupt in sporadic violence."

Hanah closes the folder

She looks around the room. She walks over to the bed, finds her underwear in the mess of the sheets. Her fingers show through the lace. This is an end of something, the last time she'll be this way for him, she tells herself. She can't give up that part of her anymore. She had mistaken admiration and infatuation for love, she tells herself. He will understand.

It might have been different before, she thinks, if she had known him then. She had heard of him, of course, the bad boy of the local art scene, the street poems, the impromptu readings, disrupting city council meetings, laser-etching graffiti into the arch over San Pedro Square, the drug arrests.

All these things are still inside him, all that joy for life. But it's locked inside and away from her. She was never a part of that. All she sees now is the brooding, the confusion, the chasing after an elusive nothing. She has done the best she could. If this is the end of something, then it is the beginning of something else. That thought comforts her. Under these conditions she can give to him, but only what she could.

She steps through the panties, pulls them up and searches for the rest of her clothes.

"Shit, Mr. Aiko," Holden says lazily. "I didn't come here to argue semantics. I'm not Mr. Reise's bookkeeper. That's not what I get paid for." He has grown tired of trying to piece together what the old gook is saying.

"No, no," the little man says, carefully taping Holden on the chest. "You wait right here. I show you."

Holden waits, scratches his side absently. It is the same thing all the time. Always the jabber. He doesn't know why he let's them talk. Maybe just to hear the latest sob story. To see how far-fetched the latest excuse will become.

Aiko returns to the doorway, waving a fistful of receipts.

Holden slaps the hand down. "You don't understand. You owe for the remainder of the deposit.

"I pay my rent," Aiko says excitedly. "For six months, I pay my rent."

This is getting decidedly old. Should I knock him around a while, Holden asks himself. But as he looks at the small stature and age of tenant, he knows he wouldn't be able to work up much enthusiasm for this job. But the jabber has worn on his nerves.

He steps towards the open doorway, when movement pulls his eyes to the right.

"Hey, ya black badass. I knew I'd find you here plying your trade."

"Shilo," Holden says cautiously. It has been a while

since he's seen his old friend.

"Is this really a way to make a living?"

Holden laughs. "You're a drug dealer."

"A time-honored profession. Though I suppose the same can be said 'bout yours."

"Alright, what do you want?"

"I just left General. The Fat Man again."

Holden knows what is coming. He wants to shut his mind to it. It makes no sense. But he can not ignore it, cannot hide from the confrontation.

"When?"

"Soon, an hour or so. He must be walking. He'd be here already if he had taken the tram."

"Okay. Thanks for telling me."

"No problem. I guess this is one time you're not glad you're not me, huh?"

"Not funny, Shilo," Holden says with an edge of anger. Shilo always pokes at what he sees as an excessive amount of ego in Holden. But tonight Holden's temperament is not expansive enough to tolerate the jabs.

Shilo shrugs. "Sure it is. My timing is just bad."

Holden watches him leave. He turns back to Aiko. What had been bored distraction is now a truly bad mood. Before dealing with Stephen, there is still business to be done. He pushes his way inside and closes the door.

Bat the beggar sits at his usual corner and watches the city churn to life in the early evening. He sits cross-legged, back propped straight against a lamppost. Traffic coils and moves across the reflective curve of his radar mask. The mirror, covering the upper half of his face, sends out ultra high frequencies and is hooked into the retinal receptors in his brain, using radar to simulate sight. Below the mask, the skin is brown and wrinkled. Bat is very old. He is blind.

The beggar has sat on this corner from ten in the morning to just past midnight every day with only two exceptions for thirteen years. The first was when he had finally been accepted for his public grant which paid for the radar mirror. The second was in 2027 when the Xltaus hovered over the Sierra foothills for an entire day before landing. Like two hundred thousand others he went to the hills and watched the ships before the UN security forces pushed them out.

Movement is perception for Bat, given to him by his radar screen. Color does not exist for him, but he discerns movement quite well. He interprets his whole world as variations in a constant flux of motion. And as Stephen approaches, Bat doesn't recognize him for the brown of his hair or the green of his eyes but instead for the angular grace with which the Devil moves.

While everything shifts and fluctuates around him, the beggar remains the same. Stephen and Holden and Fat Tony have grown and changed but not Bat. He is the same.

"Took your time getting down from the Towers," the beggar says. "Word's already here the Devil's come down. Mighty pissed off, too. Of course, nobody knows what about."

"Yeah." Stephen sits down next to Bat by abruptly collapsing. "I walked instead of taking the tram."

"Busted up the Fat Man again?"

"Yeah," Stephen says in a tired voice. "It was an accident. He just happened to be up near the hills. I wasn't thinking."

"Stephen, I don't presume to lecture you too much, but this has got to end sometime. You're the king of the demons, the Devil himself. Of all humanity, you proved the most compatible with beings from another star system. The things you must have learned with that alien in your body."

"And just what the hell are those things?" Stephen growls with demand. "I don't remember anything. There was a complete neural cutout."

Bat swallows tightly, says with no inflection, "The government hasn't released that yet."

"Right, goddamnit! A whole chunk of my life is missing, and they tell me nothing!"

"You still seeing that court-appointed shrink?" Bat asks cautiously.

Stephen breathes out, killing the welling anger. "Three times a week."

"Good. Don't ever stop, or you'll have to start paying for some of this damage. Right now you're immune because you're still acting under the influence of the alien's possession."

Stephen says nothing.

"Holden will be looking for you," Bat says at length, breaking the silence. "Once he hears about Tony, he won't wait for you to come to him."

"Tony was an accident," Stephen repeats. "I really do like him, it's just that . . . I don't know. He has something, Holden too. Inside them they have something I've lost. Something the Xltaus took from me. When they left Earth, they took something from me, something from every host."

"All I know," recrimination colors Bat's voice, "is that you can't go around beating up all your old acquaintances simply because you can't sustain your love life."

"It's not sex. That's fine. It's not the affection, It's something that was there before, but isn't anymore."

"Animus," Bat said. "Male part of the personality. A lot of theories go around that the possession strips that part of the possessed's soul away. Funny, but nobody on the street would have ever know what that word meant before the Xltaus came. Animus, anima, shadow, mask . . . all that

Jungian psyche crap flashed over all the vid news for the five weeks the 'taus were on Earth. Turned every street urchin and televid junky into an amateur psychologist."

"Ever been to the desert, Bat?"

"Sure, twice. First time when I was in the Rangers back in '86. Second time was right after I was in college. After finals, a whole shitload of us got smashed, went out into the desert and blew off whole sticks of dynamite." Bat whistles. "Hell of a time that was."

"You were in college?" Stephen asks. He is surprised.

"Sure," the beggar shrugs. "Well, only for a year on the resurrected GI bill."

"What happened?"

"Blew my eyes out with dynamite," Bat says in a flat voice.

"Then you know what it's like," Stephen says, sidestepping the painful issue of Bat's blindness. "That's what it's like for me ever since I came back to my own body after five weeks of total nothingness. You look around, and it's as if everything is dead; there is no life. But you just got to look beneath all the sand, all the desolation, something is lurking and living there. I know it's there. I just can't see it.

"See, I don't know where I went while there was some other thing in my body. But wherever it was, it did something to me. I didn't come back from that desert whole.

This big piece of me is missing, but I got to fill the hole with something. All I got is anger. Do you see that? I do these things because I got to do something. So I get angry. I don't know why."

"Are you looking for anything else?"

"Yeah," Stephen says as he stands up. "I'm looking."

"At least that's something."

"Sure," he begins to walk down the street. "I guess that's something."

A faint trace of grief pulses faintly in Bat as he watches Stephen walk away. He thinks briefly of Holden, and remembers the last time he saw the two friends together:

Bat allowed Stephen and Holden to drag him from his spot an hour early that night.

"Come on," Stephen had insisted. "We have an unveiling of a collective work of art to perform. And we feel you're just the man who would appreciate this kind of endeavor."

A high arc of weathered metal gated the mouth of San Pedro Square.

"Come here," Holden said. He lifted the beggar onto his shoulders. Holden tottered over to the left hand edge of the arc. "Read mine first."

Bat leaned close. The metal was strangely warm under his touch. He moved his hands and found where Holden had used a laser etcher to burn his graffiti. Bat read the

limerick with his hands. The letters, printed with precise neatness, had been seared with meticulous deliberation.

There once was a young girl from Frisco,
Who found an old-fashion fetish for crisco.
Her husband was Clyde,
Who found it too dry inside.
So she used enough goo till it was just so.

"And now mine," Stephen said with drunken enthusiasm.

Holden scooted to the other end of the arch. Unlike Holden's precise printing, Stephen's handwriting sprawled and wandered under Bat's reading touch.

There was a strapping young man from Milbrae,
Whose friends finally found out he was gay.
They ganged up on poor Bob,
And used him for the odd job.
When the police found him, well what could he say?

Holden dropped Bat rather unceremoniously to the ground. He staggered a bit, reached out and found Stephen for support.

"Here." A bottle was thrust into Bat's hands.

"Glenlevit," Stephen exclaimed. "Single malt scotch, the best! Not like that cheap blended crap."

Bat took a deep drink under the approving laughter of the two friends. The scotch burned smoothly down his throat. He breathed out a hot breath and laughed with them.

Bat remembers this time vividly. The night was June 3, 2027. There is more reason to remember than just the

monumental hangover the beggar suffered through the following day. The next morning, dawn broke on the unlikely sight of three alien spacecraft hovering over the sedate foothills.

San Pedro Square is bright and busy. The Square consists of a dozen small-renovated shops and restaurants in the brick shells of century-old buildings. The square has been restored three times in fits of urban renewal over the last hundred years. The crowd that muscles through these establishments is primarily young and primarily well-off. They bathe themselves in fashion, punctuate their youth with their walk. The laughter is heavy; their talk is light.

Hanah sits with her friends in the patio of her favorite coffee shop. "The little league literati," Stephen calls them. They talk and laugh, and she uses their chatter to insulate herself from her feelings. They reach out and touch each other on the arm or just above their breasts to make a point. Nothing else moves for them. Only what is enacted amongst themselves.

With little fanfare Shilo ruptures their ken. They look away from him, ignore him. But he stands just within their range. One by one they look at him, then turn to comment into their hands. He is unlike them. His clothes are faded but clean, and worn with a certain arcane and bargain-basement flair for current fashion. His neck is tied about

with myriad-colored scarves, his fingers circled with plated gold and silver. His brown hair has been tied back now with thin strands of gold thread. Both ears are triple-studded. The earrings clang quietly in the slight evening wind.

Finally, he shuffles forward, forcing himself into their conversation.

"Howdy," he looks only at Hanah, ignores the other three girls.

"Hi," she says without effort to hide her condescension.

"Name's Shilo. I'm a friend of Stephen's."

"Okay, so?"

"You're Stephen's girl, huh?" Shilo says, smiling over a broken front tooth.

She looks quickly at her friends then says, "We're friends." The answer is simple and flatly said.

"Bullshit!"

"What?"

"Ya fucked him, huh? Ya fuck him, ya more than friends. Typical woman's crap, say they want love, then why the fuck do they always hide behind things like friendship? Friendship's got nothing to do with it. I'm friends with Stephen, but I don't sleep with him."

She pushes her hands into the back of the chair. If she wasn't encumbered by sitting she would walk away. But she doesn't want to betray her feelings here. So she lets her arms fall to the arms of the iron wrought chair. She

strangles them with her grip. "Why are you saying these things to me?"

"Don't know for sure. Just curiosity I guess. Ya' see, something is eating up that poor son-of-a-bitch. He don't know what it is. If he did, he'd do something about it. That's the way it is with him . . . men like him. See, they gotta do something, just about anything, to go against all the pain and the confusion. As loopy as it sounds, with Stephen it's beating the hell out of some of his best friends. I just wanted to see what all the fuss was about." He steps back, looks her up with an appraising look. "But you're just a woman, damn pretty one for sure. But only another girl."

"Why is all this so important to you?" She asks the question to divert the burden away from her, to transfer it onto Shilo.

"Because," Shilo hops another step back and slaps his hands to his sides, "I just left my best friend at San Jose General with smashed up ribs and a whole lot of bleeding inside. I don't like that because it's happened before, and it'll happen again." His face is expressionless. "Somebody's gonna die. That's the way these things always end. Just wanted to see for myself if it is all worth it."

"Look. . . ."

"Don't try to explain. Not for me to hear. I looked you up for my own satisfaction, to learn something for

myself."

"And did you?"

"Maybe," Shilo scratches at a pimple in the scruff of his scraggy growth. "You know Holden?"

Hanah doesn't say anything.

"Sure you do. All the girls know Holden. Good lookin' black motherfucker. Does a little enforcement nowadays for some property management firms. Just enough to keep him in frills."

"So?"

"Well, Holden and Stephen . . . let me see how to say this. They're connected somehow. You know when the UN was lookin' for hosts for them alien bastards, Holden qualified. Funnier than hell, to see that smoothie with all those poets and shit. But Holden, he backed out at the last minute. So Holden is in a way like Stephen only before the possession. So Stephen looks back and. . . hell, I don't know why. All I know is Holden is gonna find Stephen, not wait for him this time."

"I don't understand."

Shilo steps close, puts both hands on the table and pushes his face close to Hanah's. "Guess you don't." He pulls back. "Guess maybe I'll move on."

Hanah blinks rapid-shot. "Wait."

"No," Shilo shakes his head and turns his back on her.

"Gotta find them. Someone's gotta pick up the pieces."

She stands and follows him.

Stephen continues his leisurely pace. Alum Rock Avenue becomes Santa Clara. He tries to think of Hanah, but once again no clarity comes. He tries to dig up a bite of anger, something concrete and real to give to her. Something she might understand. But the easy rage that Fat Tony's presence had given birth to dies still born as Stephen walks towards downtown. He doesn't know why he is drawn there, to where he knows Holden is.

This memory comes to him:

The tapping in Stephen's head had a rhythmic persistence and fluid continuity he found both annoying and compelling. Finally, full of reluctance to receive the world, he opened his eyes.

"Morning!" Shilo, face split with a grin, squatted in front of Stephen who had spent the night on the cold cement floor. Shilo had been tapping one long forefinger on Stephen's forehead.

"Shit, Shilo, don't you know of any other way to wake a body up?"

"What?" the impossibly wide grin grew even wider, "No appreciation for music? Or is it that you're just not a morning person?"

"Must be it," Stephen grumbled and laid his head back on the pillow.

"Well, I think we can arrange a cure for that. Hey Fat Man, throw me a vitamin pack."

"Yeah, alright," Tony said, looking out from the window of their shared little cottage.

A small package with four different colored pills plopped in front of Stephen. He picked it up and tossed the whole thing in his mouth. He felt the rice paper melt, his mouth fill with saliva, and the pills fall easily down his throat.

"That's not much of a proper breakfast," came Holden's voice behind Stephen.

He strained his neck, then flopped his entire body over, keeping his eyes on Holden. "So, you came back to the nest?"

Holden leaned against the wall, toying with the frame of an abstract drawing, one of the cottage's few adornments. He still wore the simple vest, t-shirt, and felt pants arrangement from the party the night before.

"You checked out of the party pretty early." The bitterness lay on top of Stephen's words like an oil slick.

"Well. . ." Holden hesitated, then said, "I had a preoccupation."

"Yeah, you took the girl I had my eye on." He was unsure until he spoke the words that he would actually be angry with his friend.

Holden frowned. "I didn't take anyone. She chose to come with me."

"C'mon, Jerry. You get who you want."

Holden shook his head. "I don't know why you always feel we have to compete with each other."

"You're the only one I know who can pace me."

"It's a bad habit, Stephen. One that's bound to lead to disappointment."

"I'm a big boy. Hey Tony," Stephen stood up, "you're going to burn your eyes out staring like that."

"Damn," Tony murmured. "I just can't get used to them hovering like that as if nothing was wrong with it. I don't care how many times I see it; it's just so unnatural. Shit, even the cows have gotten over it. They're just sitting there, grazing like they always do."

Stephen went to the window.

The Three Xltaus ships, in all their bloated metallic glory, hovered above the dry brown foothills. Though they had been a common fixture on the local skyline for three weeks now, Stephen still couldn't get over the sharp mental twinges seeing the the craft shot through his head. Try as he might, he still could not normalize their presence into his world view, much less his personal life. A whole range

of emotions threatened to crash in on Stephen. He knew this was coming. The world seemed to be on the verge of mass hysteria. Too much new information and stimuli to assimilate. All the old questions--religious, philosophical, and scientific--now sprang up again with fanatical fervor in debate throughout the planet. The aliens' arrival had taken all previous preconceptions and given them a topsy-turvy spin.

The Xltaus were on the final leg of a century-long galactic surveying mission. And when the UN announced that it was for looking for creative and artistic individuals to act as hosts for the gaseous creatures in order for the aliens to more fully explore the sights and sounds of the planet, Stephen had been among the first of tens of thousands to volunteer, and one of the hundred or so to be accepted. Holden too had volunteered and been accepted. Acceptance relied heavily on right-brained dominance which the Xltaus had said improved a host's chances for a return to normalcy after the completion of the "possession."

Stephen knew he had volunteered because the inaction would kill him. Here was a chance to live things that no other human ever had. He couldn't allow himself to experience this new stimuli second-hand, through some other possessed artist's work.

And he knew there was a certain amount of desperation in his decision also. He wasn't growing up very well. All the

partying, the rebelliousness, the petty legal infractions, it all seemed forced now. The freshness had gone out of his life. All he had now was a lifestyle. He didn't feel very close to the people in this house anymore, and they were supposed to be his best friends.

Holden stepped up behind him, and Stephen turned to consider his friend. Some unspoken element in Holden's stance convinced Stephen that his friend had made a decision "You're not going to do it," he said flatly.

"No."

"Fuck it then," Stephen said curtly. "I'll do it alone."

"I just don't think it's safe enough," Holden said in a conciliatory voice. "Those psychologists on the vid shows say there is no guarantee that some higher brain functions will not be impaired. And what good is an artist without his art?"

What art? Stephen wanted to ask. But that was another argument. "Christ, and people say I'm pretentious. Just sounds like an excuse to be a pussy."

"Look, Stephen. They're a lifeform we know little about. Essentially, they're made of gas. Even they can't say what effects this possession, or whatever it is, will have. It's not worth risking my sanity."

Inwardly, Stephen smiled. He knew this was one competition he would win. Knowing that made him all the more

eager to get on with it.

"But that's just it! I want that risk. I'm tired of writing about this bullshit little world of ours. I want what those hybrid space farts got. I want to be bent."

Whatever Holden was going to say, he bit down on it and only said, "I just think it's a mistake."

Stephen said nothing, turned back to window to where the ships hovered. A minute later he heard Holden leave.

In the dark, just outside a cone of street light, Holden waits. He knows Stephen will come straight down Santa Clara like always. He leans against the chipped brick of an old building. He feels strong, in control; his head is surprisingly clear, the anticipation of violence sharp and vibrant.

Holden pulls the whirliblade from its hip holster, holds it in his hand. Absently, he flips the toggle and the half-dozen rotating blades flick out and spin to life. He stares at the metallic blur obscuring his stationary fist. Perhaps this is going a little far, he thinks. He knows the kind of damage the weapon inflicts on flesh. But he must protect himself.

This time very little fear laces the veins of his thought. He will not run again. The memory of his last encounter with Stephen weighs in his gut as a hard knot of

shame. He ran when Stephen had come down. He ran, only to be caught and mercilessly beaten. It doesn't matter to Holden that Stephen isn't completely in control of his actions. The courts have even ruled that the possessed are exempt to a certain degree from the law. Although the Xltaus have long since left to continue their galactic surveying mission, the possessed, the former hosts for the aliens when they were on Earth, are not entirely human anymore, the possession leaving its indelible mark on each individual's psyche; it is unreasonable to expect them to behave according to human patterns of behavior.

Holden doesn't know why he made the choice he did to change his mind just before the transformation. Stephen had attributed it to fear, but Holden, with self-conscious arrogance, puts it to a premonition. And the current situation, he acknowledges with smug self-congratulation, is proof of the veracity of his misgivings. "I want to be bent," Stephen had said.

Well, Holden thinks, you got your wish.

Three years earlier Holden had fancied himself something of an artist. Although he never did manage to write or paint much. Mainly, it was the crowd he had hung out with then, he admits to himself now. It had been more important to look artistic than to actually be an artist.

Now, with all those college boys and girls having gone their various ways, he trades in petty violence and

intimidation in the pay of the local landlords, for him a far more natural calling. Minor muscle stuff, mainly evicting tenants, collecting rents, stifling complaints. It is easy work, and he is good at it. Women admire him, his strength. They come to him. He now had what he had envied most of Stephen when they first met: a well-deserved reputation on the streets, a niche in society.

Holden slips the whirliblade back into the hip holster. From his vest pocket he fishes out a capsule of meth inhalant. He breathes in vapor from the crushed capsule, holds it in his lungs, then coughs it sharply out. The speed helps him keep his edge.

At last, after an hour or so, Holden sees Stephen walk carelessly down the street.

"So you came, Stephen."

"Yeah." Stephen stops well out of arm's reach.

"I heard you did the number on Tony."

"It happened," Stephen looks down the street towards the bright lights of San Pedro Square, where traffic has begun to coagulate. "I didn't mean it to."

"So what's this?"

"What do you mean?" Stephen looks back to Holden again.

"You being here. You come down to do it like last time?"

"I don't know." Stephen hunches his shoulders, grabs his arms, rubs them. "I want to get past all this."

"Three years, Stephen," Holden says in a carefully measured voice. "It's a long time for all this shit to go on."

"I know," Stephen makes a weak attempt to grin but fails.

In the face of such a nameless and subtle madness, Holden sees no easy way out. And this bothers him the most. He feels trapped, always searching for a course of action, something to latch onto. Some deed, good or bad, anything. He wants so desperately to be an initiator, not merely the victim he feels he has always been in the past.

"Don't worry." Stephen says as if sensing Holden's uncharacteristic lack of confidence. "I don't have the strength anymore. I'm really sorry about Tony. It won't happen again. I won't let it."

"That's good. Real good, Stephen," Holden says though he is afraid to relax too much. "It's a start."

Stephen drops his arms heavily to his sides. "For so long I've used the rage and the anger as a way to understand. When you can finally lie enough to yourself and trick yourself into hating the world, everything seems clear. It gives you a direction. I should be more sophisticated than that. It's childish I know, simplistic. Like suddenly I've become prepubescent."

Holden says nothing. The sexual problems of the possessed were infamous. He holds this knowledge in his mind

as a shallow triumph over Stephen. Women were not a problem for Holden. They were the fringe benefits of his well-carried masculinity.

"I wish so much for things to be the way they were. So I could start over again. But in the end, I know that my memory of it all is delusional."

"We had some really good times," Holden says, hoping Stephen can read his genuinely felt sincerity. "Me, you, Shilo, the Fat Man, the others."

Stephen sighs. "Were they really that good?"

"Sure."

"How long did it really last, Jerry?"

"What do you mean?"

"We were friends only for about six months before the Xltaus. How long would it have been before we drifted apart? Friends do that all the time. Or worse, how long before we would have started lying to each other, competing with each other, stealing each other's women?"

Holden shakes his head. "This is bullshit talk. Friends wouldn't do that."

"Exactly."

"Why do you hate me?" Holden asks. He has wanted to ask that question for three years. For the first time he has the chance.

Surprise blanks Stephen's expression. "You abandoned me."

Holden has no answer for this.

"But I don't guess that really matters anymore. Time to burn the past from my head, time to cut it out."

"I do want to help. I mean, what you've done, it's really quite something. The whole world has gained from your sacrifice." Though the government still hasn't told us how, Holden thinks privately to himself.

"A regular messiah, huh? No. Now you're being simplistic. Easy answers and easy identities were always what you wanted so much."

Again Holden can say nothing.

Stephen takes careful, deliberate steps towards Holden, who backs into the light. "I want to have what you have. To be like I would have been naturally. But you can't help with that, can you?"

"I wish I could help you," Holden says in a small voice.

Stephen's face is shiny in the hard light. Holden imagines the flesh is almost doughy, malleable like soft metal. He resists an insane urge to reach out and touch the face, to mold and reshape it.

Stephen smiles a full-born grin. "I think maybe you can."

The answer bursts on Holden with raw simplicity. He moves a hand down towards the whirliblade.

The first of many speakers begins.

Hanah is absolutely still. Shilo stands next to her, swaying in minute waves. She listens as the microcam whirs consistently from its perch on Shilo's shoulder, its hum riding under the dull monotone of the eulogist. Shilo is recording the ceremony for his friend still laid up in San Jose General. His hand brushes close to her, and she fights a rash impulse to snatch it up, hold onto it, and not let go.

She doesn't do this.

It is a good funeral, held on the open ground of the UN complex. The morning is bright and cloudless. A lot of people have showed, important people, from the UN, the municipal government, poets, artists. They all have speeches to make, they all want to lay verbal laurels on the coffin of this "brave pioneer for the human race." Hanah knows Stephen would have hated this. The ceremony's stuffiness would have stifled him. He would have been tugging at her, anxious to leave, to make love, anything to escape such boring high-handedness. But she is grateful not to have to listen to his complaints. Funerals are not for the dead. They are for the living.

She turns her head slightly, careful not to let Shilo know she is looking at him. "Nothing special, just a girl," he had said. She knows this is true. But she has never tried to be anything else. No matter how much Stephen had wanted her to be.

She remembers what she had shared with Shilo when they came upon Stephen and Holden:

Holden stood over the prostrate body. Stephen lay crumpled at Holden's feet. His body seemed almost deflated, like an empty sac. There was no face, only a formless open sore where the blades had chewed. Holden didn't move or say anything. He stayed that way until the police came. And she had grabbed Shilo and held on and on and on. Only this morning had she let go.

Looking at Shilo, she knows with guilt that the only emotion she has been able to feel since then is a selfish one. She is relieved. She has little room in her to feel anything else.

Now she turns her head to the left, to where the beggar stands. She looks at the curved image of the podium and its speaker orating over the casket shown by the mirror mask. It seems easier to look at the reflection than towards the sealed coffin. Instead of taking Shilo's hand she reaches down and takes Bat's. He doesn't move to regard her, doesn't even seem to notice. She is thankful for this.

One speaker has finished. Another climbs the steps, clears her throat and begins.

Although Bat can see well enough with his mirror vision, he allows Hanah to lead him back to his customary street

corner. It is early afternoon. Shilo tags not far behind them. Although he only met her this morning of the funeral, Bat knows it is important for her to feel useful, to have a purpose. This is an easy charity for him to give.

She disengages from his arm; he sits.

With his artificial eyes, Bat follows the trail of a bloated tear as it sloughs off Hanah's cheek.

"Thank you," he says.

She nods. "I am going to go now." She waits for Bat to say something. "I guess I will talk to you again some time."

"Hmm."

He watches her walk away. Shilo, who has hung back, throws a quick look towards the beggar then moves to follow her. She doesn't look back, but as they move out of his range, Bat notices that she has slowed, and he knows she will let Shilo catch up.

Bat reaches a hand up, switches the mask off and lets the comfortable blanket of darkness cover him.

It is hard for Hanah, Bat thinks. Harder than he can imagine. In his blindness he tries to isolate a vision, tries to imagine what she felt when she found Stephen, his face bloody and literally shaved off. Guilt and indecision must have given birth to a strange hybrid of relief. That much he understands. Stephen is at peace now, and there is a certain amount of joy to be found in that.

For a long time he waits, then at last, he switches the mask on, and the world moves again.

Riding the Dragon in the San Jose Metroplex
(Circa 2036 AD)

Jonathan sat under the rusted struts of a monorail track and thought the kind of grandiose dreams he would only dare when he was alone. He thought about a lot of things. He thought about Moc and how his friend had grown strangely distant in the last week. He thought about Lilly, and remembered he had promised to stop by this afternoon.

But mostly, as a tram exploded down the track, rattling both the railing's metal struts and the teeth in his head, Jonathan thought about riding the dragon, and about the name that was about to be his.

After a while he tired of thinking. Besides, it was time for him to meet Obediah. He stood up and began to walk.

"Hey, boy-boy, hear you gonna run, gonna spin your web to catch and ride the dragon. Is that it? Huh? Is that what you gonna do?" Mask of mirrors: eyes of the blind.

The old blind man, naked to the waist with only a loincloth for the late summer weather, sat at the base of an even older brick building on Market Street. The sun had browned and wrinkled his skin till the neck sagged in a endless series of furrows and valleys. The sonic mask covered his face, although the tanned round of his head could

still be seen though the mask's back strapping.

Sure," The boy replied. "That's what I'll do." He tapped a finger against the mask's smooth curve. "They still letting you beg on this street, Bat, even with your sonic vision?"

"Well," the old man shifted his weight against the building's brick wall. "My beggar's licence lasts till year's end, then we'll see if they take my livelihood away. Don't think so though. This," now he touched the mask with one gaunt hand, "don't give sight as good as the real thing. Nothing better for me to do but work this street."

"Yeah, I guess so," Jonathan nodded, wondered how the motion looked to the man behind the mask. "Why do you wear that thing out here, aren't you afraid they won't dish out so well if people think you can see?"

"Hell no!" Bat exclaimed. "Just makes 'em all the more curious. They get closer to see if I can really see. And when they get closer, they start giving. Best damned thing I've done in all my years begging."

"Yeah, Okay." Jonathan said and turned to walk down Market.

Bat reached out one thin arm and hooked the boy's ankle. When he jerked around, Bat grabbed his arm, pulling to get a grip on the shoulder, then yanking down even harder to bring Jonathan's face equal to his own.

"I'm gonna tell you something, something true," Bat

hissed into his ear. "This name you so hungry after, what you been wearin' already in your arrogance, it ain't gonna hide you. Cause the council don't want no sixteen-year-old blade, no matter how big they are for their age or how shrewd they are. The council gonna push Moc, push him to make sure you don't come back."

Jonathan straightened, pulling away from the old man's grip. "No. Moc is my friend."

"Your friend is weak, a coward."

"Not a coward."

The old man joggled his hand. "Maybe not, but it's his weakness letting you go on as long as you have. He shoulda slapped you down, before letting you come before the council, where you said this and you said that. Cause maybe he'd would've saved your life then. Don't you see yet? The companies, the big corporations, are leaning on the inter-gang council to snuff the bloodshed. They don't like the negative media coverage."

"Why are you telling me this, Bat?" For the first time in the three years Jonathan had known the beggar, he felt afraid of Bat.

"Two reasons," he answered. "First is I ain't telling you nothing anybody who got eyes don't already know. Second is I gotta admit a liking for you. I feel sorry for you."

"Sorry?" Jonathan half-asked, his fear displaced by the much more common emotion of anger.

"Sure. You can't ever see the larger picture. That's why the council has given you the fastest and meanest dragon for you to try and ride. All you see is what is in your eyes and your hands, what's touching and affecting you at any particular moment. Other than that you have a blindness no mirror mask would cure. You thrash and you wail at the world, forcing people to action one way or another. People don't like that. They want what is safe, even those on the intergang council for all their spouting off and threatening. What went on in your head when you went demanding they make you blade? Are you surprised they set you up?"

"Why do people hate me, Bat?" Jonathan asked in a soft voice.

"Because you show too much enthusiasm in your work, boy. You'd rather maim than kill. You've taken all their doctrine to heart and put it in practice. You frighten them."

"I don't like to kill--not really, no matter what they say."

Bat was silent.

A shadow covered them. Jonathan peered into the mask's reflection and saw the police whirly pod hover above briefly. The suspect apprehension mandibles flexed out, and Jonathan could make out the hog's face as he shifted the controls in a warning. Not having a beggar's license, Jonathan knew they would snatch him up for loitering if he still stood here two minutes when the pod returned.

He made to leave.

Bat spoke. "You come back here tomorrow morning. You come back when you've truly earned your blade name."

Jonathan turned. "Do you think I'll die, Bat?"

He waited for the beggar to answer; when none came, he shrugged and headed down Market.

The wide street, crowded with pedestrians, was empty of traffic. Few in this city's inner core could afford a hover car. And no one dared to leave a ground car on the street. So Jonathan wandered from the sidewalk out onto the broken and patchy black of the street. He passed by and through the conversation of a coagulated knot of transients who only cocked their heads and worked their mouths furiously, seldom accomplishing actual words. He snatched in mid-air the bone-handled throwing knife a group of children (concentrating in age some five years younger than himself) used in playing mumbley peg where a slab of asphalt had been ripped up and the tired brown earth showed itself. After testing the dagger's heft, he laughed and tossed it back.

Little Obediah, perched on an over-turned postal box, waited on a corner. A ripped green duffle bag lay at his feet.

"Hey, boy-boy. I see you got the harnesses. Can't grab a piece of the sky and ride it down without them."

Obediah stood up. "Gotta tell you, Jon. I'm scared shitless."

"Oh." Jonathan opened the duffle bag. Inside four harnesses lay neatly coiled. He reached in and took one out. The soft oiled leather felt good, reassuring, in his hands. "You've ridden before," he said in an effort to soothe the frightened boy.

"Yeah, but not the Camino. Word is that this is a sucker play. No one's done the Camino before."

Jonathan refrained from the urge to smack Obediah. Instead he again used the words Lilly had said to use. "It's just a matter of the psyche-out, mind games, nerves, that's all. Really. All you have to do is jump an extra two and a half seconds before you normally would on the slower worms. The speed is constant down the canyon."

Obediah visibly relaxed, his slight shoulders lowering. It wasn't till then that Jonathan saw how apprehensive the other boy had been. The technical explanation had always worked as a kind of litany to allay the fear. It reduced everything to a simple matter of mechanics. That was always reassuring.

"Hell, Obe. All you got to do is learn how to count. Even you stayed awake in school enough to do that."

A smile lined Obediah's thin face. "Then everything's going to be all right?"

"Sure."

"And then we'll be blade. I'll get my new name."

"That's the whole point."

"Yeah."

"I want you to check the feed lines on all the harnesses. They can't snag, or we're all fucked."

Jonathan left him. He wanted to see Lilly one last time before he made the jump.

He liked being a Myrmidion. It supplied him with the readily accessible identity he had been lacking. And that was important. Attendance at the secondary vocational schools was mandatory, but the aspect of the minimum wage lifestyle provided by non-corporate government jobs obviously held little appeal. Moc had taken Jonathan as his protege, and soon he was making good money from the Talman Corporation with whom the Myrmidions had signed a lucrative support and service contract. Sometimes it was something as mundane as simple scab work, unloading cartons, or moving payloads without union acknowledgement. Other times, like this past weekend, the work was of a less delicate nature.

Moc had lobbied hard on the intergang council to win that contract. And soon it would come up for renewal, and the more blades Moc could boast, the better his chance for renewal.

Blade.

A new name and a new weapon went with the title. Funny about the steel dagger. The ordinary plastisteel knife Jonathan now carried was actually a better tool of the trade. It was more durable, wouldn't chip or break, and never needed

sharpening. Still, the prestige that went along with the antique knife was immense, and Jonathan would allow nothing to stop his having it.

From Market and its high row of old bank buildings, used now as low rent tenements Jonathan, turned up San Fernando, a narrow and less crowded street akin more to an alley, to Reise Liquors on the corner of San Fernando and Third.

Carl Reise stood up from behind the counter where he had been stocking the lower shelves with the glass bottles of the more exclusive liquors, saw Jonathan enter his store, frowned, and rubbed his hands agitatedly on either side of his considerable belly.

Jonathan strode up to the counter and pulled a crumpled triangle of paper from his trouser pocket and handed it to the proprietor.

Reise laid the check on the white plastic counter and straightened the paper out. "What did you do this time, boy, that would earn you. . . ," he read from the smudged check, ". . . nearly a hundred credits! Who the hell would pay that kinda money for what you do? Ah, the Talman Corporation, one of the biggest. Now I know what you did. You and that thieving gang of yours spent the weekend in Frisco, breaking up that union meeting at the Talman textile plant. I saw that on the vid news. What you down on their books as this

time?"

"Temporary stock boy," he answered.

"Stock boy!" Reise bellowed. "For only two days, and then at fifty credits a day? God damn!"

"What you down on my ass for, Mr. Reise?" Jonathan asked. "It wasn't me who stole off with your wife last year. Wasn't me or any other Myrmidion. That was a Roc. And besides, you hunted them down, didn't you, Mr. Reise? Hunted down your wife and her lover, blasted them with that old shotgun you keep behind your counter."

"That's right, boy," Reise leaned over the counter till the edge creased his belly, and he pointed one fat finger at Jonathan. "You didn't steal away with my wife. But you feel free to bed down her sluttish sister. Sick, that whole family. . . molesting boys. I should have known better than to marry into that litter."

Jonathan shook his head. "Ain't I always been polite to you? I've never come around here trying to prick you for money. Lilly tells me to treat you with respect, and I do."

"You're right," Reise admitted. Then a wide gap-toothed smile spread over his blunt face. "Anyway, I guess I shouldn't be too hard on you, boy. Because I heard you finally let your ambitions get the better of you. You moved too fast and want too much too soon. So the Council has finally been forced to do something. Moc cannot protect you anymore. However, there is something I want to know?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you realize how fast the monorail travels on the stretch you're supposed to hitch your ride on?"

"Don't know exactly, though I know it's fast."

"Damn near a hundred k's an hour. You know what is going to happen? You're going to swing out from that metal web you've strung high over the tracks, and try to land on the back of the train itself. But it'll be going too fast and you'll be thrown. It's a hell of a drop from the monorail to the ground. Your neck will be broken. Then your precious Lilly will find another dangerous little boy to make her happy."

When he saw Jonathan would say nothing, he blew out a coarse laugh and unlocked the register. "Why don't you get a credit account, boy. Lilly would sign for one for you; she did for all the others. Not many places still use cash like me."

"No, Mr. Reise. I want don't anyone having their hooks in me. Once they got your name in some computer bank, they own you."

Reise looked up from the check towards something just slightly behind the boy.

Jonathan swung around, his left arm bent to thrust the elbow out, right arm straight out, releasing the knife from its inside shoulder pouch of his shirt. It fell into his hand, and he had the blade switched out when he felt his

elbow crash into a soft gut.

The other was already down on his knees when Jonathan faced him. He grabbed a handful of hair as black as his own and twisted the sweating face up. With little pressure Jonathan traced his jaw line with the knife point.

"Who the fuck are you?" he demanded.

The other neither winced nor spoke. Although he looked a couple of years older, they were basically the same size. Finally, Jonathan jerked his head to the side and saw tattooed just beneath his left ear a large bird, wings spread, a struggling elephant in one claw.

He turned to Reise. "Why didn't you tell me you had contracted to the Rocs for protection? You know I wouldn't have come in here if I would have known that."

The older man smiled. "Just wanted to see you squirm, boy. Besides, the Rocs owe me."

Disgusted, Jonathan took the Roc's face and slammed it into his knee. Blood shot; the other boy groaned, and Jonathan kicked him as he fell.

"A hundred credits, minus my charge of course," Reise said, pushing the bills across the counter.

Jonathan nodded and handed a five credit bill back to him, "A bottle of Cusano Rojo."

"You're under age," he said flatly.

"Shit!" And handed over another five.

"Damn," he said. "You have peculiar perversions." He

took the bottle from the shelf behind and set it on the counter. "Worm and all."

He grabbed the bottle, tucked it under his arm, walked past the boy with the bloody face lying on the floor and through the door.

The view from Lilly's doorway was typical.

Lilly, dressed in the worn threads of her night gown, her head propped up on the meat of one heavy arm, lay asleep on the faux marble divan, typical of the second hand neo-greco furniture, which had been all the rage last year. Disfigured color from the tri-d's holo platform provided the only light in Lilly's dark little studio. The sound was off. Some soap blurred on. Jonathan always wondered why she bothered watching a broken projector. No wonder she had headaches all the time.

Jonathan hit the switch. "Not up yet?"

She rubbed her right eye hard, too hard, Jonathan thought. It must have hurt. "I'm tired, and didn't sleep well."

He couldn't really remember exactly what it was that had originally attracted him. It was her age, primarily, had to be. The idea of sinking into that soft and experienced flesh had held both terror and great expectations for Jonathan. Lilly had been a bit of a joke with the younger Myrmidions.

She liked gang members, Myrmidions and Rocs, primarily, and her reputation on the streets had ridden her like an unkind master.

"Maybe you ought to do more than just lie around. Being on the dole's not good for you, Lilly."

"You're telling me I'm wasting my life." She chortled minute amusement.

He shrugged, "Just doing nothing for a living just doesn't make sense. Maybe you ought to go back and try to teach history at the school again. Gotta be better than lying around the house."

She frowned, and in the motion her face became very ugly for a brief moment. "You know I lost my credential."

"Maybe they'll give it back to you. That thing with your student was a long time ago, almost ten years."

"No," her voice had gone completely flat. "I don't think so. Once they find out about you, I don't think any school board would approve me again."

"Me and the others." He didn't know why he said that. It hurt her. He knew it would.

"What is wrong?"

"Reise says I've pushed too far."

Lilly sat up. "So you've seen my former brother-in-law? Don't listen to him. He's too bitter and fucked-up himself to pass out judgments. What's a matter with you, Rail?"

It felt strange, her calling him by his blade name

already. Bat was right about that. He hadn't earned the title yet.

"What do you want to do with your life?" she demanded. "You practically live out on the streets. You'll probably never finish school. Maybe you can get a minimum-wage job on an assembly line or maybe be a cabin boy on a space liner. Is that what you want?"

"No." He snagged the salt shaker from the table and stuffed it in his jacket.

"Then don't worry 'bout what other people say," she said. "To be blade is your immediate destiny. You shouldn't let these thoughts get in the way of that."

"Aw, Lilly. I'm just a kid."

"Bullshit. There are no more kids in this city."

"Sixteen is just too young," he protested. "They're just ain't been no sixteen-year-old blades. The corporations like 'em to be at least seventeen, so they're legally adults. I don't see why it has to happen so fast."

"It is the inevitable push of history. Socioeconomic evolution, the gangs are growing into something else. Common street thuggery is passe. Everything, government, our private lives, our vocational lives are merging into a new corporate identity."

She stood up and stepped towards him. He fought a powerful urge to back away.

"Shit, Lilly. Every time we try to have an argument,

you start talking this shit. It makes my head hurt. You ain't teaching class anymore. I don't want to learn any of this."

"But it's important you know these things about the world you live in. To help prepare you for the future."

"You're not my mother, Lilly," Jonathan said, trying not to be angry. "I can take care of myself. I did it before we ever went to bed together."

"Is that what you think I'm trying to do, to be your mother?" She lay her hands on his shoulders and squeezed.

He didn't look in her eyes. "Look, I like being with you." It was an uncomfortable subject. "You seem to know what is going on. How to make sense out of some of these things. I know you know what's best to do."

"I only want to help," Lilly insisted.

"But you can't do everything for me. I can't live just for you. Sometimes, you smother me."

"I don't want to do that." She leaned her head close, whispering heavily in his ear. "I just want to help."

Then he submitted to making love because it was a way of bypassing the argument.

When it was over she lay up close next to him.

"In twenty years, when you're living comfortably on a corporate salary, you'll thank me." Then she said in a softer voice. "Even if you don't know me anymore then."

If he had been expected to dispute that fact, he

disappointed her.

Blazing ruby, the meteor dropped from thick cloud cover, subsided in hue to a glowing orange, threw off a trail of angry sparks, then cooled to a dull pearl.

He licked the curvature from thumb to index finger, sprinkled it with salt from the shaker he had stolen from Lilly's apartment, and watched as the meteor transformed into the metal sphere of a dropship as it extended its multi-legged landing gear and descended to the San Jose Interplanetary Spaceport which stood fenced off from the bus stop where he sat alone. The dropship fell from sight, and he took a swig of mezcal.

"Drinking for courage, Jonathan?"

He spun around on the bench. Moc stood behind him. He had just stepped from the sleek silvery hull of an aircar bearing the Talman corporate markings.

"It's Rail."

"Not your name yet, at least not for a few more hours," Moc shrugged. A gust of early evening wind blew a strand of sandy brown hair into his eyes. He let it stay. "Till then it's still Jonathan, I'm afraid. There are rules, you know."

He stood from the bench and handed the bottle and shaker to Moc. Moc took the bottle, not the shaker.

"How did you know I would be here?"

Moc drank. "Easy. The nearest stop that would take you to the Camino. I assume that's where you'll meet the others."

"Sure." He took back the bottle but did not drink. "You know, Moc, I have to ask. What do you think? Do you think we'll make it?"

"Maybe you might, if you keep your head, make sure you count right, and pull up hard on the kick once the dragon takes you."

The underbelly of the cloud blanket flared with orange as another dropship fell through.

"Look at that, Moc." He said in soft wonder. "Now **that** is riding the dragon, just look at that! To be able to do that, to ride down the sky, burning it down from space. I'm going to do that one day. Damned if I won't."

"Only bringing passengers and cargo down from the big space liners," Moc said with a frown.

Jonathan wasn't fazed. "You know I will be there, out in space, on all those other worlds. I feel so trapped on this one. One day I'll be there. They've whole new cities now on those other worlds."

"Always full of ambition," Moc said.

"Why not?" he asked. "If we succeed, there'll be four new blades in the Myrmidions. Surely you want that. It'll make you the most powerful member of the council. That's why I'm doing this, for you. That's why I demanded that the

council make me blade. It'll bring the number of blades up to twenty. Not even the Rocs can equal that."

"That's all you see?" Moc folded and gripped his arms and kneaded the thick muscles. "You think that swinging down on the monorail is the hardest thing in this whole mess. Is that what that old bitch has pumped you up to believe?"

"Oh, come on," he protested. "Don't talk like that, Moc. You know how I feel about Lilly."

"You don't see anything you're doing fucking up anything else? Don't you know there's a balance to be maintained?" Moc was nearly shouting now.

"No. I don't see anything else," he said defensively. "I want to be blade. So do Mark, Dale, and Obediah. The council says I have to ride the dragon to be one. So I'm going up to the Camino and join them to do just that. That is all I see, the only thing important to me right now."

Contrary to Jonathan's expectations, Moc did not retort. "Okay, Jonathan. Okay. We'll let it go for now."

He seems so tired now, Jonathan thought, surprised by both the observation and the realization of what it meant.

The easy hiss of a hydraulic door sounded. Moc turned. A man stepped smoothly from the sleek aircar. He was a young man. Everything about him--his immaculate cashmere suit, iguana skin boots, perfectly styled hair cut--glowed with the high gloss of corporate status.

"Jonathan," Moc said, "I'd want you to meet Mr. Loucan.

He is the Talman corporate liason for the Myrmidions during the length of our contract."

"Hello, Jonathan," he said, extending his hand, knuckles spread out in the traditional street greeting. Loucan was all poise, pure snake, Jonathan confirmed to himself.

Jonathan and Loucan knuckled.

"I've heard you've been stirring things up." He put his hand back down to his side, and Jonathan imagined that Loucan wanted desperately to wipe that hand. "So I asked Moc to arrange an introduction. With the contract coming up for renewal at the end of the quarter, I thought it would be advantageous for us to meet."

"Does that mean the Myrmidions will get the contract?"

"It's a little early for that. We'll have to see how things develop." Loucan smiled a smile awesome in its lack of commitment. To be that detached, Jonathan thought, is a real art form.

Moc looked down the road. "Here comes your bus."

As the ancient vehicle rumbled up to the stop, Jonathan ignored Loucan, asked Moc. "Why did you come here?"

"I just wanted to see you before you went. We both know it might be the last time. I . . . I wanted to remember something, to keep in my memory."

The bus door collapsed to open. He put one foot on the first step. "What is that, Moc?"

But Moc only said, "Never mind. We'll talk later," he

worked up a smile, "when you're blade."

Bat arrived early in the morning to claim his spot for the day's begging. The old man hobbled to the building's weathered corner and removed his parka. Once settled, he moved a hand up underneath the mirror mask to adjust.

Rail stepped from an alleyway.

Bat cocked his head in his direction as the boy approached. "So you made it, huh? You rode that speeding beast?"

He nodded.

"I guess I can call you by the name now."

Exhausted from the lack of sleep, Rail squatted. "I don't know." He swayed and stuck out a hand for support.

Bat grasped it in a surprisingly strong grip. "Sit down, boy."

He sat. "You know, Bat. I did ride the dragon; I swung out and rode it all the way to Frisco."

"The others?" Bat asked.

"I met them at the Fed building. I'd been drinking a little, but I felt okay. They looked sober, but scared as hell. You know little Obediah? Man, I thought he was just gonna run, just bolt before we even got inside. He didn't, though. There's this back door to the building on the side not facing the Camino. It's used for the people who want to

work late. Opposite it, on the other side of the monorail track, there's that fancy hotel, two hundred stories of it."

"Yeah, I know where." Bat said.

Rail continued. "We split up the web and the rest of the equipment Dale had gotten. Obediah and me went inside the Fed building. Dale and Mark went over to the hotel. Wasn't too hard for me and Obediah to get past the janitor. Shit, he may have even seen us as we snuck around to the staircase, and just didn't give a damn.

"You know, Bat, that's actually what's most important, stringing the web between the two buildings. Made out of that tinselled alloy, I guess they call it. Six strands, overlapped, each secured separately by stakes we sunk right into the walls. It's gotta be able to recoil, to pull you back over the dragon. The only time I ever got hurt riding the dragon was when the web wasn't strung right. I just hung. It didn't pull me nowhere. So we made extra sure this one was done right. All four swing lines had to be separate. We didn't want to get tangled up on each other."

"Yes," Bat said, nodding his head to the rhythm of the boy's voice, "The web is most important."

"After we got it strung, Mark and Dale came back over to us. We put on the harnesses and boots and the gauntlets Obediah had brought. Nobody said a word as we checked each other and made sure the straps weren't too tight.

"Once that was done, there was only the waiting. That's

always the worst part. The four of us sat hunkered down on that long crumbling ledge, hiding, waiting. A couple of whirly pods came by, but we had set the webs in the canyon where the hogs can't get their machines in. We were all scared shitless. I knew that. I remember thinking to myself: I really don't know these guys at all. I mean, I really didn't. I only started hanging around them in the last few weeks. Other way around, I guess. They started hanging around me. Started doing the things I wanted to do. I was the reason they were there. Because they trusted me. But man, oh beggar man, I was scared, just like I said."

Rail had thought the waiting would never end. Then at 5:22, right on schedule, the windows on the other building began to rattle a split second before the tram came segment by segment into the canyon. Rail heard that metal squeal to metal, stinging in his ears. He cracked my back and grabbed the wire. He made sure He counted those seconds just like Lilly had said. He sucked in a breath, kicked up and out. His knees were cinched up close to his chest. Everything was nothing but noise and wind.

"I closed my eyes and fell. . . ." Rail stopped, remembering.

"Tell me," Bat said with quiet insistence.

"It's a two to three second drop, like always, like all the other runs. I didn't feel anything. I didn't feel my body, I never did. I like that time, the drop. I guess

that's why I always ride the dragon."

He dropped even beneath the level of tracks. He blew out all his air, and then it came. The wire actually twanged, and the web snapped me back up and then over. He stayed with the movement and kicked up again.

He arced high and beautiful. At last, he opened his eyes. The tram flashed gray beneath. He stared at that blur, lost himself in it.

"God, all that gray," Rail said to Bat. "It just about sucked me into it. It became the whole world, nothing else but that dull gray. Something strange about seeing something move so fast, because I was falling at the same time, falling right into it. It's like nothing was real, nothing was solid, because everything was moving so fast."

Then, quite violently, the world was very real, very solid. He hit running--stumbling, falling in a stupid way. Three steps, the magnetic boots grabbed for a second then they let go with each step. He whipped straight up then snapped back; all the muscles in his chest, back and stomach seemed like they heaved. They all screamed. He stood upright for a brief second, stuck to the metal hull, then the tram jerked, one leg lifted, his balance shifted and over the side he went.

"'Motherfucker!' I shouted but couldn't hear my voice in that all the noise."

He had tried to haul himself back up when the line in

the belly latch reached its end. Somewhere away he knew the web stretched almost to bursting. He was snapped back. Scooped off his feet with furious energy. His skin under the harness snarled with pain. Four times he was bounced off carsides as the line dragged him back towards the web. He knew from the sharp pain lighting up his side that the third blow cracked some ribs. He slammed one of the magnetized gauntlets against a carside to hold himself. With the other hand he snapped the belly latch. The swing line flew up and away. He kicked in one of the car's windows, the glass fractured and blew away easily in the high wind. He used the ledge as a foothold and scrambled up the side. He snagged the railing, swung a leg up, and rolled back onto the roof.

"After seven long seconds, I could finally let out the breath that had been hiding in me. My lungs were all torqued. Holy son-of-a-bitch, I thought. I had made it."

"What about the others, blade?" Quiet insistence toned the beggar's question. "What about the others?"

On the retelling, the memory resurfaced with a vivid ugliness. And Rail wanted desperately to push it away. The guilt throbbed in him. He felt it almost as a physical thing.

"I had forgotten them. During the whole jump it had just been me. You know? That's all I had mind for. But as I rode that dragon, I looked back just before the tram turned a corner. They just hung there, all three of them. They

must have jumped too soon. And the dragon just ate them up."

That must have been it. They jumped before the trailer lines from the web caught the tram. It was essential to have downward inertia before the web caught and jerked you forward. They should have waited, kept their heads, oh man, oh shit, oh, man, Rail thought, in unwanted recollection of the moment. Christ, the bodies had looked all chewed up, and his own pain became a minor, forgotten thing.

Moc's voice broke the silence that had followed.

"You tell a good story, Rail. Just like it was. I was there."

Rail turned.

Moc leaned against the wall from where he had been eavesdropping. Oddly, he wore a long coat, unbuttoned, in the early morning heat.

"You were?"

"Sure, a good ride. You kept your head, maintained your count. A pity the others couldn't have done the same."

Moc moved, and Rail caught a flash of color underneath the coat.

"What's that?"

Moc said nothing.

Rail came closer; Moc stiffened. Rail opened Moc's coat. Underneath, the pale blue uniform of a Talman Corporation spaceliner cabin boy showed.

Rail stepped back. "I don't understand."

"I'm through. I'm leaving tonight. I pulled some strings and got a job on a pleasure liner doing the circuit to Io around Jupiter."

"Not now. You can't be leaving, not after what we did."

"Wake up, boy-boy!" Moc shouted. "Didn't those three corpses hanging on the wires tell you anything?"

"Shit, man, shit, shit. What about the council? This was gonna put us over the top. Give you control. Steer all the big-money contracts to the Myrmidions."

"Christ," Moc spat. "Where did you get your perspective on things? Did Lilly really make you believe that a big corporation like Talman would give two shits about a group of cheap quarter-credit punks? The intergang council is only a bunch of sub-contracting errand boys."

"But you," Rail insisted, "the Myrmidions, are my family. My real family."

"That was just survival, don't you see? Just keeping my ass safe while I waited for something else. You still don't understand, do you? I was only in it long enough to go corporate. There is no way to make a decent living anymore unless you become a lifetime corporate employee. Even before you pushed into that meeting I was arranging to get into the corporation. Hell, I had already had my physical and signed the papers before you rode."

Now Rail said nothing.

"I have to leave. I'm taking a dropship up to the liner

tonight."

Numb, Rail only nodded.

Moc started away then turned back towards Rail. "One more thing to do," Moc said. "My last official act as chief of the Myrmidions." He dug a cloth bundle from under the long coat and tossed it towards Rail. It landed hard on the concrete halfway between them.

He then left.

Rail stood unmoving for a full minute, and then at last he stooped and picked up the bundle. The knife was there as he knew it would be. A simple double edge dirk. Folded up next to the knife were two slips of paper.

The first was a check for a thousand credits from the Talman Corporation.

The second was a hand written note:

Just a little something in the form of congratulations. I look forward to working with you in the future.

Loucan

Rail held the papers in his hand for a long time, fighting the initial urge to rip them up. But somehow there seemed some latent power in the handwriting. He folded them both up neatly after a while and put them in his pocket.

Rail was waiting for Reise when the shopkeeper arrived

to open.

"So," Reise said. "You're alive." He unlocked the wrought iron gate and then the glass door. "Who would have thought that?" And walked in.

Rail followed him slowly to the counter, laying the check out.

Reise scanned the amount, frowned briefly then unlocked his safe. He lay the bills out in hundreds. Rail barely noticed that Reise didn't subtract his usual fee.

"And what do you intend to do with this money?" For the first time that the boy could ever remember, the shopkeeper's voice was void of sarcasm.

"Leave," Rail said, actually contemplating it for the first time. "Leave the city."

Reise shook his head. "Thousand isn't a bad little piece of change. But it really isn't going to hold you that long."

Rail's throat was dry, mercilessly so. "The others are dead . . . Mr. Reise, I don't know. Is it my fault they're dead, all of them?" He desperately wanted a concrete answer either way. He wanted someone to tell him how he should feel.

But Reise wouldn't give him this. "Perhaps," he shrugged. "It's a cruel way to grow up." Then he said in a softer voice, "I know."

"Moc is gone. Everything is so fucked up. Maybe

leaving is a good thing to do."

"Naw," Reise shook his head and prodded with uncharacteristic warmth. "You might as well go back to her. Let her live her youth out through you one last time. You got time to figure the other things out later."

"You think so?" Rail was unsure.

Reise nodded. "Sure, one last time. You go on. Do it."

He snatched up the money.

The walk to Lilly's apartment was quick. That was good. He didn't really want to think too much about the future. He stopped when he arrived at her door. He considered briefly running away, but decided against it. Reise had been right. There was time enough for that later. Rail took a breath and let himself in.

Boy in a Holographic World

Expectant and determined, Rail stood impatiently before the laser screen's muted hues.

Holo City!

Every metroplex had one. And the San Jose/San Francisco metroplex's holo city had a reputation almost equal to New York's red light holographic sector. Rail had passed by the laser screen's shifting dull grey tones all his life. His two older brothers, who frequented Holo City, had told him stories, wild, unbelievable stories. And now, at last, came his seventeenth birthday, his chance to pass through the barrier.

Rail carried his newly acquired passport to adulthood, a plastic identification card, in his hip pocket. A thick wad of bank credits lay folded up next to the card. The whirli blade, its knives collapsed, was tied securely to his shin. He carried too much money, all he could save and steal; he wouldn't let himself be rolled and lose it all before he got what he came for.

He took three carefully measured steps towards the barrier. Something manshaped moved and regarded him from behind the shimmering screen.

Three heads, dog heads, scrutinized him. "Well, boy,"

came the triple-layered voice, "you're at the gate, what do you want?"

Rail, shocked at the apparition, said nothing.

"Come on!" the creature barked.

"I want to come in."

It lurched to the barrier, and Rail stepped back, afraid. But instead of the three-headed beast, a plain, pot-bellied man over fifty stepped through. He regarded Rail with a mixture of curiosity, amusement, and impatience.

"Let's see it."

"Huh?"

"The I.D., boy. You don't look a day over the seventeen you undoubtedly are."

Rail slid his hand into his trouser pocket, hooked the card out and handed it to the man.

"Today's your birthday. Congratulations, Jonathan." He handed the card back. "Okay, you're legal."

"Rail," he said quietly.

"Rail, huh? Your street name, I gather. And tell me, where did you get that moniker?"

"Hopping monorail trams, the fast ones that cut between all the big skyscrapers."

"Oh." He took a step towards the barrier. Rail made to follow, but the man pulled up short of the laser screen.

"Now, my little Cinderella, let me give you a bit of advice. I'm sure it won't be the last you'll be offered."

Every thirty days Holo City shuts down for five days. The laser screens are turned off, the illusions are dimmed, and the dreamers leave their projection coffins. This little respite allows the City's residents to retain their sanity. Tonight is the last night before those five days."

He stepped back from Rail but continued looking intently at the boy. "People come to Holo City because they want illusion; they want to have their fantasies played out for them. We cater to that for a month, and then there are the five days all to our own. If you want to keep your memories good and intact, try not to be here in the morning." With that he stepped through the barrier.

Rail followed.

His first glimpse of Holo City was decidedly disappointing. The buildings, multi-storied and antique, seemed tired and worn, like usurped Victorian monarchs. Dry blasted earth, speared through with brittle grass, pushed up through sections of the pavement. Most disconcerting was the sky. It stood an unyielding gray, undiscernible. There seemed to be few people about, only three sitting on the porch steps of a broken-windowed two story boarding house.

A hand fell on Rail's shoulder.

"Don't worry, this street has been shut down," came the three-toned voice.

Rail looked at the hand on his shoulder and started violently. But the huge paw held him firm. He followed the

hand/paw up the length of the arm and found himself staring at the great three-headed apparition.

All three heads smiled a needle-toothed smile with a slow pulling back of the lips. "Everything here is a lie. That's why you'll fall in love with this place. That's why you'll come back."

Rail, terrified, blinked repeatedly, but the man retained his canine shape.

"I'm Argus. Like old Cerberus, I guard this gate to Holo City. I determine who is worthy to come in, who this place can truly benefit. So boy, what do you want here? Whatever your fetish is, I'm sure we'll feed it well enough."

"I want to find a fleshsmith."

"And maim that young body of yours? Well, I don't know if I could be party to that."

"Oh, no," Rail protested in earnest. "I need a muscle graft, here," he traced the back of his triceps, "and here," he ran his hand diagonally across his chest. "My brothers say they can get me a job rigging steel on the big 'scrapers if I get the extra muscles added on like they had done to handle pulling up all the cable."

"An admirable and functional goal. I guess we can allow that, though I suppose another itinerary not so noble also fills your agenda. Follow Williams (that's the street you're on) to First. You'll find whatever you want on First."

"Thanks." Rail started to move down the street.

Williams continued in much the same vein: worn and seemingly abandoned buildings. He had to keep his eyes open. Everything here was so different. Rail's world was free of such decay.

He had spent the days of the last six months in the crowded box of a vocational studies classroom where he had learned, along with the rest of his classmates, how to properly cultivate the various endorphins and enzymes which composed liquid memory for organic interpretative computers. Rail remembered with distinct horror watching as the sluggish blue gel of DNA coded proteins coiled and recoiled in the transparent brain sac. . . artificial life, artificial intelligence. Unlike their silicon counterparts, organic computers did more than collate and sift data. They interpreted, speculated on stock prices, predicted fashion trends, guessed who the new celebrities would be, advised which employees to hire. Essentially thinking for man.

Gotta find another way to make a living, he thought. Not the bullshit jobs the municipal school system was preparing him for. Rail knew exactly what quality of life that kind of factory minimum wage job would provide: fifty-four hours a week in some antiseptic clean room, earning just enough income to live in an overcrowded multiplex tenement, sucking in vid shows on the tri-d, and passing time snorting meth or popping derms, or maybe even some grass or opium if the mood was anachronistic enough.

Which is what this was all about -- to avoid that kind of life, to get the muscle grafts, to get a rigger's license. Such physical jobs as repairing the superstructures of the impossibly high 'scrapers held a new found prestige. You did something yourself. For once a machine didn't do it for you.

He looked ahead.

Fresh graffiti burned, laser etched, in the heat-streaked concrete of a crumbling fence.

Could you ever ask Troccoli to understand
How to live the life the dream demands?

The letters burned with black ugliness against the white concrete. Just beyond smoldered more, freshly burned:

Dreamer, dreaming alone in your dead sleep.
Do you really care for the company you keep?

"Well, you found me." The thin wand of the laser etcher burned red flame in her hand. She flicked it off. Younger looking than he, she was fifteen perhaps. Pretty, even with a shaved head, she wore a thick black leather jacket, green fatigue pants, and heavy unlaced boots.

She walked up quickly and put her arms around his neck. He felt her hands move down and around his body. Finally, he managed to push her away.

"Hey, what the fuck you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"Greeting you." When he frowned at this, she brought

her hands up to her hips. "I'm waiting to take you to a fleshsmith. That's why you're here, right? You want to get your rigger's license. And you need more than the muscles God gave you to do that."

"How did you know?" he asked. She certainly didn't talk like fifteen.

"Argus, who else? Don't look so surprised. He keeps me informed of what people want, and I give him a percentage. As I look at it, you're in for a hundred as it is, not counting what the smith charges you, of course."

"A hundred credits, what the hell for?"

She smiled and assumed a school teacher's tone. "Fifty credits for me taking you to Myrna and fifty for the lay."

"What makes you think I want to. . . ."

"You do," she interrupted, "take my word for it."

He folded his arms and looked past her down the street.

"I can't afford it."

"Bullshit." She took her hands from her hips and opened her right. Two silicon fifty-credit pieces fell from his wallet into her left hand.

"Hey, goddamnit! Give me that," he demanded and snatched at the wallet, but missed. She was that quick.

"Don't sweat it," she said, folding the wallet and tossing it back to him.

Only the two fifties were missing. Suddenly, she grabbed his hand and started pulling him down the street.

"Elaine," she said without looking back. "That's my name, Rail."

He pulled up hard, and she jerked back to him.

"Look," he began, but she shot her hand up to his throat. He felt the prick of extraordinarily strong nails against the soft flesh.

"Don't be difficult," she said flatly. "You're too fresh a fish for that."

He grabbed her wrist but did not try to pull the hand away. "Okay," he said. "Just tell me where we're going."

"Fair enough," she replied, dropping the hand. "We're heading to Myrna's. She's a good enough smith and won't rob you." She looked directly at him. "Neither will I."

"Okay," he breathed out, once the claw-like nails had left his throat.

Elaine leading, they walked the last block of Williams hand in hand. Rail watched closely this girl who had so confidently and effortlessly cowed him. He noticed little uneven swirls notching the stubble on the back of her head, as if she had been cut open there once. So strange, she didn't even walk like a fifteen year old. The boldness was there, but not the carelessness. Elaine strode with utmost economy and confidence, towing Rail, ignoring his attempts to pull even with her.

First Street was alive.

Neon winked and enticed; compounded noise rumbled and belched; Rail gawked and shied, content to let Elaine lead and direct him. The buildings were taller here -- and older. A thick crowd, too varied and fast moving to assimilate as individuals, pulsed through the shops and buildings and out into the street.

Letting go of Elaine's hand, Rail bumped and scuffled along, trying to take it all in. One heavy set man, his bare sweating back covered with thick glowing spikes, knocked Rail in the shoulder without slowing down. The boy spun around to protest until a woman, naked to the waist with her upper body covered with a luxurious growth of golden fur, braced him by the shoulders, gave a quick sharp-toothed smile, and then side-stepped him. This masquerade streamed all about him. He stopped, unable to decide if the alterations were holographic products of the laser screen such as Argus' three-headed canine guise or the permanent work of a fleshsmith.

He gave up and just watched.

"Hey!" Rail yelled as Elaine yanked him through an open door. A stripped wooden stairway led up.

"Myrna's smithie is upstairs," Elaine said. "It's gonna cost twelve hundred."

"Twelve hundred?" Rail asked, the sum returning a taste of the real to his overloaded senses. "Why so much?"

Elaine, who had started up the stairs, came down two steps and said, "Because you want to bring something real out of Holo City. It goes against the nature of the place."

She didn't wait for him to answer. He followed her up.

Upstairs was open and sparsely furnished. Myrna, in baggy shorts and a loose top, sat on a simple bench, smoke floating from her nostrils. A half-smoked cigarette fell from her mouth into her left hand, which she closed into a fist. She unfolded long shaved legs and stood. To his shock she towered a good head over him. She opened her hand and dropped ashes to the floor.

"This the one Argus sent?"

Elaine must have nodded behind Rail. He could not see her; he was too busy studying the flat handsomeness of Myrna's pocked face. Something appealing and knowledgeable rested in her ruined complexion. The damage seemed only superficial, unable to touch the structure of her face. All attempts to pinpoint her age proved futile. Must be over thirty, Rail thought, fascinated at the idea.

"Don't look at me like that," Myrna said in response to his scrutinizing. "That's not what I'm here for." She gestured with her chin towards Elaine. "That's what she's here for."

"Uh. . . ." Rail tried to get out an answer, but Myrna was already in the room beyond. "Let's get started. I've already got a set of rigger's muscles thawed out and ready."

The tiny room had been converted into a makeshift operating chamber. There lay a series of self-powered tools and a small package wrapped in dry ice. He started to look around the room when Myrna said, "Hey."

He turned from the bench towards her.

Calmly, she sprayed gas in his face.

Rail woke, his arms clutching his shoulders. Myrna had been talking to him, instructing him in the use and care of the newly grafted muscles.

"Give it a day before you undo the bandages. After that it's surprisingly easy. I've rerouted some of the neural synapses to accommodate for the new muscles. You should be okay to go. Under normal conditions you'll never use those muscles, so they'll have time to heal and acclimate properly. I also threw in a spinal brace. With the split quadriceps you'll be able to pull up a lot more cable than your skeletal structure could normally handle. It'll be clumsy for a few months. Tattooed on your right wrist are instructions for a series of exercises. They'll disappear in sixty days. Follow them, and you should have no problem. Just remember, plastiflesh needs to be constantly exercised to prevent atrophy. Understand?"

Rail nodded. It was the third time she had repeated the instructions.

instructions.

Myrna opened the door, and he walked out to where Elaine waited.

She surveyed the bandages around his shoulders, arms and chest as he gingerly put his jacket on. "Looks good. Come, let's get going."

"Where?" Rail asked groggily, his head still fogged.

"To get some fire."

"What's that?" After five hard blinks, he was finally able to focus clearly.

"Myrna, got any?" Elaine asked in a tentative voice.

"Show him, could you?"

Myrna shrugged and produced a small piece of dried neuro hemp from her smock. She popped it in her mouth.

Color splashed and flowed from a seeming vacuum around Myrna's face. Violets, greens, and vermillions shaded the blunt cheek lines and the sleek slope of her nose. Pearl globules floated lazily to the floor, then dissolved into rainbow smoke. Myrna's eyes remained closed during the whole display, but Rail could see the intent moving in her mind.

The show ended; Rail could only say stupidly, "That was something."

Myrna opened her eyes. "Works on retinal distortion, tracing the nerve up to the brain, tricking the eye and brain pretty much the same way the laser screen does. You can control the patterns with practice."

"All that matters," Elaine said, "is that it's beautiful. Making love with fire is. . . never mind, you have to experience it. Myrna, do know where Victor is?"

The fleshsmith frowned. "Probably at the Fox."

"Good. Let's go."

"I want to talk to him for a second." Myrna gestured with her chin towards Rail.

Elaine looked doubtful, stared hard at Rail but then turned and clomped down the stairs.

Once they were alone, Myrna folded her arms and leaned against the wall. "Do you know that girl is one of Julia Wetren's whores?"

"So?" The older woman's assumption of authority made Rail nervous.

"Julia is a five projection dreamer: three women, two men. The two men and two of the women are prostitutes. Don't you understand what that means?"

"No, I don't."

She blew out a shallow breath. "It means she is a very fragmented personality, fairly stable, but very spread out. There are only four five-personality dreamers in all the City."

"I don't understand."

"Obviously," she said in a flat voice. "And you don't know who Alex Troccoli is, do you?"

"No. Not really."

"He is our Holo City's only seven-personality dreamer. Edward, Troy, the others, all of them male, very unstable, especially Victor Damas."

"Doesn't mean shit to me."

"Never mind that, then," she waved a dismissing hand. "Just remember this: Julia and Troccoli are in love, or more precisely, three of his personalities are in love with four of hers and two of hers are in love. . . damn, never mind."

The frown resettled. Finally, she asked, "You do know what a dreamer is? That a majority of the whores, the pickpockets, the police, the storekeepers, in the City are holographic manifestations of dreamers? And that you'll most likely never meet a dreamer, but will probably run into one or all of that dreamer's projections at one time or another if you come to the City enough."

"Of course," he said defensively.

"Good that you realize that, then all that is important is that the two, Julia Wetren and Alex Troccoli, are in love."

All these names were beginning to confuse Rail. "Okay, I'll keep that in mind." Finally the thought occurred to him, so he asked, "Are you real?"

"That question doesn't mean anything here; it's irrelevant."

"Why?"

"Because I refuse to answer it," she snapped. "Now get

the hell out of here. Elaine is waiting."

"What's this place?" Rail stopped in front of a refurbished building's ornate neon facade. A well-lighted marquee stared blankly.

"The Fox Theater," Elaine replied and took him by the hand through the wrought iron gates.

"Why are we here? We gonna watch a show?"

"No, Damas doesn't put on the kind of shows you're thinking of."

"Damas?" he asked, thinking of Myrna's warning. "What do we want with him?"

"Who else we going to get fire from? Victor Damas controls all the fire dealing in the City." She rapped on the ticket booth's plexiglass.

A slender boy, younger looking even than Elaine, glanced up from painting his nails. "Yeah?"

"Damas inside?" She asked hopefully.

"No." He shrugged slack shoulders. "What do you want?"

"Fire."

"Oh," the boy scowled. "Damas is out. Edward's in, though."

"Damn, that little bastard Edward gives me the creeps," Elaine swore in a soft voice, although Rail was unsure if it

was because Damas was out or Edward was in. "Well, I guess we'll have to deal with that little shit, then. Buzz us through."

"Sure," he leaned forward in the booth. The glass double doors swung inward. "There's a private party going on, but I'm sure Edward won't mind."

Inside, a hundred people crowded the plush and gaudy lobby. Elaine led Rail to the bar.

"Get a drink, and I'll see if I can find Edward."

Rail watched as she walked through the theater doors. For the first time he felt exhilarated, back in control. He sucked a watered vodka down quickly.

"Hey." Two fingers pushed into Rail's shoulder. He turned into the face of husky blonde-haired young man. The vain attempts at a beard crawled patchily across his jaw.

"Yeah?" A big sloppy man, a Samoan, Rail guessed, stood behind the blonde.

"My name's Troy. Edward sent me."

"Where's Elaine?"

"She's waiting with Edward for you in one of the upstairs rooms. Let's go. I'll take you to her."

Troy started off in the opposite direction from where Elaine had disappeared. Rail grabbed his shoulder. "Elaine left through those doors."

"Don't mean anything," Troy replied. "The Fox is eaten through with ways to get places."

Rail nodded, but knelt quickly and loosened the strap securing the whirli-blade. The contraption fell into his palm, and he shoved it into his back pocket. When he stood again, they were already ahead of him in the press. He watched them as they ascended stairs alongside the theater's far wall.

Upstairs, a plank gangway ran the length of the wall. There were two doors, both closed. Rail walked to the first door, a heavy slab of metal with a magnetic seal. Without expecting it to actually open, Rail pushed. Effortlessly, the door swung back, revealing a small square room.

A glass-cover coffin jutted from machinery in the wall. Curious, Rail stepped closer. Inside the cubicle, a man slept. A dull metallic circlet trapped brown curls that trailed from his balding head. Intravenous lines snaked into the man's wrists, feeding and monitoring him. The man was a dreamer, his dreams recorded, amplified, and projected, through the recording equipment on the wall and given shape and holographic substance through the laser grid covering all of Holo City.

To Rail the dreamer seemed an old man, forty perhaps. His face sat placid and calm, yet the eyes were a storm of motion behind the closed lids.

"Hey, cut that!"

Rail jerked his head over his shoulder. The Somoan stood scowling from the doorway. "You ain't supposed to be

in here. Goddamnit, Damas would slit my balls if he found out that door was unlocked. Let's get the hell out of here."

Rail took a last look at the dreamer who shaped and created undisturbed. The Somoan waited till Rail was out, then closed and sealed the door. "Edward's in the room next to this one."

Rail was led to another door, one without a magnetic seal. He stepped in, saw the room was empty except for Troy. The door closed behind him, and Rail felt the Somoan move in behind.

"Christ," Rail said with a shake of his head, "Fuckin' dumb." He kicked back hard and felt his foot sink into the man's groin.

Troy pulled a switchblade. "Never was very smart, anyway."

"Man," Rail shook his head and said, "You certainly are behind the times. That thing is obsolete." He brought out the whirli-blade and hit the power switch.

A dozen long knives danced around his fist.

Troy's blade tip fell as he saw the whirli-blade.

He's scared shitless, Rail thought and spat on the floor. "Go on, get the fuck out of here."

Troy edged around Rail, then ran from the room. Rail turned and saw that the Somoan could do nothing but sit doubled over, clutching at his crotch.

In the lobby, Rail spotted Elaine.

"Where were you?" she demanded.

"Going to meet you, I thought," he said. "Someone tried to roll me."

"What happened?"

Rail told her.

"Edward," She said with soft venom. "That shit."

"So, what do we do now?"

"See Edward," she said. "I found him."

They strode through the lobby doors. The theater proper was congested and dark, with only twin cones of light glaring on the elevated makeshift stage. A young boy, naked, hairless genitals jangling, danced to the strumming of an acoustic guitar played by an unseen player. At the back of the theater, near the lobby doors, groups of people drank, lounged, and smoked in the tattered ruins of what had once been plush theater seats.

Up front, at the stage, people shuffle-danced to the naked boy's swaying. Silicon credit chips littered the stage in front, and those hanging on the stage pounded their fists and sweated away their smiles.

Elaine spoke a quick word into the guard's ear and motioned back to Rail. He let them past, and they descended the stairs, went backstage. Rail stole a last look at the dancing boy. Blackish purple welts rose from the pale buttocks like swollen leeches.

"What the fuck is that?" Rail grabbed Elaine's shoulder.

She looked at the marks, then shrugged. "That's Victor Damas' handiwork. It's something he likes to do."

Backstage, Edward sat at a plain wooden table against the back wall. He was a prim young man, dressed in subdued slacks and vest with a bright white short-sleeved shirt. His hair, carefully combed and gelled into place, framed a delicate face. He waved away the two men he had been talking with and watched Elaine and Rail walk towards him.

Elaine touched Rail lightly on the wrist. He stopped, and she walked forward.

"That was a cheap, shitty thing to do."

"What?" Edward traced either side of his thin face with long bony index fingers.

"You know what I'm talking about, sending Troy to try and stick my friend. You have no right to be jealous."

"Friend?" he asked, mocking, smiling over white, even teeth. "I thought you were a whore. Whores only have johns, not friends."

Elaine leaned forward and smacked both palms down on the table. "I've known you to turn a trick or two. A lot of Victor's friends take a fancy to your type. And you're Victor's good little faggot, his lackey. You do anything for him."

Edward jerked his head from the caress of his fingers and folded skinny arms across his vest. "What do you want?" he asked in a tight and controlled voice.

"Fire."

Edward reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a small package wrapped in clear plastic. He tossed it on the table. "There," he said this to Rail not Elaine, "consider it my treat."

She hefted it in her hand then dropped the package back to the table. "That's not nearly enough, Edward. And you know it."

He shrugged. "All I have. Unless maybe you could feel free to. . . ."

"Make love to you?" She asked, this time mocking. Rail saw something slip from the jacket sleeve into her right hand.

Edward couldn't see this. He unfolded his arms and dropped his hands to his knees. Rail could tell from Edward's forearms that he was nervously kneading the fabric of his slacks. "I don't ask to feel the way I do about you, Elaine. I can't help it. You should appreciate that."

"Sure. Why not?" Elaine shot her hand forward, flipping the laser etcher's switch. The beam burned Edward's left eye neatly out in an instant, then exploded the mass of skull behind. She searched the body quickly, before it even had a chance to slump on the table, then ran.

"You killed him!" Rail screamed, dragging on Elaine's arm, forcing her to stop.

"Hell," she shot back, shrugged Rail off. "Troccoli can regenerate a little flea like him in a day. Edward will be back."

"But why? Why did you do that?"

She stepped over a broken concrete barrier, into an vacant lot. "Because I hate him."

He followed.

"Why?" Rail persisted in his bewilderment.

"I don't know."

"But it's not right. Don't you see that?"

She shrugged again. "It's a different world here, a different thing entirely. Right and wrong, I don't really have a choice in some of the things I do. The thoughts that are in my head. They're not mine. They're some woman's I can never meet. What I feel. . . I don't guess you would understand."

"How's that?"

She reached out and touched him gently on his chest. "You felt me do that. I know I did it, but in reality without the holographic laser screens, the audible and olfactory sensory units hidden throughout the City, it wouldn't hold any reality for either of us. I wouldn't exist."

Somewhere, just beyond the edge of shock, an emotion

moved inside Rail, all unformed, but very real.

"But it's not that bad." She took his hand, bringing it up and leading it past the thick leather lapels of her jacket. The plush comfort of her breast filled his hand. Her body retracted a bit as she breathed in. "You see? I feel that, I really do! I am as real to myself as I seem to you. In Holo City you pay for the most real illusion technology can provide. Come." She sat down, bringing him with her. In her hands she held the neuro hemp, the fire she had killed Edward for.

Color ruptured, congealed, and imploded, sucking itself in reverse out of Rail's head. He lay as immobile as possible, propped up against a half-wall of bleached concrete. He grinned; at least he thought he grinned. He wasn't quite sure. The surroundings seemed impossibly far away. He was aware but didn't really feel the coarse gravel beneath him cutting into his buttocks as she pulled both his trousers and his underwear off with the same unbroken motion. In some unrelated corner of his head, he felt momentary concern about what passers-by might think. Then he blew out such insignificant thoughts. What the fuck? This was Holo City.

Elaine was a queer shadowy presence in the lot, as if the hemp's influence rendered her less real. She moved behind that dazzling wall of color. Fingers tapped his bare chest, slid down his stomach. He shivered, felt himself naked and Elaine moving somewhere above him. She shifted her weight, came down close to him. Her face punched through the hallucinatory curtain. In passion her face held a curious lack of expression, and Elaine looked very young indeed. Then the face was gone. Her hands and mouth moved just below his belly.

Something distracted him. He looked away, felt others in the lot.

"You know," a man said walking out of the shadows, "I don't mind you fucking one of Julia's whores. After all, that's what they're there for. But killing one of my people? I take exception to that."

Rail tried hard to focus, but clarity wouldn't come. The man walked with a deliberate swaggering gait. He stopped just a few feet from them. Elaine hugged close, and Rail felt panic in the urgency of her touch.

"Troccoli?" Rail whispered.

"No, Victor Damas," came her voice, edged with bitterness. "Only one of Troccoli's, like I am one of Juila's." The admission seemed to take the defiance out of her.

"Shut that, bitch." Victor shouted.

Rail felt an added deadly weight on his chest. Victor said, "Boy, you call what I saw making love?" He was very close. Through the drug haze Rail could see the white traces of scars which etched the tan face. "Here," Victor's hands shot forward, too quick for Rail to stop, and cupped his head and dragged his face towards Victor's. "Give me a kiss."

Rail could taste hot tobacco breath, Victor's moist lips sliding on his dry ones, the searching tongue forcing its way in.

"Elaine," Rail pleaded. "Help me."

"Victor, don't do this," she said.

"Hell, Elaine. You know this game. And you know how it always ends."

Gravel scraped as Victor dragged Elaine off into a vague corner.

"Hold the boy," Victor said to the others.

Rail tried to move but hard hands pushed him down. He still could not see past the fire's influence.

"Now you'll see what kind of tender romantic advances I give," Rail heard Victor say to Elaine. "I just don't see the sense to the way you act. You know Edward really does love you. He can't help the way he feels. None of us really can. But you know that."

Elaine screamed. But they were out of the range of his limited vision. The screams went on for a short time, then stopped.

Victor came back. "Now, for you."

"Elaine," Rail whimpered.

"Elaine should have known better than to bring someone into our family quarrels right now," Victor said almost gently. "Things always get bad right before the sleep. Sleep for us, I mean. Consciousness for Troccoli and Julia. It's dream fatigue, a lot of neurotic behavior seeping into the projections. But what do you expect after thirty solid days of dreaming? Bound to have some ill effects."

"Please," Rail asked. "Let me go."

But Victor didn't seem to hear him.

"Take a look at me, and if I represent a major part of Troccoli's personality, he must be one screwed-up puppy. So don't blame me for the way I act. It's Troccoli. He's the one in love with Julia. Me? I'm just a puppet." Victor jerked his arms and shoulders back rigidly to the dictates of invisible wires. "Comical, huh?"

Rail knew he was crying hysterically, but he barely felt the tears on his cheek.

"There is a thing to be done," Victor said with a sigh.

Rail felt little at all. The fire shielded him from any sharp physical sensations, but he could feel himself being flipped over. It seemed that Victor entered him with great patience, with practiced expertise.

In the brutal rhythm of Victor's efforts, Rail tried to search through the haze for some sign of Elaine. But she

was nowhere to him.

"Elaine," Rail said without thinking.

"Don't worry about her," Victor grunted out. "She's with Edward now."

The violation continued for an impossibly long time.

When it was finally done, Rail felt himself being turned back over.

He choked, cried some more.

"Ah," Victor said with a broad evil smile, "my poor child. Here, have some candy." He shoved a huge wad of neuro hemp into Rail's mouth.

Overdose, Rail thought frantically.

"Burn, asshole, burn." came Victor's dead voice.

White noise.

Static light.

Nothing.

Color and substantive light returned. The world dulled itself back into the sane, linear parameters of early morning. Someone had been talking to Rail. He lifted his head a little from the damp ground and triple-blinked.

Argus, in his manshape, stood above him. "I see my Cinderella-boy didn't listen to his fairy god-father and decided to spend the night in the magic kingdom. Ah, youth

must pay for its impetuousness."

"My head." Aching -- dull, persistent, and very real -- thudded in his skull.

"Too much fire, and you get burned. I'd have thought that was obvious." He undid the top of the thermos he carried and poured.

Rail managed a nod.

"You did happen to keep something after midnight." Argus indicated with his head.

Rail glanced down at the swathe of bandages. "Yes, Myrna does good work."

"That she does. Here." Argus set the cup underneath Rail's nose.

He closed trembling hands and sniffed. "What's this?"

"Herb tea, laced with a little meth to fight the depression. The best thing to help stimulation overdose. It's what dreamers drink."

The tea sparked a return to ordinary thought patterns. His head slowed down. He felt the fire relinquish the last of its hold. Things became clear, discernible again.

"It's not too bad once the screen's been turned off," Argus said. "The hemp doesn't have much effect without the optical distortion from the laser matrix. Just makes your head feel kinda spongy. Stay away from holograms or any other kind of laser projection for a couple of days, or it will trigger a flashback."

"Victor Damas. . . ," Rail began and then stopped as the memories juttet back to conscious recollection.

"I know," Argus soothed.

"The girl, he killed her! No thoughts about it, no nothing, as if she didn't mean nothing."

Yes," Argus said and then grinned horribly. "Ain't love grand?"

"How can you laugh about it? It's so. . . ." The black memory of Victor Damas moving inside of him welled up. He didn't want to think about that. With a certain amount of self-loathing he longed for the fire's sensory overload. Then he couldn't feel or think anything. He wanted that state for a brief second then pushed the thought away.

"Buck up, boy. You act like you've forgotten what's real and what isn't." He took the cup from Rail's hands. "Time for you to go. City's closed for five days. Time for all the employees to rest."

That's not good enough, to dismiss the whole affair so easily, Rail thought with fresh born outrage. She did live. She breathed, felt, and spoke. She was real; she knew it. She did die!

The older man tugged Rail to his feet, jerking him away from those thoughts. Argus' ordinary strength disappointed Rail. Somehow he had expected something more than human.

Rail dressed quickly. He only wanted to get away. Elaine's aborted screams came back to him too clearly now.

He wanted to be as far as possible from that memory.

"Union cable riggers make good money," Argus said.

"That means we'll see each other again."

Rail followed.

First Street seemed quiet, subdued, but pulsing with a strange kind of life. The frantic rush of Holo City was gone. In its place lay a calm which jarred violently with Rail's memories.

"Come, this way," Argus said. "I want you to see something."

They walked silently for a few blocks. For the first time Rail saw the dull metal of the laser projection antennae protruding from strategic locations. He spotted the olfactory transmitters and the delicate mesh of speakers, all the hardware which produced the alluring lie of Holo City.

West on Williams, then north on Second.

It was the dreamer from the Fox. He sat on the porch swing of a restored Victorian. He had a soft, comfortable body, the easy paunch of his stomach visible through the cotton shirt. He rocked slowly back and forth, staring straight ahead but preoccupied with the swing's motion. His face was calm, and Rail thought that he had never seen a face so content with itself.

Argus stopped

Rail looked back.

Argus said, "You go on, now." And Rail knew that

qualified as good-bye.

Rail turned back ahead, continued to walk, passing close to the house. He stopped then, simply watched.

The screen door opened, and the woman stepped out onto the porch. She was tall, heavy-set, with wide hips and short brown hair. She walked over and dropped her arms around her man's shoulders. She kissed the back of his neck, pushing her face into the curly mop of his hair. He didn't move his head, but he smiled. And why shouldn't he, Rail thought. He was in love.

Rail knew who the man was and tried hard to see the maniacal Victor Damas or the effeminate Edward in Troccoli. But he failed. The connections seemed preposterous and alien. Oddly, though, as he studied Julia Wetren, he saw the ghost image of Elaine in the older woman, the bold sure way she carried herself.

Then her mouth went to the man's ear. She licked. His face maintained its stoic countenance. Rail saw the flash of teeth as she pulled back her lips in a smile. He imagined the stormy wind of her breath in Troccoli's ear. She bit. For a quick moment the man registered pain. He gripped the swing's arms. She stopped, and Rail saw but could not hear her teasing laughter.

Rail imagined with a chill what occurred just behind the wall of Alex Troccoli's restraint. Before they went inside, leaving Rail alone, he could see Victor Damas leap and prance

just beyond those placid eyes.

China

Catrina snatched Karen's tunic from the coat peg. "This time I must say you have outdone even yourself. Girl, you are a slave to your hormones. Have you no shame?"

Lisa remained silent as she savored her friend's none-too-subtle envy. No, she thought, contemplating the night ahead, I have no shame.

Catrina held the radiation tunic up. "Remember what they say about sex with a bender being like fine china."

Karen nodded as she fit her arm through first the left then the right sleeve of the bright yellow suit.

Catrina laid her hands gently on Karen's shoulders. "Beautiful to look at, but not really meant to eat off of."

Karen nodded again under the storm of Katrina's laughter and stepped into the airlock. "Like fine china." The analogy played over and over in her head as she snapped the last flap. She had grown up with the saying, but it remained an ugly connotation, its exact meaning never clear.

"Well, anyway, have a good time," Karen heard Katrina say as the airlock hissed closed.

The front lock slid open.

Monochromatic dominoes of tenement buildings rose from heat-bleached concrete, forming an unbroken, immense canyon.

Harsh neon from wind-blown hanging lights stabbed and pushed at the early evening darkness, toning the buildings with shadows. A bullet-shaped monorail tram cut through the canyon, rattling triple-enforced windows. The transom's rusted struts stretched up from the streets like frozen spider webs.

All one color, Karen thought dismally as she looked around, all battleship gray because it's cheaper and because nobody cares about aesthetics anymore; nobody wants to spend time outdoors anymore.

The bender had waited patiently for her to leave Catrina's party. He wore only a drab green overcoat that hung over his body like slabs of dead meat. A heavy hood covered his head.

"Where's your tunic?" she asked, alarmed. "What about the fallout?" Not to mention the heat, she thought.

He turned his head about him, sucked in a breath of the lying night air. "No need to."

She shrugged and breathed deeply. The air came to her pure and fresh through the suit's filters. But this was a lie. The air was saturated with death. The Ten Minute War of 2041 had assured that. The heat from a recent flash rain stifled her but couldn't quite kill her anxiety.

"Where to?" he asked without looking at her, concentrating instead on the sprawling buildings.

"This way," she motioned. He wasn't looking but offered no resistance when she slipped her hand into his and led him

underneath the elevated tracks towards her home.

Torn corners flailed in the hot wind.

A trio of 3-d Space Corps recruiting posters covered the nearest wall. The wind and rain had blurred their three-dimensional images. Distant figures of benders toiled at obscure tasks and beckoned against the myriad smear of the cosmos. In bright unmarred red the Corps slogan blared out: COME AND JOIN THE UNIVERSE.

The posters were part of a massive publicity campaign to spur recruiting for the UN space program. Posters, continuous radio broadcasts, and incessant televid commercials, all aimed at seducing the listener with a romanticized adventure of space travel. They were tempting. Here was a chance to leave Earth and all its constrictions. But strangely enough few ever did leave to venture to the deep space gravity wells.

And the spacemen, who bent the laws of space and time, seldom came back to the home world. Out there entire new systems were being discovered and colonized. But most people on Earth were content to make do with what was left of their planet. The benders were treated with awe and fear and a perverse kind of contempt, an unvoiced hint that their journeys cost them some part of their humanity.

Simple jealousy, Karen convinced herself though in the same instant she knew she was guilty of this too.

As they walked by, the bender casually stuck a hand out and caught one of the posters. Without looking, he continued to walk forward, tearing the poster down. It floated briefly before being sucked up in a gust and blown away.

The bender hadn't even blinked.

Karen rented a studio in a building which Catrina and her other friends at work jokingly referred to as the "old whorehouse," which it did resemble. Its simple two-story wood and stucco construction spoke of less convoluted times when all the buildings didn't have to be a hundred stories high, when most of the land was still habitable. The aging structure stood between an abandoned Vietnamese supermarket and another of the monolithic tenement buildings. A hundred years earlier the neighborhood had served as a mecca for Vietnamese refugees. The new immigrants had grown prosperous and their descendents had moved on, leaving mostly place names and old buildings in their wake.

Living alone was an expensive luxury in the overcrowding. But her job compensated well enough for its numbing simplicity. She worked on the snaking belt of an assembly line, inspecting red and black radiation detectors. Common household fixtures, her own small studio had three of them.

As they neared the supermarket's boarded facade, she pulled the bender close and whispered, "We're about to run

the gauntlet."

"Huh?"

They were wretched men in torn radiation suits, sprawled stuporously against the chipped and faded tile wall. Cancerous sores boiled up from their exposed skin, evidence of long-term exposure to residual radiation.

Anxiety, envy, and lust coiled and unwound in the vagrants' cracked faces. As for the bender, he caught and returned without malice each one of the stares. The hate and envy died in the lean beauty of his face. Its features were carved with the utmost economy as if all the excess flesh had been burned away clean.

She saw that he soaked up everything: the thundering trams, the musty odor, the graffiti laser-etched on the walls.

One of the vagrants who had been absently staring into his lap abruptly jerked up his head. He smiled, and Karen swore that smile threatened to split the cracked skin of his face in half. "I see you're out to notch up your bedpost tonight."

Karen pushed the accusations out of her mind. Secretly she knew ego comprised a large part of her actions tonight: the chance to do more than merely kiss and then tell to Catrina and her other friends. She threw a worried look at the bender, fearful he might read her mind, find it distaste-

ful, and change his mind. Telepathic? No, that's ridiculous, she thought with a self-conscious reprimand, he was still just a man.

"Whatcha got there, girl?" another shouted.

"Ooh, this is one a beauty. Finally taking home a specialty number, huh?"

Karen gripped his hand tighter and pulled the bender along. He had seemed almost content to stop and stare at the tramps. She fumbled for her key to the front door.

"Know what they say about china?" they laughed as she pushed her way inside.

Karen stepped out of the radiation suit and hung it near the door, then turned to watch.

The bender moved about the room examining each piece of furniture, every trinket. He picked slowly over her dresser, going through the bottles of perfume, the combs, the cases of mascara. He touched each, an expression of bemusement and curiosity coloring his face as if experiencing these things for the first time. He seemed especially intrigued with the dozen potted plants placed throughout the room and the framed photographs she had cut out of seventy-five year old National Geographic magazines. A puff of subdued laughter escaped him at the recruiting poster hung over her bed.

Only the mirror held no interest for him.

This room was Karen's private sanctuary, built to reinforce her sanity. Work consumed most of her life. She didn't often bring anyone here, mostly just men for a night, maybe two, when her isolation made the room more a cell than a sanctuary. But these times were few enough; she was most often satisfied to be alone.

Karen observed him further. There had been too many people at the party, too many hovering over him, trying to be as close as possible. He shook off the hood, exposing a mane of white, almost transparent hair that exploded around the delicate face. His hands, the only other visible part of him, were long and thin with clear shiny nails.

And he was beautiful.

Here was someone who had escaped, who had leapt offworld, leaving Earth and its huddled population. He had left behind the radiation suits, left behind Earth's cities, stacked higher and higher because up was the only direction left to build.

He had left behind all the things that composed her world.

"So static," he said quietly, barely breathing the words out.

"What?" she asked, startled by the subtle rupture of silence.

"All these things," he turned from her and swept a graceful hand about the room, "such an accentuated lack of

movement."

"I don't understand."

He turned back to her. "In the gravity wells, light is much different than on Earth. Even stationary objects throw out rings of color. Everything moves, as if it's breathing, as if it's alive. The brightest blues, reds, greens you could imagine, all swirling and colliding.

"My eyes," he moved his hand up to his face, placed a finger on the pale lid, closing it over the eye with its vertically slit pupil. "They had to surgically alter my eyes and the retinal receptors in the brain, just so I could make sense of it all."

She stood absolutely still, lost in his litany. He stopped speaking, dropped the hand, and for the first time looked directly at her, ignoring everything else in the room.

"You're beautiful," he said in a flat simple voice.

She had never believed it till now, until this beautiful creature had said it with a conviction that killed all modesty, all argument.

He passed his hand down the front of his coat, detaching the buttons there and shucked the heavy coat. Underneath he wore a plain black jumpsuit. He stepped out of his boots with the same ease as he had dropped his coat. Walking slowly towards her, he stretched his arms out and pushed her down on the bed with his palms.

She gasped as he undressed above her. It wasn't so much a change in the pigment and color of his skin as he exposed it, but more so the lack of a color. His lean body shone with transparent radiance, seemingly taking substance from the reflections of all the colors around him rather than producing any color of his own. Muscle stood out rigid as if sculpted.

He straddled her, pushing up along her. He looked briefly, quizzically in her face, then settled his weight back. His hands moved at her waist, bunching up her top as he brought his hands back up. Absently, she straightened her arms, and he pushed the blouse over her head and off. The hands dropped back to her waist, catching the pants this time and pulling them off.

Crouched at her feet, he looked up into her face. Momentarily, he looked like the child who had explored every inch of her room. His face resonated surprise as if feeling or thinking something unexpected. But then the expression faded, replaced by a toothy smile. Once more, he came back up to her. He kissed her quickly, like a stab. It was done before she could react. He moved down her body.

His head moved down to her breasts, the initial sensation wet and pleasurable stinging. She looked down at him as he tongued, and for a moment she thought she saw her image reflected in the splintered mirror of his hair. The illusion broke as he jerked his head up and kissed her. She grabbed

the back of his head and kept him hugged to her.

He entered slowly, with great patience, never breaking the kiss. She hooked her legs under his buttocks and contracted, pull him inside her and generating a rhythmic push-pushing. Periodically, she closed her eyes and lost herself in the tide of their efforts.

His lovemaking was marked with a control and patience that was actually alarming. It was this thing that was new for her. He made love as if removed, engaging with ferocious enthusiasm, but at the same time seeming not to be there at all. But he never broke his gaze. No matter how many times she closed her lids, she opened them into his exploring eyes. And soon she too felt detached, as if her body continued without her.

Finally, he broke the spell with a blink. She was so startled, she laughed. He joined his soft laughter with hers, then suddenly flipped over, setting her on top. As she looked down on him, he seemed to disappear into the bed, becoming one with the tangle of sheets. When their orgasm came, he met it with a curious lack of expression, showing his pleasure only when she exclaimed hers.

Afterwards, they stood outside her building unsure where to go.

She felt cold, alienated.

Karen thought of what she would tell Catrina and her friends at work. She looked on it somewhat guiltily as a conquest, a sexual conquest, as if conquering something so beautiful would let her retain some of that beauty for herself. That bit of pride was petty. She knew it but couldn't help feeling it anyway.

"Who?" she asked.

"Do you really need my name?"

"Yes, I think I do. It seems it would give me some kind of perspective."

He smiled without showing any teeth. "You want a name. Sure, everybody does. That way we can categorize things, keep them in control. Color them into something we can understand. I do have a name. But it's not the same as the one I had before on Earth. I guess we too want to have a perspective on things, control over them. So we change our names. We also change our date of birth to the day we became benders."

"Why?"

He shrugged then said, "That's not what you want to ask."

She nodded. "There is something," She had been mulling over the question ever since he had agreed to leave the party with her.

He showed interest at this. "Okay."

"Why me? There were others."

He blew out a shallow breath. "Talking with you at the party, I found you can't tune the world out, no matter how hard you try to build a protective womb out of your little studio. I was like that, always trying to escape. Perhaps you should have been a bender. This world has taken so much from you. I thought maybe I could give some of it back."

He started to walk. "It is very important for me to give."

She swallowed; the dryness in her throat hurt. What he said scared her for some reason. "But if you hate it so much, why did you come back?"

He shrugged. "I'm not exactly sure why. Everything's so different . . . feels different. That's obvious, but it's the memories. It's coming back and seeing and smelling and touching the same objects as before, but this time through different eyes, a different nose, touching with different hands . . . like my mind has disinherited somebody else's body."

"It must be incredible out there," she breathed out.

"It is!" He punched the air with his exclamation. "We speed up light, shoot gravity through space, slow down time, fucking with Einstein and his theories to warp past the speed of light. Remove the relativity of your presence and watch the movement."

"Imagine all the things that are moving here." He stopped, scooped up a small rock from the ground. He tossed it up and caught it. "It looks like it is going straight up. But it isn't. At the same time it is spinning according to the Earth's rotation along its axis, its revolution in its solar orbit, not to mention the speed at which the galaxy is traveling. We just can't see this because we're caught in all this movement, acting under the same physical laws as the rock. In the gravity wells, as the universe constantly expands and contracts, we step out of this movement, using gravity as a fulcrum to sidestep time and distance. Appearing to travel faster than the speed of light, we actually only warp from one well to another."

"The way you make it sound, I can understand why you left Earth."

"Sure," he smiled, but she saw no pleasure in it. "The cost seems quite small compared to all that, doesn't it?"

"Cost?"

"The cost?" he repeated. "You know it. But you hide from it. Everyone on Earth hides from the price of gaining the stars. In fact, the Space Corps spends a large chunk of its budget down playing the negative effects on the human body."

As she looked at him, she once more sensed that he wasn't there.

"It's funny," he said without humor. "How people envy

this body, my face. They tell me I have great beauty, and they clamor for it. But for all the envy, I see spite in their faces as well. Spite that I have done what they haven't dreamed to do. I've left Earth. I left all this decay you live with everyday."

He started to walk; she followed.

"There are some pleasurable side effects. My skin is immune to the cancers still seeding the air. All people see is this shell, my body, the way it refracts and returns the light."

Instinctively she didn't want to know what he wanted to say. She wanted to hold on to her own illusions of what they had shared.

But he continued as if sensing her timidity, gaining strength from it. "When we disrupt the natural progression of gravity, time, and space, everything looks crazy. The mind isn't made to descramble it all. Changes have to be made in the brain's synapses. Sensory and pleasure centers have to be broken down and reconstructed. Some sensations can't be made to function in the new environment. You've heard what they say about china."

Finally, the knowledge descended on her.

"My body goes on without me. It continues to function, but many of its sensations never come to the surface of conscious experience. My body is almost alien to me,

separate from me. I am impervious to most pain. . . and most pleasures."

At last she knew the cost. The sadness throbbed in her and with it shame that what had passed between them could be so one-sided.

"Don't do that," he said gently. "Don't shrink from me."

"But," she said brokenly. "If you can not feel. . . I mean, get pleasure from what we did . . . why do you do it?"

"I take my pleasure from you," he said earnestly. "It's not a physical thing at all. I've been freed from all of that. I steal what joy I can from watching your face, taking back what I give you second hand. It's your sensations and and joys, and the knowledge that you are getting these from me, which give me fulfillment. It is the way I survive."

"I don't know . . . I just can't. . . ." She wanted to look away, but she didn't have the strength to abandon him.

He smiled, this time bordering on a laugh. But she found his humor almost horrifying. "I cannot feel," he said. "But I can love. And that's enough."

"Hey! Mirror man!"

Karen had forgotten the bums.

A gnarled, scabbed hand flung out, grabbed the thick fabric of the bender's overcoat. Karen studied that hand, vacantly fascinated. The nails were alien and yellowed, the cuticles puffed and discolored. The hand pulled down.

Tendons steeled under the patchy skin.

"Hey, mirror man, come close here, lemme look into that glassy hide of yours. I want to see somethin'. Yeah, China, I wanna see all those worlds you been to," the vagrant mocked. "I want to see what you traded your manhood for."

"Christ, guys. Let's give it a rest this time." She went to pull the bender away.

"Quiet, girl," one snapped. "You've had your shot. It's time to give him up to us."

She jerked her hand back. Karen stood apart from this exchange as if looking at it from underwater. She felt insignificant, the least necessary kind of window dressing.

The bender didn't resist as the tramp pulled his face down. The hair spilled over the glossy dome of his forehead.

"I don't think I like what I see," said the cracked man. "You got no right to go where you go, do what you do when we gotta stay here."

The other tramps were still, and for the first time ever they seemed sober and reasoning to Karen.

The bender lifted his chin, looked directly into the tramp's ruined face.

"No, don't like it at all. This skin of yours twists everything around," the tramp said, looking into the dull reflection miraged by the bender's lack of pigment.

They rose, seemingly straight up. The first tramp still

held on, his hand now firmly entangled in the bender's coat.

From there it went very quickly.

They dragged him from the store front, up the access way, along the elevated tracks.

Karen felt stupid in the cold night.

She didn't move. But it wasn't fright that held her. She watched the bender, and his once human eyes contained no fear. The tramps pushed and bullied him along; he continued to twist his head keeping his gaze on Karen. He didn't want help.

This is for me, she thought. He is trying to show me something. Her mouth was dry, a feeling she noticed as she tried to swallow.

She moved a few clumsy steps towards the tracks.

The tramps' loathing and hatred seemed so much more natural than the bender's calm acceptance of those emotions. She realized she had more in common with the maimed outcasts than the man she had just made love with.

Before she knew it, they had him at the top of the tracks, and their distance from her felt as frigid and vacuous as she imagined space to be.

The approach of an oncoming tram thudded down the track, the vibrations finally spurring Karen to move. The metal rail quivered with malicious tension under her hand as she leapt up towards the platform.

The bender stood slack and uncaring in the tramps'

The bender stood slack and uncaring in the tramps' hands.

The tram came, and they flung him forward. His coat flashed for an instant in the weak neon. Then he was gone.

Karen took three more steps and stopped. There seemed no use to it.

The tramps milled purposelessly on the platform.

One chuckled, but the half-laugh had no joy in it.

For an impossible time she stood up on the platform, afraid to go down. Soon, however, she found herself sluggishly thumping down the grated steps. Each step shot like a blow from her heel straight up through her body.

The bender's body lay smashed up against a chipped brick wall. Limbs jutted at crazy, impossible angles. What had been an animate living creature, now seemed nothing more than a crumpled heap, as if the former owner had simply collapsed into nothingness underneath.

She couldn't think anything, couldn't feel or concentrate on anything. But a detached part of herself saw this as a lie. She simply didn't want to feel anything, to take responsibility for anything. She hadn't wanted much from him. He hadn't owed her a thing.

At last, less than five steps from the body, and she couldn't force herself any closer.

The heap of clothes sat up. Arms and legs unbent, snapping back to their normal sane arrangement. The bender

pushed back hair from his unmarked face and smiled.

This time his smile held no terror for her. She stopped and sat down, just plopped down on the heat-bleached pavement, useless hands dangling between her knees. And now she didn't know what she felt because she felt too much.

"As you can see, this china doesn't break easily," he laughed, a laughter full of freedom and promise.

Her own laughter crawled out of her and joined his, and now she allowed herself to accept his gift. On her hands and knees she went to him.

Hound

(Wilson on the Hunt)

A crackerbox room, furnished in Wilson's spartan bachelor manner: a dresser, an air bed, and the tri-d.

He avoided acquiring too many knick-knacks and decorations. When he was sober, he lacked the concentration to keep them neat and orderly. Simple quarters, cheap enough so he could save up his money, not like living in the Glen, living in all that clean air, among real trees. That was just a dream.

Wilson sat in that room for three days, sucking in vid shows on the tri-d, sucking up a mountain of methamphetamine. Beer too, three cases of it, sixteen pots of black caffeine-enriched coffee, a fistful of illegal diet pills. During those three days he took nine showers. But each time he washed off a blanket of sweat, another soon enfolded him.

At night he often stared out his window where the high curve of the Glen's atmosphere dome sliced off a commanding chunk of the night view. The dome's screens filtered out radioactive dust and let sunshine and purified air in. No building over four stories was allowed. City ordinances dictated just how close the buildings could be. The population was strictly monitored. They had trees. During

the day you could see their beautiful green clearly through the mesh of the filtration screens.

The shakes hit the first day, wracking his body with angled spasms. And, after losing the first day of sleep, the brownouts kicked in. He faded in and out as the crank took over. He didn't do too little so that his body surrendered to sleep or too much so that his over-amped heart would stop. He methodically timed each dose. He listened carefully to the chop-chop of the blade on the mirror. Listened intently to the sound, waiting for the pounding of his own rhythm to cry out. His nose burned. His nostrils were being rapidly eaten out again. Three reconstructions had been done already.

On the second day he sang to himself as he cleaned and cleaned the exact same spot on his kitchen floor. He spritzed a mostly harmless mutant virus from a can into the scum of his oven. It ate up the crust left over from a couple hundred near-burned meals. The oven thermostat never worked and he had never bothered to fix it. He wiped up the foam. He cleaned and ordered his studio until it was as antiseptic and nondescript as a hospital room.

On the second night he called Wendy on the visiphone. She looked nice, ready to go out.

"I don't like to see you like this," she said.

"What?"

"Ah, c'mon, David. You're so torqued up right now. You

look like hell. All that crap you put into yourself."

"Thanks. But I have to do it to get my abilities to surface."

"I like you, David. You can be very sweet when you're straight. But what you do for a living. . . ."

"What about it?"

"It's indecent," she almost screamed, "that's what. Digging around inside other peoples' heads. Some things should be kept private."

"Not all personality transfers are legal," he insisted. "Not all transferees have some sort of debilitating disease so that they need an entirely new body. Do you know the black market price for a blank body? Hell, the people I collect warrants on are running away, they have something to hide. They're not nice people."

"My mother's a transferee," she said simply.

"Look. . . ." He had never met her mother.

"It is perfectly legal. Six years ago she had a degenerative nerve condition. A new body was the only way for her. Now everything is fine."

"Look. . . ." This was getting out of hand. It wasn't what he wanted.

"Do you understand now?"

Frustration. Nobody ever understood him and his work. They just shut their minds. "I didn't know. But you still have the wrong idea about it. It's just what I do for

money."

"David, all you do is sit in that room ninety percent of your time watching tri-d shows, like you're too afraid to leave. The only time you go out is to work as a"

"What?" He was getting angry now. "Say it."

He heard her doorbell ring. She looked past the screen towards her airlock door.

"I'd like to see you," he pleaded.

"I have company here. I have to get off now."

"I'll probably be ready to go out by tomorrow."

"I don't think I should see you anymore."

He cut off. He didn't want to hear anymore.

Parasite. He knew that was the word she had wanted to say. Almost three months he had made that relationship last. Some kind of record. He also knew she was right. He was afraid to leave sober. He didn't have any friends, hadn't since high school when his psi ability had first been tested.

He shoved those thoughts out of his head. They were too painful. He was good at that, at shutting out unpleasant realizations. They happened so often he had to be good. As another coating of sweat covered him, he knew that soon he would no longer think of her.

By the third day it had arrived, his rhythm.

His perception of things had changed. Everything seemed clearer, sharpened with an edge he would have found painful if his mind was not so numb. A final shower was needed. He

made it hot and long. Steam softened his body. Carefully, he dried himself with his only clean towel. That was very important, the final drying off. He had to feel as fresh as possible before going out on the hunt. It might take weeks.

He walked to his closet, he picked out the suit. It contrasted sharply with the cotton jeans and worn casual shirts that comprised the most of his wardrobe. Cheap stuff, but not the suit. That was very special. The kind of nondescript fashion he could wear to almost any establishment in the city. He had had it dry cleaned to remove the stains and dirt from the last hunt.

An hour in front of the mirror and he was ready.

Except for the gun.

He took the sub-howitzer, checked it carefully, then slid it into the holster nestled in the small of his back. An ugly tool of the trade, it would punch a hole through three meters of the densest plastisteel. He had a license for it though. To collect on warrants he had to be a certified private detective.

He snatched up the radiation tunic, made sure all the seals were good, slipped into it.

Hound.

That's what was he was, a s'nap hound, a personality transfer sensitive. Under normal circumstances his psionic ability was just above average, but the combination of stimulants and sleep deprivation honed his skills to their

finest point, made him sensitive to the vague order of a person's thought patterns. He could smell it when wrong thought patterns rode in a person's skull. That smell burned in his own head like the toxic fumes from burning rubber.

Marginally, it was a legal profession, just as synaptic transfer was a marginally legal medical procedure. The idea was fairly simple: take the synaptic patterns, (the opening and closing of the electrical currents between neurons), of a person's brain and surgically impose them onto another, preferably wiped, brain. In a sense, personality transfer. The technology allowed those with physically debilitating disorders to enjoy the freedom of movement in a new and healthy body. Take a blank body, usually a comatose accident victim declared legally dead by the courts after the prescribed two years, and insert the new personality.

That was the legal application.

But as with all new technologies, there were many more lucrative and shadowy uses. And there were always more minds to hide than blank bodies available as hosts.

"Gotcha pegged, girlie," Wilson said to himself out of the corner of his mouth, then filled it with the tart sting of Tanqueray and tonic. He sat perched on the bar stool, a half-eaten plate of ravioli unattended in front of him.

Wilson had been on the hunt for two days. Finding a

mark calmed him now. The chase would begin.

He watched. . .

. . . a bright-eyed lady, back straight against black leather. Something burned in her face, unnatural and fiery. That something popped up hard in the sea of Wilson's rhythm, shot adrenaline to his heart, caused his fingertips to buzz. He sucked in short breaths without thinking. He felt nothing; his body went on without him as his mind rocked in its own rhythm.

Her reflection crawled along the chrome plating running behind her booth. With one hand she tapped silverware on her glass, tipping it on the checkered tablecloth. Lacquered fingernails on the other hand clicked slowly in half-time. She stopped, brought a hand to the gold rope around her neck, then dropped it to the vee of her satin dress. Very elegant, this one, Wilson thought. She was beautiful, strong. Wealth and fashion rested easy on her. Yes, she was certainly something.

And she was also just as definitely not something.

His eyes were dry; his lids seemed to scrape the whites when he blinked. He sucked down the last of the g & t he had ordered from the lounge. Still dehydrated, he took an iced foil packet of Coke-a-Cola he had bought from a vending machine near the bathrooms, ripped off the top. He took five sugar cubes from the bowl in front of him, plopped them in. He fished out some diet pills, tossed them in, then resealed

the pouch, shook up his concoction, drank it off all at once.

He noticed something very peculiar about her. Her mouth moved just barely. At first Wilson thought she was singing to herself, then he realized she was vocalizing some sort of internal conversation.

Her dinner arrived. She attacked it with a great deal of grace. Magnificent table manners, a kind of one/two punch use of knife and fork Wilson found fascinating. She was obviously alone that evening. That puzzled Wilson, a woman like this would never be alone. But Miguel's was the kind of restaurant that welcomed all kinds, a stumblebum factory worker or a night mover like this one. Cotton work tunic or tuxedo and evening gown--Miguel's accommodated them all.

She ate patiently, as if waiting.

Wilson saw her mind clearly like a three dimensional grid. He closed his eyes, and it etched itself on his inner lid. Only problem was it felt as if there were fourth and even fifth dimensional coordinates imposed on the grid, as if a couple of passengers were joy riding in her head.

He kicked his legs out forward, hopping off the stool, and began to walk over to her booth.

"Yes?" she looked up from her plate.

"Fire?" He held a cigarette out. He had to be up close to read the pattern correctly. Something was wrong, very subtly so. Wilson couldn't place it. At first he thought he had her pegged as a jockey. Often, there were underworld

figures who wanted to disappear, but they couldn't wait to find a donor body. So they crowded into a surrogate's head, until their new body and identity could be arranged. It was a very lucrative profession. Wilson had made a bundle collecting on warrants that way. But something didn't gel here. A variety of patterns swam in her head, but it was too difficult for him to accurately sort one from another.

She set the silverware down, turned to reach into her purse. He stepped forward to take the lighter when she suddenly shot straight up, rigid.

"Hound dog." She said it so simply he could read nothing in her expression.

"What?"

"Hound, and you're loaded." This time he sensed weary recognition stir in her face.

"How did you know? About the gun, I mean."

She relaxed. "I carry a metal detector grafted here." She turned her wrist up. The vague obelisk of the detector was just visible under the skin.

Wilson shrugged. "It's legal. I'm a licensed private detective."

Her smile rode her face in a way he could only describe as professional. "Technically, you're a private dick, sure. But we both know you're a bounty hunter, a hound. A dog after a certain kind of prey. Looking to collect on an arrest warrant if you find the wrong mind riding shotgun in

the right body? Or perhaps a little blackmail if you can get more money that way?" she mocked.

"I don't know what you mean by 'hound.'" he said dryly. Damn, his hand thrown so soon. Now she'll clam up.

To his surprise she slid over, gestured for him to sit. Wary, he did, but she made no move.

"How old do you think I am?"

Wilson took an appraising look up and down. "Early thirties."

"Now," she smiled again, "I'll let you in on a little secret. I am actually fifty-five." She read the shock in his face then continued. "Its amazing what skin grafts, face lifts can do. Not to mention something simple like clean living."

This last seemed like an accusation. At twenty-five Wilson easily looked ten years older. His rhythm had its price.

"When I was twelve," her voice was slow and tightly controlled, "my family owned extensive estates in the country. My father was only one generation removed from the aristocracy in Old England. We lived very high in the years before the Ten Minute War. The land was green, beautiful and clean. My Father inherited from his father both a love for the hunt and a pack of hounds, the most magnificent beasts of the purest bloodline.

"Since the hunt was illegal in this country, my father

used his wealth to get the next best thing: he had a holographic projector set up on the estate, complete with a scent distributor. Mirrors were erected all over the grounds to help facilitate the illusion. Our fox was a wily old creature tipped with gray, as cunning as the projector's computer could make him. As real as real to all the senses except to touch. With this illusion my father played the grand old gentlemen on the hunt with his dogs. However, one day while he was away, the projector malfunctioned and stuck. Three of my father's favorite hounds chased the nonexistent beast until their hearts burst."

She stopped speaking, then sipped her wine.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Two things. First, you should know that often the hound doesn't have the sense to quit and can run himself to death. Second, that you know where I acquired my fascination with the hunt. It is in my blood, the hunt."

That is actually a warning, Wilson thought to himself with amusement.

She stood, dropped her card into the payment slot in the table, then retrieved it when the bill was paid.

"I'm going."

And that was an invitation, Wilson decided.

He followed her to the restaurant's air lock entrance.

"No," she laid a hand on his arm as he began to don the radiation tunic. "It's a nice night out. I hate wearing

those things."

"What about the dust?" He folded the tunic over his arm.

"I've seen the reading for tonight. The level is very low, strictly non-toxic."

"Until it rains," he said.

"Sure. But I think we will be out of it before the rain comes. I like walking at night."

.

Wilson followed just behind the woman as she walked down the empty street. High rise multiplex tenement buildings flanked her. She moved down that canyon effortlessly, making no motion for him to catch up. Few people were on the street tonight.

It's going to rain soon, Wilson thought as he watched her. But he didn't put the radiation tunic on. He didn't dare.

Grace wasn't the word for it; Wilson decided there was something instinctual about her--the way she carried herself. Wilson had become an expert on the nuances of body gestures. Often when the signals were too vague, Wilson could spot a transferee by the way he walked or spoke. This woman moved in an ordered, studied manner, as if walking by committee, yet he could sense no other personality than her own.

Fifty-five? he asked himself. Still didn't seem likely.

And suddenly as she stopped just in front of him--the gesture a subtle reprimand at his lagging pace--he realized: I'm not in control here. Where are we going, and why am I letting her lead me? The idea of a score wasn't so pressing now. He had followed the scent too closely; it didn't mesh.

And still that blurring in her head. It didn't become any clearer.

Too many variables, time to bow out.

She turned. They stood before the glass panes of the Triton Hotel's lobby. The luxury hotel spiraled above them so far Wilson could not see the top from the proximity of his angle.

"Look, I think I'll just get go. . . ."

"Why?" she interrupted, a slick kind of pouting in her voice.

"Well. . . ," he stumbled.

"No," she said, killing his fear with a strong toothed smile. "We're here already. No need to leave. I want to show you something."

She moved close to him, keeping his eye, and then without touching him, got him moving again. Those teeth must be grafts of some sort too, he thought. They were too even to be entirely natural, and white with a blinding, blizzardy kind of white.

They moved quickly through the radiation dusters in the lobby. Once cleared by the automatic doorman, they

circumvented the lobby bar pit and moved towards the elevators. He kept thinking she would grasp his hand, but she didn't. She kept a perfect distance from him as they walked. Her hip constantly threatened to brush against him, but it never did.

The elevator door closed behind them.

He felt the ascent as a mounting pressure between his ears, threatening to rupture his skull. Imagination, he assured himself.

They stepped out onto the roof and back into the night. She had a key to the roof airlock. This is something she has done before, Wilson surmised again, something she has done many times, a ritual. Perhaps she knew the hotel's owners. Perhaps she is the owner.

"Look at that." She said with what Wilson saw as a hushed command. "This is what I wanted to show you."

He looked.

Five years after the Ten Minute War of 2041, the Glen's citizens were the first to recognize the lasting residual effects of that limited nuclear exchange. They seceded from San Jose and incorporated their own separate city. The Glen had money. The rich had been steadily migrating there from other parts of the San Jose/San Francisco metroplex since the end of the Twentieth Century.

Together they watched the soft neon glow thrown out from the dome. They said nothing.

"Beautiful," he breathed out finally. The promise of wealth, an open breath of air, even if filtered. But to gain residency in the Glen took money and a lot of political pull. The waiting list was years long.

"There," she said. "I want to live there." A hard-edged want in those eyes. Wilson saw it. It terrified him for one icy, static moment.

"You don't live there now?" Shock. He had assumed so much. Of course a woman like this would live in the Glen. He hadn't considered any other reality.

"No," she moved a hand across him, it cut across his chest, touched just barely. "There, I live there." Old, tired buildings, decades old. And new stacked tenements, piled hundreds of stories high.

Wilson blinked hard. "I live in that part." It went against everything. It rang false. The way she was dressed, the jewelry, the story about her father. "It's not what. . . ."

". . . what you expected? I know. I never expected to have to live in a rented cell like the one I do. I want to live in a place where you don't have to wear a radiation tunic just to walk outside. I don't want to be afraid of the rain because of the dust it carries. There, in the Glen, you can walk in the rain, and all you will come down with is a cold."

He nodded. "Money. But you have money. The story you

told me about your father. I don't understand. You should be living under that dome, living the good life."

"It's actually very simple. My family's money was in land. Our holdings were enormous. Out in the country, the beautiful untamed country."

She shrugged, and Wilson saw this as almost an automatic reflex. She probably wasn't even aware she was doing it. "But what good is land now? Now, after the war? All the population is scrunched in on ten percent of the inhabitable land. The rest of the land is what? Dead? Yes, that's it. It's dead. All the memories. I still have the deeds. The family mansion still stands out there, but it's too expensive to habiform, to put in all the air filters, to seal the house up, to make it safe from the small, slow, creeping death in the air."

"I'm sorry," Wilson said. But it was nothing. She isn't lamenting, she's only recounting by rote, he realized.

She seemed frozen, for the first time her mind ground to a halt. She was almost a tangible for this one moment, an accommodating downbeat in the syncopation of Wilson's rhythm. In the grip of drugs and the lack of sleep, Wilson could almost nail the pattern of her mind to the wall of knowledge. Almost it made the most basic kind of sense. So simple.

In the silence she dropped a hand towards his.

This was the gesture he had been waiting for, half expectancy stillborn in his heart, all night.

His hand was brought up. He didn't resist. I have wanted this, Wilson thought, since. . . when? Somewhere in the short evening she had changed, had moved from being prey to being simply a woman. When conscious acknowledgement of this came to Wilson, it stopped him, stopped his rhythm. He blinked hard, stifled a yawn. The lack of sleep crashed in on him.

She moved her other hand. Her skin was warm, almost too warm he thought. She gently turned his wrist up. She didn't look at him. He didn't look at her. Instead they concentrated on their hands.

She tapped him quickly on the exposed wrist.

It stung.

He saw the micro-hypo needle automatically retract into its hiding place under the long nail of her index finger.

"What the hell?" he jerked his hand away, and tried to pull the sub-howitzer from under his suit jacket. But the drug she injected him with was faster. His arms froze up. The gun clunked to the ground.

Why?" He tried to say. But the muscles in his mouth locked so that even that short word was slurred into incompleteness.

She didn't answer him.

He began to collapse, to spiral in a crazy, cartoonish way as the paralysis spread. She caught him up under his arms and eased him down.

Once he was propped up, she stepped back from him.

"Hound," her voice was soft. "I have caught you." She shook her head slowly, sadly. "I'm never good at killing though. They are, I guess, the men that come. But they don't always kill. Sometimes they only do enough to get the job done, to make sure the hound can't hunt anymore. I've never seen them. I call a number. I leave a message on a recorder. I receive money later automatically deposited in my account."

She turned away from him and looked out towards the Glen's dome.

"How many s'nap hounds are there in the whole metroplex from Morgan Hill all the way to San Francisco? A couple hundred maybe, in a population of seven million? You're predators, and I'm the predator's predator. The people I work for sell security on the black market, the promise for a new identity. You jeopardize that."

Suddenly, the truth broke on him. Her brain had been remapped, her synaptic patterns overlaid. She had had her own personality surgically multi-exposed on her brain. She was a trap sent out to catch him, someone like him, a hound.

"I want to live out there. Under that dome, living the good life like you said. Takes a lot of money. I'm getting it, though. But. . . I don't know."

She scooped out a vial from the folds of her dress. Wilson saw her plop something into her hand. She brought the

hand to her mouth.

"Sedatives," she said, embarrassed.

She would need those, he thought. Because of the surgery inside that pretty head, a good half dozen neuroses must thrive. Some hyped-up kind of schizophrenia, to start with, not to mention paranoia. She would need suppressants to keep up a front in public, to keep the craziness from crashing to the surface.

She knelt, placed her hands on either side of his face. But he couldn't feel her touch. She looked softly into his eyes, searching for something in his expression. But of course there was nothing for her to see. All the muscles had gone dead, and his face sagged like warm clay.

"In the end, I guess it's too much to pay, to try and save yourself a little piece of sanity in this world. . . I don't know," she said in a distant voice.

She stood and walked out of his field of vision, and his eyes couldn't follow her.

Time passed, and only after a long pause did he realize she had left.

He waited.

Waited for the men. He knew what kind of men would come. A member of the one of the metroplex's ethnic underworld groups. Vietnamese, Italian, Armenian, or maybe

even American Indian--whoever she worked for. Maybe all of them. They all dabbled in the contraband market of mind-blanked bodies. They would come and kill him.

It began to rain.

So funny, Wilson laughed to himself, he had actually begun to worry about the rain. It spattered over his body, covering him with a false sense of refreshment. The rain carried radioactive dust, the war's residual fallout.

Again, he waited.

God, he thought, what some people would do for money. To have your head sliced open, to live with who knows how many mirrored reflections of yourself, to have each and every thought echoed down the hallways in your skull. Wilson didn't know the precise semantics involved. It would be impossible to exactly multiply the same personality in one brain. The patterns must have just been slightly tailored differently from each other. Wilson had a distinct vision of a maniacal brood of bastard half-sisters, all trapped in the same narrow little cell. To prostitute your soul like that, it was unnatural, he decided.

With quiet and unsettling dexterity, self-incrimination broke over him. He was no different. Remembering his conversation with Wendy pushed her unspoken accusation to the surface of his consciousness. This time he couldn't push out the word: parasite. I've given up, he thought flatly with a minimum of emotion. I gave up years ago as soon as I tested

positive for psi sensitivity. All along I've just been doing whatever there was to survive; I've just been waiting to die. Waiting for someone like her to come and kill me. I must have been such easy prey.

He lay helpless with those thoughts for a long time.

And passed out twice as the lack of movement finally killed the last vestiges of his rhythm. He woke the second time and saw that light would come soon. Soaked, he could practically feel the cancers burrowing into his skin. It rained once more. Two hours after dawn broke, his fingertips began to twinge with feeling.

By noon, a sticky heat punched the air. Wilson's clothes, that fabulous suit, heavy with moisture, seemed to have melted onto his body. He moved his arms, slowly, sluggishly. He lost consciousness again.

It was dark, and the muscles in his calves screamed with soreness. He would be able to walk again, he realized, probably before the next morning broke.

He would need surgery. Chemo too, the new accelerated type of treatments. The cancers would soon start sprouting on his skin like fungus. A lot of money, but it wasn't fatal. Ironically, he realized he would have to go out on the hunt again soon just to pay for the medical treatments this day in the radioactive rain cost him.

But he was distant from this: he almost didn't mind. He knew now she didn't make that call. He could think only of

her, the woman who had so completely taken him. What was it that saved him at that last moment--what she saw when she held the deadened flesh of his face her hands. He didn't know.

He grabbed the railing, and pulled himself up, then sat waiting for full feeling to return. Picking at a stain, he realized his suit was badly soiled. Having it cleaned would be his first priority.

She wasn't done.

He knew this with glaring certainty. Though he had been spared, she would be setting her trap again, doing whatever needed to be done so she could afford to escape the reality of their world, to insulate herself, protect herself, entomb herself.

Another dawn threatened to break. He stood, though he had to lean on the barrier for support. His legs ached as the numbness grudgingly gave way to dull feeling. After a while longer, he sat again and watched the first creeping of light catch the dome. He would look for her there. That's where they would both meet. They would do what they must to get there. The price was really insignificant compared to the prospect of living in the Glen's relatively clean air. He was tired, dead tired, but couldn't keep himself from looking.

Suicidal Necessities in the Twenty-First Century

Ironical, how we push forward only to slip back. Technology progresses to such point that many of the old rituals resurface. Beowulf, Siegfried, and St. George--in his time each rode out to fight his own private dragon. These are my predecessors. My employers have clipped and molded me into their shape.

My dragon, the construction dinosaur, is building again in the huge lot across from my apartment complex. It is almost finished after only three days. This is a damned beautiful beast, reflective silicon eyes unblinking with concentration. Segment after segment of the serpentine body arches, bends, maneuvers. The service tentacles lining its back flare out, carrying beams and panels to the frame. Some hold the panels in place while heat tentacles fuse the beams together.

The beast is so god-damned beautiful. But all that bulk is really simulated flesh, cloned from scratch; there is no life, not actually, no matter what all those bio-engineers would tell you. I know. I am corrupted with this non-life.

I sit on the edge of the airbed and watch the beast work out its genetic program. The penthouse is dark. Lisa lies behind me wrapped in the sheets. I wait. The beast will be

finished soon.

Compared to the constructor, I am so ugly, so god-damned grotesque. All these extra muscles, fed by a self-contained hydraulic system, thicken my body out of proportion. My face is all calluses, the mouth slit extra wide to allow for the tusks. Fleshy pouches containing a powerful neural toxin bulge behind my clipped ears. Lisa finds me attractive, like other women have. But they are blind to what I am, so I act out the loathing they should feel.

She had come over earlier this morning. We fucked, and it was pretty good, as it always is. Although she sweated too much, like she always does. Somehow, I don't like that, the coarse red hair all caked on her face, and that complete lack of personality in her expression. She gives everything up, surrenders everything to me, and I don't want it.

"Why?" I hear her push up in the sheets, the subtle thump of her back against the bed board.

"What?"

"Why do you always insist on thinking you're ugly? You always eat yourself up when you watch that creature."

"Look at me."

"I am." She moves up, rests her weight on her thighs. I feel her close. "You're very special, you know that?"

"Sure." Again and again, I've heard that. One of the special few. I have a built-in time bomb in my brain, a

neurological incongruity that would surely drive me insane by the time I was thirty. At seventeen I was already entering a manic depressive cycle, and one day I would swing too low. I am twenty-eight now. I've beat the prediction of madness by two years. Hell of an accomplishment.

"I still don't see why. You have a kind of beauty I find fascinating."

"That can't be enough, can it?" I insist. "It's artificial, it's not real, all this you see grafted on me." The admission eats at me once more. The same genetic makeup that allows me to wear the cyber-spliced armor is also the sickness which slowly kills me.

I feel Lisa's hand hover over my shoulder. I feel her indecisions throb. But she doesn't touch me, not now. Our fears have walled us apart. "It must be enough," she sighs as she falls from me and back into the sheets. "It's what you're given. "

She doesn't know. She couldn't, and the arguments and the envy have lost their sting. I don't feel the need to argue anymore, to convince anymore.

She edges on her elbows to where I sit. "Got to get out there," she says looking out the window, "I'm working the swing tonight."

"Oh."

"God, I hate putting on a rad suit just to go work," she says. "I wish I could afford the operation."

"You wouldn't like it," I say, following a billowing dust cloud caused by the constructor. "I hear it takes a lot of getting used to, being covered with rubber like that. I wouldn't want to sleep with someone who felt like a mannequin."

I hear her turn in the sheets. "No, it's probably not that bad. Besides, look what you have on your body. You tell me it's perfectly comfortable."

I shake my head and knead a meaty biceps. "This is a completely different thing. This is genetically engineered flesh spliced with my own. What you're talking about is simply sealing up your skin. And I don't believe those claims that the skin gets enough oxygen. Besides, you still have to wear nose filters."

"Hell," she says. "That's nothing compared to having to put on that suit. Those seals have to be constantly checked and replaced. You don't know what a pain-in-the-ass that is. You haven't had to do it since you were seventeen."

It has fallen into a routine, a ritual, this conversation. We both know what we are going to say, but say it anyway. It is easier. "You could just save some of that money you're making at the factory and move into one of the complexes that have access tubes which hook right up to the plant."

"Too expensive," she says and swings her feet over.

"Besides the waiting list is over two years long." She walks over to where her clothes lay.

I start to say that if she had put her name on the list when I first met her, she might have the place already. But I don't need to. She knows what I would have said.

She begins to dress; I turn to watch the pale, thin body disappear underneath a tan jumpsuit. "I hate going out there every day," she says. "It seems every time you turn on the vid news you hear about another region being shut down because of the increase in radiation."

"I know," I reply. I sympathize with her feeling. The land locks us in, forces us into to each other. "This is what we're given. We must make do."

"I know," she says this time. "But it's not much, is it? I mean, it's always there. The decay, the inhabitable land slowly eroding. I don't believe it will stop like the government predicts. So each day I just try to do something to keep my mind off it."

She stops, and we both know what she implies. It lies between us as an unspoken sore: the fact that she doesn't know why she continues to come up the ten floors from her own apartment. And what's worse I don't know why I let her. But she does anyway, showing a ferocity in her punctuality that she never does in bed. Our lives proceed separately, except for sex. We almost seem to prey on each other. She on my strength and me on her complacency. She wants me to be

strong for her. To make up for something she feels she lacks. But I do not know what it is.

As she passes the bed, she lays a hand on my shoulder. I don't flinch, though the reflex is there. She doesn't kiss me. She had stopped doing that a long time ago. "I am going in to work early." She throws a look towards the window. "It looks like you'll be going to work again too."

I nod and look away from her.

"See you later? Upstairs in the bath?"

"Sure."

She leaves.

I go back to watching the dinosaur build.

It is just about done, a great job, as always.

Sometimes if it's an extended program like this one, the dragons start to develop a personality, too much intelligence ingrained in the synthetic brain. Originally, the constructors were genetically programmed to self-wipe their brain patterns. The neural toxins needed are extremely delicate, meant to selectively terminate the memory and initiative centers but not the brain's motor controls. These poisons were kept in secretion sacks just behind the grafted frontal lobes and were activated by the termination of the constructor's building pattern. But as the job proceeds, a cognitive

personality emerges, and the artificially forged synaptic connections play hell with the genetic programming, subverting it and often prematurely releasing the toxin. Or worse, the toxins spread through all areas of the brain, attacking the cerebral cortex and paralyzing the central nervous system, effectively ruining the entire beast for further use.

And so I am trundled out in this grotesque parody of the medieval knights to apply the pure toxins at the proper time. The extra muscles are a necessity for the physical demands of this arduous task. No sentient creature, even an artificial one, meets death easily. Even if it is only the partial death the toxins inflict.

I go into the wardrobe and pull out the mahogany case, a real rarity since most wood these days is artificial. I unhinge my lower jaw, and my mouth hangs open like a character from one of those antique cartoons of the twentieth century. The tusks are getting uncomfortable; some of the bone in my mouth must be warping. I am a horned and tusked devil now. And the claws. Sometimes I cut Lisa with them when she is pushing on me too hard. I apologize, but she only grips me harder, and I drive into her further.

Green neon flares from an observation tower, signaling the building has been completed and approved by the engineers. This one looks Arabic in origin, magnificent domes and spires, an elegant palace, looking like it had stood for

a thousand years and will stand for another thousand. Although next week it will be torn down and replaced with another building. The appearance fits the function since OPEC is holding a convention there. Some would object to the organization in California. But there are no national borders across most of the world since the disarmament. I've seen a hundred different facades forced upon the lot across the avenue: convention centers, hotels, race tracks, sports centers--all temporary, built and dismantled by that half-alive dragon.

I can also see the factory Lisa works at from here, a squat ugly thing. They make cheap plastic radiation detectors. I have three in my penthouse alone. But it doesn't really matter; I am so padded with artificial meat that the fallout from the Ten Minute War of 2041 could never affect me.

I cross the street. It is empty of foot traffic. The plastic spinners, twin automated plants which mold the panels for each new building, stand like pregnant bulges pushing up from the land. Soon they will be taken down into the ground, along with the dinosaur's body, to be reprogrammed and used

again.

"Hey," I hear as I cross through the construction barrier.

I turn. "Yes?"

It is one of the caretakers, a doughy man of over forty. I don't know his name. His skin catches the sun's weak glint. He has had it sealed against the contamination just like Lisa always talks about.

"I think maybe you've waited too long. The beast is getting skittish."

I frown. "No, I don't think so."

I can see a combination of fear and contempt in the man. He fears my body, the heavy muscle, the horns, the claws, the curving tusks. But he gloats over the cycle which allows me to wear this body. He knows of the madness, and smirks, but still he fears what my illness buys me.

"I know this beast," he says cautiously. "This was a hell of a job. The prefrontal graft was quite complex. We allowed for a lot of independent thinking for this one. We had to."

"Sure." I shrug and walk towards where the beast waits. I know he mumbles the word 'freak' under his breath, but it doesn't matter. He'll leave the area, afraid of the violence.

The dinosaur squats away from the building, its massive

bulk resting on the two legs. The remainder of its body snakes out behind. Huge overlapping scales protect it from the possibility of a building collapsing. The head, almost all bone, is dominated by sensitive elephantine ears, the mouth covered with fibers like one of those extinct humpback whales. The service tentacles, normally splayed out along the back as they maneuvered sections of building, are now flat and unused.

It waits according to its program. But I can see the struggle there, the awareness waiting to take seed. It is this that prompts me to move closer, to get it over with as quickly as possible.

It watches me slowly. After a pause the head lowers in a flat descent.

I grab a handhold on one massive scale. A subtle tremor pulls through the leg. I look up into the beast's face. It turns down to regard me: no expression. I kick-swing up, using the spurs grafted to the back of my calves to hook a scale. I hang briefly upside-down. I am perched at the knotty hub of the knee, and the ground is already five meters below me.

The leg moves, lumbers forward. The knee bends, and I move to the back of the leg to avoid being stretched by the movement. There is an eerie lack of sound as the creature brings its leg up to examine it. I remain on the upper leg just underneath the massive shoulder muscle. It knows some-

thing is wrong, and I hear a rumbling from the belly, a sloshing, agitated sound, as the creature is sustained only on liquid nutrients.

It puts the claw down and becomes increasingly more disturbed. It can sense me now through the thick armor and begins to move away from the edge of the building. I continue to cling to the leg until it moves forward enough. I kick forward, up, hard, glancing against the bottom of the arching neck. I bounce off the heavy plate which is too smooth to grab a hold of.

Finally, I twist around to the front and stop at the base where the neck meets the chest. Quickly, I climb up the ladder-like arrangement of scales which travel all the way to the swaying head far above.

It panics because the residual memories of all the times it has died before have resurfaced. It shakes, and I stop my climb, claws hooked securely into the edges of plate. My head slams into the neck. It goes on for a minute and I close my eyes and try not to think because I am terrified. Not by the prospect of being thrown to the ground and trampled to death, but by the very violence of the beast's futile anguish. It thrashes and rages but can do nothing. It is helpless.

It ceases to try to shake me off and shifts its weight to its right. I scramble up the neck spider-like, just as

the left claw speeds to snatch me. It misses and lurches to the right, thrown off balance by the attempt. It shifts its weight again, and I am only a third of the way up the elongated neck. Misses, but this time in frustration it tears into itself and dislodges a plate, which falls off with a sickening tearing sound. Blood shoots out in a high pressured rush. Again no roar of pain, only the belly's thunder. The monster falls to the left, and my hand is jarred loose. I dangle from one arm, try to secure a foothold.

Too late.

This time the claw catches me, I fall.

I feel only the initial impact as my brain is equipped with a neural cutoff circuit to prevent pain from hampering my performance. I look up. The creature straddles me. I am covered with blood, but it's not mine.

The head looms up above me, considering, seeming to make a judgement. The right foreclaw lifts up. I prop myself on my elbows. My legs are numb. The creature reconsiders and lowers its head. It falls slowly, the eyes studying me carefully.

I lie on my back and don't move, don't even really consider it. I simply lie and stare at the head as it comes relentlessly down. It has gotten harder each time.

The head hovers a meter over my body.

I see the final tragedy of our play in that misshapen face. The beast has just enough intelligence to realize its

own mortality. Its personality has broken out from the rigors of the genetic programming. The first roots of free thought have taken hold.

There is only one mercy I can do.

I reach up and dig my claws into the soft skin lining the jaw. The beast jerks up. I dig the claws on my feet into the curve of the jaw bone, and I am lifted up again.

I think nothing. I let habit and instinct ride me. I am high enough, and I slowly work my way around up behind the ear despite all the shaking.

Behind the right ear there is a tender unprotected patch of skin. I sink the tusks into this patch, and the toxin sacs behind my ears are drained empty.

I sit in the steam bath at the top of my apartment building. Through the fogged glass I can just make out the convention center and the ugly multi-storied landscape (all simulated brick) of the corporate town beyond. I sit and stare and feel the twin pumping of my hearts (one natural, one mechanical) in my temples. They are pounding and pounding, more and more, and I can do nothing but sit alone. I can't even cry because they burned out my tear ducts to put in heavier heat-resistant lids.

The dinosaur's body has been hauled underground automatically, where the prefrontal lobes will be sliced off,

and new ones with the future design of the next building grafted on. The lot seems empty, although I know a flurry of activity is taking place as smaller versions of the constructor outfit the center's interior.

I sit in the chair and let the steam soften me. My arms drop to either side, and I pump my hands, getting the veins full of blood. I lean my head back.

I have resigned myself to hating it all, twisting my head into an ugly lump until it plops off. And feel nothing, because nothing is all there is in this decayed world, a radiation-soaked womb giving birth only to despair and mediocrity. I prove to be the ideal creature to roam this landscape. I am altered and hideous, clinging to the madness which kills me every day as a way of earning my livelihood, each feeding the other, the broken spring in my brain the same genetic element which allows the cyber-spliced armor to adapt to my body.

We've disbanded the formal concepts of nationality and war, but we are still preoccupied with death.

There is a calm in me now. Because I cannot help it. I have tried. Lisa is a diversion to occupy my life, to go through the facade of loving and being loved. I know that is unfair. But it doesn't matter; it has failed me. It doesn't really matter if it is this constant ritualistic murder that has done it to me, or if it is the natural acting out of my genetic heritage. All that matters is that I am here now, at

this point.

A thousand pinprick explosions open up my wrists. The blood flows freely. It slicks down my thighs and begins to pool at my feet. I continue to stare out the window until dark comes, and I black out.

I wake; it is night. I try standing up from the chair, but it takes two tries. I am still weak from the blood loss. I am still wet with my own blood. I look down at my wrists. The arteries there have been burned closed by a timed acid which my pores release after I lose consciousness. While I am clear-headed, I'll have to remember to replace the micro charges.

I was never promised a cure for my manic depression, only a treatment to survive the low swing. The one my employers have provided me with is clumsy and artificial, but it works. The only thing that is important is that for the moment I am alive. I'll settle for that--for now. I have lost a lot of blood, much more than normal. But this is no worry; I have a plasma bank in the penthouse.

I open the glass door and step out onto the roof and into the night. It's cold, too cold. A flash rain, laden with radioactive dust, had come while I was unconscious, washing down the area with a lying sense of cleansing. The

steam escapes outside to evaporate, and the glass chamber is soon cleared. Across the avenue the dignitaries have already begun to arrive. The long aero-limousines are lining up at the front entrance unburdening themselves of their passengers.

At these times, hope pulses in me. And though I'm tempted to attribute this euphoria to the upswing of my illness, somehow it seems more that that. Almost as if I live through enough of these mock deaths, I will reach a plateau, the plateau of sanity. Just thinking this makes me stronger, more prepared for the next suicide, hoping that one day I'll be able to throw off all this artificial meat and see clearly what this life, this world, offers.

Tonight is not that day.

But maybe soon.

I lean against the railing and breathe deeply, the fresh-smelling contaminated air. It cannot hurt me. I stay that way for over an hour watching the aero-cars come and go. I am content to take what little pride I can in my part in the affair. Perhaps I should feel ashamed of this, but now I cannot.

I look down the thirty floors to the street. A small group of pedestrians is entering the lobby. It is the swing shift from the factory. I can pick Lisa out by the way she walks, despite being hidden by all that yellow rubber.

She'll take time to step out of the radiation suit that

she hates so much, and come up here naked and expectant. I try to smile at the pleasing prospect, but I left the tusks in so I can't. I chuckle through the corners of my mouth and unhinge the lower jaw and spit out the cumbersome bone. I smile.

I step back into the chamber and reseal it carefully. I reset the controls so the bath will be ready by the time she comes up here.

I wait for her, relaxed.

I have time.

And for while it lasts I will be able to be strong for her.