

## Freeing the Angels

by Pat Cadigan and Chris Fowler

He was standing on the sidewalk, idly flexing his brand-new arm while he waited to cross with the rest of the blowfish, when he heard his mother's voice in his mind. Unbidden, unwished-for, apropos of nothing, it came to him: *Carry on the way you have been, Danny-boy, you be seein' angels a lot sooner than you want to. Or maybe devils. You sure got some bad in you, boy. Watch it don't catch you out and take you down. When you go, you want to see them angels waiting to take you in.*

Danny smiled to himself sourly. *Yeah, sure, Momma, thanks for the pointer.* He thought of it as typical of everything she'd given him, from the charity-shop clothes and cold junk food all the way down to the little stump and four tiny fingers that grew out of his right shoulder, the legacy of her five years in a fertilizer production factory, now completely covered by a brand-new arm from the Universal Prosthetics Clinic.

Maybe the sudden echo of her voice in his mind had been his simple acknowledgment that she wouldn't have approved. *Getting above yourself* was one of the many deadly sins on the Momma-meter, along with *whining*. As in, *Stop whining about your goddamn stump, you're lucky that's all it was. I saw some of the things they took outta women I worked with. And if you think you oughta get one of them fancy prosthetics like some jumped-up poster child, you gettin' above yourself, boy. Way above yourself.*

The sour smile deepened as the light changed. A desperate bike courier, legs pumping as if he were treading water in a panic to keep from drowning, blew through the intersection close enough to flutter Danny's shirttail. He smoothed it casually, enjoying the small fantasy that he'd worn completely normal and totally unremarkable shirts all his life, just like anyone else. *Not above myself, Momma—just above you. Like the man said about everyone being in the gutter and some of us looking at the stars. It's called ambition.*

He flexed the arm again. Realizing the smaller ambitions was the first step in getting the bigger ones taken care of. Not that a new arm had been all that small to him. Two years of living on the cheap, saving the money he got from playing errand boy and selling guidebooks and magazines to the tourists, no luxuries, not even a piss-quality beer on a Saturday night, just so he'd have the cash for old Sibelius at the Universal Prosthesis Clinic. UPC did a cash-only business—strictly used paper in a used brown envelope, don't want that old taxman coming around, do we? Nosir. Straight cash got you the straight goods.

You wouldn't have thought so looking at UPC's shabby storefront. You wouldn't have even thought to ask, which was just as well, since if you had to ask you'd never know. But if you were the right kind, someone more interested in possibilities than what you could have right now—i.e., the stars rather than the gutter—and you were both willing to work and open to suggestion, some of the right things could happen. Because you'd know the right way to make them happen. You'd know that putting some extra in that brown envelope and staying awake through old lady Sibelius's sales patter—*Come on in, we fix you up cheap, just don't ask too many questions about where the parts are from. We do arms, we do legs, we even do whole exoskeletons. Don't matter how you come in, you gonna be walking out, walking tall and proud. Doctor Sibelius guarantees and that's for life, my man*—meant you'd get something higher-grade than the stuff Sibelius and her partners jury-rigged for the run-of-the-mill blowfish. One more good reason to get above yourself.

Of course, until you actually *did* get above yourself, until you were actually up and out of the gutter, it was best to exercise discretion. Especially in this neighborhood, when it was starting to get dark.

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SKIN MUSIC screamed the old-school neon sign on the front of the tattoo parlor. Just below, one of the artists was hanging in the open doorway blowing garish-colored smoke rings. She was new; the ink in her face morphed from Valkyrie-style enhancements to Snow Queen to Snow Beast. She eyed Danny with the bold, *I-can-take-you-in-a-fight-or-I-can-take-you-in-bed-your-call* attitude endemic in those under the age of twenty. Or maybe that was just the tune her skin music was playing, he thought, giving her a self-possessed smile in return. She was staring at his face. Didn't even notice his arm except in passing, the way you never notice anyone's limbs if they have all of them. He made a point of pausing to read the plain old painted sign on the shop next door (TRADER VIC'S—YES WE R OPEN) by way of showing her that he was busy, thanks, some other time maybe. A prior commitment was more palatable than outright rejection; he knew that one firsthand. In lieu of pulling a thorn out of a lion's paw, it was the sort of extended courtesy that might come in handy. But even if it didn't, it wasn't like it cost you anything.

The tattoo artist crushed her homemade on the sidewalk as he went into Trader Vic's. As usual, Vic herself was behind the high counter at the far end of the store, looking regal as she flicked a finger at the flatscreen in front of her. She was dark-

skinned and heavily-built, no little slip of a thing but solid and strong in a grey Athletic Club of Overland Park sweatshirt. Trader Vic, as she styled herself, was the *real* deal because, unlike the restaurateur who had launched a thousand mai tais, she made trades, not drinks. Need something, but suffering from financial embarrassment? Not to worry, Trader Vic liked to say, she had a thousand thousand contacts reachable via a touch on her flatscreen, and millions more reachable by *two* touches. Somewhere among them was the person who had what you wanted and might be in the mood to make a deal for it, a trade between the two of you. Or it could turn into a three-way dance, or four-way, or you might end up getting plugged into a complex network of give and take, something that would be an impossible tangle for anyone but Trader Vic, who could keep it all straight in her mind no matter which angle she came at it from. You might have thought it was just good software and record-keeping so meticulous as to be anal, but that was just backup for the real trading machine, the one between Vic's ears.

"Hey yo," she said with a big smile. "Something new has been added."

He waved at her with the arm and did bodybuilder poses with it as he approached the counter. Today she had rented some of her unneeded floor space to the tattoo parlor and some to the market on the other side—boxes of animation inks faced crates of olive oil, fish paste, fortified wheat germ, and shell macaroni.

"Like they say on the late show, checkiddout, checkiddout." He stretched the arm high over his head and made a buzzing noise as he lowered his hand onto the counter next to her monitor for a five-point landing on the fingers. "The Eagle is in da house and things can only get better."

"Nostalgia sure ain't what it used to be." She tried a soul handshake on him, bumped his knuckles with her own, slapped him high and low five, and then got him in an arm wrestling grip.

"No fair, I got no leverage," he complained grinning as he pushed her arm down on the counter effortlessly, careful not to crush her fingers.

She grinned back at him and then gave him one upside the head; not too hard, though. "Don't get all misty just because you beat the champ *one* time." She flexed her own hand, as if she had a mild cramp. "Feels good, like the real thing. Only realer. How much were you holding back?"

"All of it. Sibelius came by some military stuff, surplus leftovers, she said."

Vic looked at her screen and tapped a finger on it. "So *that's* where that went. Anonymous auction, not that you heard it from *me*."

Danny made an elaborate dismissive gesture with his right hand. "You know Sibelius—you don't ask her questions and she doesn't have to tell you lies."

Vic leaned on the counter. "Well, if your arm really did come out of that lot, you may have gotten the deal of the century, my man. It was an experimental batch. The mad scientist behind it got himself cooked in some kind of stupid accident and the military warehoused everything. Sat for six months until the inventory database got scrambled and ceased to officially exist."

"Gee, I wonder how that happened," Danny said, admiring his fingers.

"Happens all the time," Vic said serenely. "With no official existence, there was no official sale and no official income lining any official's pocket. Not that I told you anything. What would I know anyway? I'm just a humble trader, a go-between, a matchmaker for goods and services."

Danny looked at her with exaggerated puzzlement. "Huh? Whudja say?"

"I said, I'll have to thank Sibelius for this."

He blinked, the puzzlement becoming real. "*You* will?"

"Oh, yeah." Vic's smile was thoughtful. "How'd you like to make that new arm pay for itself?"

"Well, that *is* kinda what I had in mind," Danny said. "You know, doing jobs I couldn't before."

The trader nodded. "Good. Because it so happens I've got a vacancy for tonight. Does that fit in with your busy social schedule?"

"Sure. What do I have to do? Bend some iron bars? Crush beer cans?" He snapped his fingers rhythmically. "Keep the beat?"

"Later. First get down to Jeremy's and pick up some code for me. It's special, I don't want it getting intercepted or scrambled."

He couldn't help showing his disappointment. Errand boy again.

"Hey, that's only the beginning," Vic said, reading his mind, or at least his expression. "I'm going to need a lot of help from you tonight, and I don't mean I want you to sit the store while I'm out. I can't get this done without you."

Danny laughed a little, feeling both sheepish and relieved. Anyone else might have been patronizing him or setting him up, but not Vic. "Okay. I'm on the case."

The blowfish, mainly of the tourist persuasion, were lined up for Eye in the Sky, which was just starting to jump. The sumo wrestler on the door was making the usual big show of passing them through after a thorough visual inspection of their clothes, their faces, their jewelry, and, presumably, their coolness quotients. The sumo wrestler's name was Rakishi, and legend had it he really had been a sumo before bad knees had relegated him to ruling the ingress with guest list and stun-stick.

Danny didn't look at any of the overdressed would-be clubbers, fearful he'd see some of the people he'd cajoled into buying guidebooks or letting him run errands for them. All he'd need would be for one of them to call out *Errand boy!* in front of that lard-ass on the door. Rakishi would never let him forget it.

*Relax*, he told himself as he trotted up the crystal steps to the entrance. The errand boy they knew was a gimp with one arm. They weren't expecting to see him with two good arms. Nonetheless, he decided, tomorrow he'd get a new haircut, and maybe a dye job just to make sure.

"Say hey." Rakishi tapped him on the chest with the stun-stick and then left it there. He made a business out of counting Danny's arms and legs and pretending to think it over. "Sorry, I don't see your spare parts on the guest list, and even if they were, you couldn't come in here dressed like that."

"Save it for the blowfish, Rakishi, you know I'm not here for the dancing. Jeremy's expecting me. Otherwise I wouldn't get within a mile of this place."

Rakishi laughed. "You're telling *me*."

He winced at having inadvertently handed the man a straight line at his own expense and started to push past. Rakishi blocked his way with the stun-stick, resting the point against his new arm, against the shoulder, where the stump and the tiny fingers were now hidden away. The big man started to say something. Danny reached up, closed his new fingers around the chubby wrist, and began slowly applying pressure, letting Rakishi feel it.

The look on the fat man's face went from surprise to unease and then to outright fear. Danny backed him up several steps toward the entry foyer, still squeezing. He removed the stun-stick from the man's numbed fingers, and then, just as slowly, released him.

"Don't worry, nobody saw," he said in a low voice, giving the stick back to him. "It'll be our little secret, that a gimp with a spare part took your toy away from you. I

mean, we wouldn't want the blowfish rushing the door and getting you fired, would we?"

Rakishi stared at him, saying nothing. The expression on his face was supposed to be murderous, but Danny could see a hint of the fear underneath.

"But no more, Rakishi, okay? No more gimp, no more spare parts, no more big-man-on-the-door crap. Not to me. Got that?"

Still silent, Rakishi stepped back to let him pass.

"Thanks." Danny started to go in, then stuck his hand out. "Shake on it?"

Rakishi drew back and jerked his head at the entry foyer.

"Oh, yeah," Danny said, "we already did that, didn't we?"

The big man turned away from him and Danny suddenly felt ashamed of himself. He hurried through the dimly-lit foyer, pushing through the double doors marked STAFF ONLY to the left of the ticket-booth and going up the stairs two at a time. *Good show, Danny-boy, he thought, you just proved you can be as big a bully as anybody else.*

He went halfway down the narrow corridor at the top of the stairs and stopped at a grimy-looking door, plain except for a small card at eye level that said SERVICE MANAGER. Danny knocked and heard the answering come-in grunt.

Jeremy was dressed in his usual multi-pocketed work pants, white T-shirt, and blue fisherman's jacket with even more pockets. He was as thin as Rakishi was fat, which was some trick considering that Danny had never seen him when he wasn't eating. Tonight he was having Chinese food, busy chopsticks clicking among an array of classic white takeout cartons on his desk. They competed for space with the old, oversized but very sharp surveillance monitor. On the screen, Rakishi was doing his sorry-not-cool-enough routine with three tourists who were trying to argue with him.

"Saw you throwing the fear of God into my big guy," Jeremy said, gesturing at the screen with a noodle caught in the chopsticks. "New arm, eh?"

"Works pretty good," Danny said.

Jeremy made a prawn disappear. "I could see that."

"Hey, I wasn't really trying to start anything," Danny said. "He's just always pulling that crap on me when he knows the only reason I come here is because Vic sends me to pick something up from you."

"She told me you were on the way over, and she told me you had a nice new part." Jeremy put down his chopsticks. "Mind if I have a look?"

Danny extended his arm, pulling his sleeve up. Jeremy ran his hands along the musculature with an expert touch, nodding at the way it connected to his shoulder. He found the software load in Danny's armpit and palpated it the same way Dr. Sibelius had after she'd put it in.

"Not tickling you, am I?" Jeremy asked.

"I was never ticklish on that side," Danny told him coolly.

Jeremy stood up to take a closer look at the crook of Danny's arm. "If I'm not mistaken," he said after a bit, "this is from the lot that didn't exist out at the old Roswell Base."

"Jeez," Danny said, "does everybody know about this except me?"

"Maybe," Jeremy said. "I don't know, I haven't talked to everybody today."

Danny smiled, although the truth was that when Jeremy said something like that, you could never be certain he was kidding. "So you can tell just by looking?"

"I know what to look for. You got yourself a lot more arm there than you know."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. The Roswell lot was mad scientist stuff, experimental."

"Oh, right—Roswell and UFOs and alien technology. You think this came from outer space?"

"Haven't you been paying attention? The aliens are up in Montana these days. Roswell is a plain old military base now. Even the mad scientists are gone. After what's-his-name cooked himself, they moved the rest of them elsewhere. The moon, maybe, I don't know. Those who do know say the guy was working with some kind of quantum crap and that's what got him."

"Quantum crap?" Danny grimaced. "You mean, like, you go to the bathroom and it comes out in wavicles?"

Jeremy's expression never changed. "That's really very funny, Danny. Quantum stuff is highly weird. You ever hear about Schrödinger's cat? Things can exist in any number of different states all at the same time, even if they contradict each other."

"What does *that* mean?"

"It means you might be able to do some interesting magic tricks with that thing. Did you get an operator manual with it?"

"It's in the software. Check this out." Danny shifted his shoulder slightly and then extended his arm again, turning it to show Jeremy the underside of his forearm. Words faded in on the pale skinlike surface along a patch five inches long and two inches wide and began to scroll upward.

"Now that takes me back," Jeremy said, watching the documentation. "Like crib notes in middle school, only fancier. A skin animation of this kind'll run you, oh, hell, I don't know, I haven't priced any lately." He looked at Danny. "Except this not really being skin, it's not really a tattoo, is it."

Danny grinned. "Close enough for government work."

"You really are a very funny guy," Jeremy told him solemnly. "I had no idea."

"Well, besides improving my piano playing, this thing has really put me in a good mood," Danny said. "Prosthetic limb *and* antidepressant. Is that like the quantum states you were talking about?"

"Not even close." Jeremy felt around the pockets in his jacket, then his pants, and then his jacket again before he found what he was looking for, a tiny blue disc in a clear plastic sleeve. "Anyway, this'll be what you came to get. Vic's code. She doesn't make things very easy."

Danny reached for it with his new hand and Jeremy pulled it back slightly. "Don't crush it."

"I've got control," Danny said. "If I didn't, your big guy'd be on the way to the hospital with a compound fracture."

Jeremy dropped the disc into his palm and Danny made a show of carefully tucking it into the watch pocket of his jeans. "Yeah, I guess."

"Hey, I didn't humiliate him in front of the blowfish, so it's not like I undermined his authority on the door," Danny said.



"Bullying is about the only thing Rakishi knows how to do well," Jeremy said. "And like all bullies, it's always good he gets a reminder now and then that he's not the top of the food chain, that there's always somebody tougher and it might not be who you'd expect. Also, like you said, no harm done. But all the same, here's a tip for you, Dan-man: what Rakishi does isn't personal. You shouldn't take it personally."

Danny glanced at the screen where some more tourists were arguing with Rakishi.

"Only blowfish take it personally."

"Oh." Danny dipped his head, feeling sheepish again. "Got it, Jeremy."

"Blowfish," Jeremy continued, almost talking over him, "take everything personally. They don't understand. They think the world's out to get them when, actually, the world doesn't even know they're there." Pause. "Sorry. Quantum stuff tends to bring out the philosopher in me. Maybe it has something to do with the butterfly effect. Can I see your arm again?"

Danny obliged, letting him run his fingers all over it again before turning his attention to Danny's hand, palpating it in a very thorough, pointed way, as if he were looking for something he knew was hidden inside.

"Now, you understand that when the military makes something like this, they always intend it as a weapon," he said, holding Danny's hand a little closer to his face as he felt his palm. He suddenly bent Danny's fingers into an imitation gun shape and aimed it at an antique paper shredder in the far corner of the room. "Try shooting that, see what happens."

"Try shooting it *how*?" Danny said.

"It's *your* military grey-market arm. Think it, or say 'bang-bang,' or something. Didn't you look at that part of the manual?"

"There was a whole bunch of stuff on how to hurt, torture, or kill someone with one bare hand so I kinda skipped it."

Jeremy glanced at him. "Pacifist?"

"Actually, it was just grossing me out," Danny confessed, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"In the future, you should try not to turn down free knowledge, no matter what kind it is," Jeremy said, aiming his hand at the shredder again and experimentally

pressing his knuckles. "Most stuff you want to find out ends up being pretty expensive. Whatever you can get for free could come in handy later, you know?"

Danny disengaged his hand and flexed the fingers. "Don't you think fooling with a possibly loaded weapon you have no idea about could be a real expensive free shooting lesson?"

Jeremy's smile was unexpectedly sunny. "You're learning." The smile vanished just as suddenly, leaving his bony, wizened face so deadpan that Danny wondered if he had just hallucinated. "Be careful out there tonight. Tell Vic I said be careful."

"I will," Danny said. "Anything else?"

Jeremy seemed mildly surprised by the question. "No," he said and sat down to pick up where he'd left off with the Chinese food.

The street outside Vic's had gotten busier, more populated with the usual mix of urban survivors, suburban pretenders, and a few tourists who thought they could handle some adventure. Maybe they could. In any case, they could afford it, and there was no shortage of people to sell it to them. The suburban geeks, though, they were all looking a little nervous. It was past time for them to head for the old all-day indoor parking garage, fire up that sport utility vehicle, and hurry back to the 'burbs before something actually happened, Danny thought, amused. One of them, a tall, plump young guy who looked like a college student, seemed to be trying to get up the nerve to approach the tattoo artist having a smoke in the doorway of Skin Music. Same woman as before. Her gaze met Danny's and he saw her mouth twitch in a brief, secret display of amusement. She knew Joe College was there and what he was up to and she was having a great time making him even more nervous by being so completely oblivious to him. And now she had Danny to share the joke with her. He pressed his lips together so hard they hurt. What would she think, he wondered, if he told her no one had ever shared the joke with him before, at least, not like this? That instead of meeting his gaze, women always looked away casually but very quickly, so that he might be fooled into thinking they hadn't looked at him in the first place and so weren't looking away from his deformity. What would she think if, instead of just smiling secretly back at her, he told her that?

He suddenly heard Jeremy's voice in his head, so distinctly he nearly turned around to see if the man was somehow actually there. *She'd probably think you took the world way too personally, Dan-man.*

The ink in her face moved smoothly through its changes. She managed to contrive to track him as he went into Vic's. He thought of pausing at the door to give her a

wink and then decided not to press his luck. Besides, now that he thought of it, winking was a pretty corny thing to do. The woman had animated facial tattoos, for god's sake; *get a grip*, he told himself.

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"You look like a man with a code," Vic said, smiling around the monitor at him.

"I am," Danny said and put the disc on the counter.

Vic picked it up and held it between thumb and forefinger. "Would you mind changing the sign and locking up for me? And then come on in the back so I can give you the whole story."

Danny flipped the handwritten sign over to the side that said, TRADING FROM A 2 Z—CURRENTLY TRADING IN Zs, SEE YOU TOMORROW. Trader Vic whimsy—he'd always found it strangely poignant, though he would never have told Vic that. He locked the door, tested it, wondered briefly when Skin Music or the grocer were going to pick up their goods, and then joined Vic in the back room.

As far as he was concerned, Vic's back room was one of the top ten rooms in the world. She had a big, overstuffed sofa in some kind of soft fabric that was not quite velour and not quite corduroy but combined the better features of both. It was the color of an expensive red wine and sitting on it was the next best thing to having someone pour you a glass. The coffee table in front of it was just an old block of plastic, okay to put your feet on. The big video screen in the antique box had a resolution that most blowfish could only dream about; almost too good for some of the older movies Vic had. Like when she'd shown him that old space opera movie.

Vic picked up the remote and aimed it at the screen. The familiar city skyline faded in; then the perspective zoomed in on the top half of a glass-and-steel monster, one of several built during the last glass-and-steel revival in urban architecture.

"Is that—?" Danny turned to look at Vic.

"La Belle Ciel. Or, as we like to call it around here, C L."

Dan wiped his left hand over his face. "As I recall, it's *le ciel*, which would make it *Le Beau Ciel*."

"Yes, but that doesn't rhyme in English. Where are your priorities, man? Anyway, we have a date in that building tonight." She glanced at him sideways. "Unless you're losing your nerve?"

Danny took a breath. "So, you say this gig pays well?" He wiggled his new fingers at her.

"How long did it take you to save up for that arm?"

"*That* good?" He gave a small laugh. "For money that good, I got all the nerve in the world."

Vic gazed at his arm for a moment. "You may not realize how true that is. Yet." She turned her attention back to the monitor and pointed the remote at it again. The image vanished and was replaced by the word *loading....*

"This is intercepted security surveillance from a special area on the ninety-first floor, and the only reason I'm not going to tell you how I came by it is because detailing all the connections between me and it would take most of the night. Well, I'm also never supposed to say some of the names out loud, too, but you knew that, right? Anyway, just watch this."

The image on the monitor faded in slowly, and it seemed to be a plain old cam-shot of an office anteroom, the sort you might sit in while waiting for your appointment with the important personage in the inner office, as expensively furnished as you'd expect in a building like that. But not quite: it lacked not only a receptionist's desk but the customary multi-screen wall showing all of Ciel's channels of entertainment, edutainment, documentary, docu-dramas, sports, sports entertainment, news, and cooking (it was said one of the higher-ups in the organization had fixated on old footage of someone named Julia Child).

What it did have was ... something else.

After a while, Danny realized he had moved from the couch to the floor directly in front of the monitor and he was probably blocking Vic's view. But Vic didn't seem to mind—at least she hadn't said anything—and it was important that he keep watching closely and try to understand what he was seeing. It kept shifting, the way certain things sensitive to changes in light and air will do, but he was sure he could understand if he had just a few seconds more.

Abruptly, the screen went dark.

"Hey!" he yelled and turned to look at Vic.

"Not me," she said, putting both hands up to show she hadn't touched the remote. "The transmission cut off. It has to every so often—otherwise the security cam'll register the presence of an extra and very unauthorized eye."

"Oh." He glanced back at the dark screen and then went back to sit on the couch next to Vic, feeling sad and deflated. "How long—how long did we get to watch?"

"Five minutes," Vic said.

Danny laughed incredulously. "That's a joke, right?"

"Feels more like half an hour?"

"Or even longer."

Vic smiled. "So tell me—what were you watching?"

Danny thought carefully, tapping an index finger against his lower lip. The new index finger.

"Try not to think *too* long about it," Vic added. When he still didn't answer, she went upside his head, just hard enough to rouse him. "Quick—what did you see?"

The answer burst out of him almost against his will. "I saw four little girls about nine years old. They were building something in the middle of the floor!" He looked at Vic, startled. "No, that's wrong. That's not what I saw. I saw—"

Vic put up a hand. "You saw what we're going to go and get tonight. Never mind what it looks like. We don't have to describe it. We just have to get it."

"But—"

"We know where it is, and we know what room it's in. And you know just as well as I do that we'll know it when we see it. No matter what we see when we get there."

"Yes, but—"

"But what, Danny?" Vic sat forward and looked into his face. "What's on your mind—stealing's wrong? You're afraid of getting rich? You want to get rich but you fear Ciel more?"

He fumbled for a few moments. "You *know* what the problem is. You saw that screen. Aren't you even a little bit—well, *freaked out*?"

Vic sat back. "I was, yes. I'm sorry, Danny, I've had a lot more time to get used to the idea of it. Several days, if you want to know the truth, while you were off having

Sibelius fit your arm. I've gone from freaked out to accepting it. Maybe I'm asking too much of you to get used to it in such a short period of time."

Danny put his head in his hands, registering absently that he really liked the feeling when he did that. "I'll try, Vic, I really will. I just—this is like, I don't know, dreaming or something. If you can't describe it, can you at least tell me what it *is*?"

Vic took a long slow breath. "Software." Pause. "Maybe. Or aliens. Alien software. Aliens turned *into* software. People turned into software by aliens. The bastard offspring of aliens and people, turned into software. A little something Ciel's resident engineers whipped up while they were on drugs. Or while they *weren't* on drugs. The ghost of Christmas past. The Second Coming."

"Well, that really narrows it down."

"In any case, I'm not as concerned with what it is so much as I am with what Ciel is going to do with it."

Danny opened his mouth to say something and then couldn't speak at all.

"Right," Vic said, smiling grimly. "That was *my* reaction." She sat all the way back on the couch and grabbed one of the throw pillows, hugging it to herself in comfort mode. "Imagine what it would mean for a telecommunications empire like Ciel to have something that would make you watch any and all of their channels the way you were just watching that surveillance."

He waited for the wave of nausea sweeping through him to subside. "We don't know that they're going to use whatever that is for *that* reason—" He cut off again. "Yeah, okay. The question is actually, how stupid am I?"

"Naïve," Vic corrected him. "Big difference. Naïveté is curable. Stupid is forever. No global corporation should ever, ever, ever have access to anything with that kind of—of—like that. And if there *were* one that should, it sure wouldn't be Ciel. There's a limit to how much power any company should have. And anyone who knows about a potential for abuse of what could be unlimited power, or something just as good, and does nothing is just as culpable as anyone who perpetrates it. And you just have to know when you have to do something. And ..."

Danny's voice was quiet. "And you've got a buyer."

"Well, that *is* how I found out about it in the first place," Vic said reasonably.

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The code Jeremy had written for her, Vic explained as they drove over to the Ciel building in an all-purpose white van borrowed for the evening, was a passkey-cum-security clearance—i.e., it would decrypt locks and order security programs to validate their identification.

"That sounds almost too good to be true," Danny said, looking at her skeptically.

"It almost is," Vic said, "in that it's good for tonight only, between the hours of eight-thirty P.M. and midnight, give or take fifteen minutes. And it's almost nine-thirty now, so we've lost an hour. Not that it could really be helped."

"Why the time limit?" he asked her.

"Shifting security codes. The program works on data from a tap on whatever system it is you want to breach. It makes a model of the system and plays statistics off against chaos. The result gives the program enough latitude to guess how to give the system only stuff it wants to see. So to speak. If you don't understand that, don't ask me to explain it. At least, not until tomorrow night, when I'll have more time. Anyway, there's only about three and a half hours' worth of room on the disc for that kind of data in the necessary amounts. So it's work smooth, work fast, and keep an eye on the time."

"And then spend the rest our lives on the run," Danny said with mock joyfulness as they stopped at a red light.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, getting in and out of there is no problem, I guess, but after we leave, all they have to do is run a matching program on our faces from their surveillance footage, track us down, and crush us like bugs."

"O ye of little imagination," Vic said, laughing. It was starting to rain and she put on the windshield wipers. The resulting smears completely obscured their view of the street. "Now, see what happens when you put the wipers on too soon?"

"So I've been told," Danny said. "By you, about a million times."

"It has to do with conditions being wrong. Or right, depending on your point of view. This is the sort of thing you can create on, say, a digital level. Like, if you can somehow persuade a cam the conditions are wrong for the current settings. Like, say, telling it the ambient light is ten times brighter than it is. The resulting under-exposure leaves you with a screen you can't see anything on." Vic grinned at him.

"Until you clear it." She pressed the washer button and nothing happened.  
"Dammit."

"I guess you can't forget the time limit," Danny said. "Like, you only get so many years before the available washer fluid evaporates and you have to refill."

She gave him a look. "And sometimes you end up calling on a higher power for help." She stuck her head out her window and looked up at the sky. "Hey, a little help here? I'd appreciate it." She had just pulled her head back in, ready to explain that higher powers had better things to do, when the clouds opened and rain gushed down in what Danny's momma would have called a *genu-wine frog-strangler*.

The two of them sat stunned as the rain drummed on the hood, sheeted down the windshield, and turned the gutters into small, turbulent rivers. Danny reached over and flipped the wipers back on; Vic made no objection, although normally even minor trespasses into driver-space, as she called it, were dealt with harshly. "Now, *that*," he said, "is one *mother* of a coincidence."

Vic turned to look at him, her gaze flicking to his arm. "Certain scientists believe there's no such thing as a coincidence."

He gave a small laugh. "Yeah, well, they're in labs all the time, what would they know?"

Now she looked pointedly at his arm.

"Oh, come on," he said. "You don't think that was some kind of quantum ..." He searched for a word. "Phenomenon."

She didn't answer and he felt peeved, as if he were being forced to make a promise he already knew he couldn't keep.

"Vic, if I did that, I didn't know it, and I don't know how to do it again. The light's green."

She put the van in gear.

Getting into the Ciel building went so easily that Danny felt a little bit spooked. Vic drove past the service entrance with its pair of security guards sitting in the observation deck—twins, for all Danny could see of them—and pulled the van directly into the delivery lot, stopping at an automated gate-barrier. The ten-second wait felt more like ten minutes to Danny, who tried not to fidget. Vic was amused. "Security in this area is all automated," she told him. "It's like the tollbooths that



read your paid-up tax sticker. Except this system is reading the disc you got from Jeremy."

"I don't know," he said, looking back at the observation deck on the other side of the enormous parking lot. He couldn't tell if the guards were paying any attention to the van or not. "Seems like pretty flimsy security."

"When you know how to get around it, yes, it is," Vic said, chuckling. The gate opened and she drove through, heading for the loading docks. "The trick is knowing the right stuff at the right time. This area isn't *a/ways* automated, just at night. And it isn't automated *every* night."

"How long have you been planning this?" Danny asked her. "I thought you said you found out while I was getting my arm."

"Oh, I had all this information in reserve when the, uh, opportunity came up," she said, turning the van around and backing it carefully into an unoccupied space between two other, slightly larger vans. Just as she cut the motor, the vans on either side flashed their lights for a split second, making Danny jump.

"Settle, settle," Vic said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "No one's coming, it's just an intranet security check among vehicles."

"A *what?*"

"It's their fool-proof backup security system," Vic told him, patting his chest.

"Breathe slowly, I need you cool and collected. When a strange vehicle parks next to an authorized vehicle in a secure area, the authorized vehicle checks the security clearance of the strange vehicle. In other words, those vans just asked our van for the password, and our van gave it to them."

"Thanks to Jeremy's disc."

"Got it in one."

"But now we're about to take Jeremy's disc inside with us, aren't we? What if they ask again?"

"If they ask again, the information they got from Jeremy's disc will tell them they already got the right answer."

Danny sighed, feeling his heartbeat begin to slow down to a more normal rate. The rain had let up some but it was still coming down hard enough to be more than a mere shower.

"I know, it's weird," Vic said. "Welcome to the world of big business."

They slipped out of the van and Vic led him to the freight elevator at the end of the dock. She waved a white plastic card at the call-plate and the elevator came to life, the doors opening from the middle but up and down rather than sideways, which Danny thought made it look too much like an open mouth.

"Now what?" he whispered to Vic as the doors closed. Definitely too much like a mouth.

"Now the elevator is delivering what our nice code told it is crates of really lousy instant coffee for the vending machines," Vic told him. "And you don't have to whisper unless it makes you feel more secure, because this thing has no ears. Ergo, no voice prints."

"Okay," Danny said, still keeping his voice low. "So, what, this thing actually goes to the ninety-first floor?"

"No, it goes to the twentieth floor, where edible consumables are checked in. We tell it to wait until someone comes to unload the really lousy instant coffee."

"Which won't happen."

"You're a quick study, Dan, and don't let anyone tell you different. From the twentieth floor storage area, we simply take the elevator to the ninety-first floor and, as my Great-Aunt Stella used to say, *viola*."

"Won't the elevator activity attract somebody's attention?"

"Maybe, but when they see it's just lubing itself, they'll lose interest." The freight elevator came to a halt and the door-jaws opened on an empty, dark room, lit only by the exit sign over the door. "You got to keep the elevator mechanisms properly lubed, or the best computer control system in the world won't make a bit of difference, especially in buildings this tall."

"I never heard of that before," Danny said, a little suspiciously as they went silently to the exit door.

"When did you ever need to know it?" She put a finger to his lips and then opened the door a crack.

There was a bank of elevators directly opposite. Vic waited for a moment, holding the plastic card out in front of herself before moving to the elevators, pulling Danny after her by his new hand. "That tells the surveillance cams the light exposure isn't right here, readjust."

"But won't they notice *that* down in security?"

"They don't have a single screen for each cam—the screens switch between several cams. Every time the screen tries to switch to a cam our code has fooled with, the cam will tell it to go away, it's readjusting. When someone in security finally notices that they haven't seen anything from one of the affected cams for a while—if they notice—they'll just figure it's a software glitch." An elevator arrived without chiming and opened its doors for them. The inside was nicer than Danny's apartment. "Now can we just get the job done and I'll answer your questions later?"

She pressed for the thirty-fifth floor, the thirty-ninth, the sixty-third, the seventy-seventh, and the ninety-first.

"If I know at least a little of how things work, I'm not as likely to screw up," Danny said.

Vic gave him an affectionate sock on the new arm. "You won't screw up, Dan-man."

As the elevator ascended, Danny decided he could live with Dan-man as a nickname a whole lot more happily than he had with Danny-boy.

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The passage leading from the elevator bank to the rest of the ninety-first floor had been blocked off with a new entry portal, a chamber designed to let in only one or two people at a time, accessible within a transparent wall that, the warning sign said, was electrified.

Vic stopped short. Danny felt his stomach attempt to drop ninety-one floors without him.

"Your piggy-back surveillance cam never picked this up?" he guessed after a long moment.

"This is new," she said slowly. "It wasn't here before. Hell, it wasn't even here this morning."

"Maybe they had a feeling company might drop in?"

Vic muttered something about gently, with a chainsaw. Then she looked at Danny. "Did you happen to bring the manual for that thing?" she asked.

Danny shrugged his shoulder and showed her the words beginning to scroll on his forearm. Vic seized his arm and put it under the slightly brighter light above the elevator bank.

"Does this thing have hyperlinks or go-tos, or do you have to read all the way through it every time?" she asked him.

He snapped his fingers and produced the table of contents. "Touch your subject of interest. Just like your screen."

"Show-off." She poked his arm.

"Ow. I said touch, not impale."

"What should I look for, information on disarming booby traps or electrified fences or what?"

"I don't know, this is my first combat situation."

"Sarcasm isn't what we need here."

"I'm serious, I don't know what to look for. Espionage? Is there a section on that?"

Vic surprised him by grabbing his head and kissing him. "I take it back what I said about you being a quick study." She tapped his arm once, and then again, and then was silent for a long time as she studied the words on his arm, occasionally scrolling back and re-reading.

Danny sighed. "What time is it?"

"Only ten-fifteen. Not *too* late, but thanks for the reminder." She looked into his face with concern. "What have you tried to do with this thing? Other than normal movements and actions, I mean."

"I beat you at arm wrestling. Besides that—well, I kinda overdid the secret handshake with Rakishi. Then Jeremy tried to get me to unleash a death ray or something on his paper shredder, but nothing happened."

"Because he hadn't read the instructions," Vic said. "And they always accuse women of that one. Now, what we have to—"

Danny snatched his arm away from her and put it behind his back. "Are you telling me I really *do* have a death ray in my arm?"

"No, no, not a death ray. Don't panic." Vic tried to reach around him and grab his arm but he stepped away from her. "I swear, it's not going to kill anyone."

"Tell me what it *is* going to do," he demanded, keeping his arm behind himself.

"Well, that's kinda hard without being able to look at the instructions—"

"Try."

Vic took a breath. "You have a ... well, it's like a quantum state generator. You can induce certain states in things."

"What kind?"

"You can make things insubstantial."

Danny looked at her incredulously. "How?"

She stuck her fists on her hips. "*Read the freaking manual.*"

Humiliated, he slowly moved his arm around to his front and looked at it under the light. Vic waited, glancing at her watch several times.

"This seems pretty straightforward," he said after a while. "Almost *too* simple."

Vic nodded. "Try to remember that arm was meant for grunts who would see action. The documentation had to be easy to read and understand."

"Yeah, but they'd have received a certain amount of training beforehand." He let out a breath. "But okay, I'll give it a try."

"Good boy, Danny. There's just one thing."

"What?"

"If—when you turn that barrier insubstantial, all the alarms are going to go off up here."

He started to wipe his right hand over his face and then used his left instead.

"Because the disc didn't cover this eventuality."

"Right. I've got no code that's going to camouflage a security device ceasing to exist on this plane. Or dimension, or something." She paused. "Do you want to quit?"

"Will your disc still work on the stuff it's already worked on? I mean, to cover our escape?"

She nodded. "It should. Until midnight."

"Until midnight," he echoed. "Well, it's not getting any earlier, and I hate to go all the way up to the ninety-first floor of any building and have it all be for nothing. Do you know the layout of the floor?"

"This is it. There's only one room, and you saw it on the surveillance cam at my place. It's halfway down the hall behind that barrier, on the inside, not an outside wall."

"How fast can you get to the room and get ... whatever that is in there? And more important, will it go with you?"

"I can do it fast enough that we'll be on our way down in the elevator before they can get one themselves. We can go out the way we came in, but the van's trashed. They'd trace us."

"We can drive the van to the edge of the parking lot and jump out and run," Danny said. "Now, get behind me, and hang onto my waist. I don't know how this will feel, or if there'll be a recoil or what, so I need you to steady me."

Vic obeyed. Danny stretched his arm out toward the barrier, cradling his elbow in his other hand, and concentrated on feeling power begin to build up at his shoulder and move through his arm. He expected to feel the arm grow warm or heavy; instead, there was a pleasantly cool, bubbly sensation, as if his arm were being filled up with champagne. Vic's arms tightened around his waist, as if she could feel something happening to him.

His arm began to glow; in a moment it was too bright to look at and he closed his eyes just as there was an eruption of even brighter light. He'd expected to feel power flying out from his hand, but instead, it felt more like the power was flying into him. He braced himself for the scream of alarms but nothing happened.

"Uh ... could they be silent alarms?" he asked Vic, his eyes still closed. Vic's arms slipped from around his waist as she straightened up.

"Danny," she said in a strange voice. "Open your eyes."

He did so and found that the barrier had not disappeared at all. Instead, they were now on the other side of it. "Oh, *God*," he moaned. "This is worse than the old stories about Windows 2000."

"No, it's okay, it worked *better* than we wanted it to. Instead of making the barrier insubstantial, you made *us* insubstantial." Vic shook his left arm, the normal one. "And—pay attention, Danny—we *still are*."

He looked at his hands and then at her. She was right; he could see through them to the hallway, the walls and floor. "Oh, *God*," he moaned again, "I'm going to have hysterics here—"

She slapped him sharply across the face.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Don't *do* that to someone who's—" He stopped, and grabbed her hand, feeling it.

"We're not insubstantial to each other because we're both in the same state. The same quantum state, I guess. And we can move relative to the building, any way we want. So let's just walk on air over to that room, waft through the door like ghosts and see how whatever's in that room looks to us from here." She jerked her head toward the hallway. "Sorry about the slap. I had to get your attention back fast. Let's go."

Walking felt more like skating, or skiing. Maybe it was supposed to be sort of pleasant but he didn't much care for it. There was a greasy sensation to it that gave him what his momma would have called the willies.

Going through the door, however, was unremarkable. As he and Vic stepped into it, it was just *gone*, but when he looked behind, it was still there, still closed and presumably locked.

The room was empty. No, not quite. Rakishi was sitting in one of the leather chairs. Danny's mouth dropped. Jeremy's voice suddenly came to him: *You shouldn't take it personally. Only blowfish take it personally.*

He blinked, and it was Jeremy sitting there, chopsticks in one hand, a white carton in the other.

He sneaked a quick glance at Vic. "What do you see?" he whispered.

She gave his hand a squeeze. "It's okay, it's just the guy who paid me to do this job."

"*Jeremy* paid you to do this? Or *Rakishi*?"

She looked at him and he saw real fear in her for the first time. "You see Jeremy and Rakishi?"

"And you see your buyer." Pause. "What do you see now?"

"You look. I'm afraid to."

Danny forced himself to turn his head. Now there was nothing but a strange pucker in the air, as if the room were only an image on a touch-screen that was being twisted from inside. "I'm not sure what to do here. Maybe we should just run like hell."

His arm vibrated suddenly. He lifted his hand and looked at it.

"What?"

"I think I've got a call coming in."

"At least it doesn't play one of those really annoying Vivaldi passages."

Danny looked at Vic again; she stared back. They were both on the thin edge of hysteria, he realized.

"I think it's—they're—trying to communicate. It's intelligent—at least, intelligent enough to follow us out if it wants to leave. If it wants to go with us, it will." He gave a short, wild laugh. "Listen to me, I'm theorizing about something and I don't even know what it is!"

He pulled Vic to him roughly and held on tight while he concentrated on his arm again. This time the flash happened almost instantly, without his having even to straighten it out.

Right away, he knew they were substantial again—the carpet almost felt as if it were pressing against his shoes, and he was conscious of a processed-air smell in the room. Vic pushed away from him, shaking her head.

"Thank you."

For a moment, Danny thought Vic had spoken. Then he realized it was one of the four little girls standing in front of him. They were about nine years old, and Danny saw a new detail he had somehow missed when he'd first seen them on Vic's video screen.

All four had a small stump with four small fingers where the right arm should have been.

Vic touched his shoulder and he jumped.

"Sorry," she said. "I think we're both seeing the four girls now."

"They only have one arm," Danny said. She nodded and he felt himself relax.

"*Oh, Jesus!*" Vic yelled suddenly and Danny almost jumped out of his skin.



"*What?*" he screamed at her before he could think better of it.

For answer, she showed him her watch. The time was 11:48. His jaw dropped.

"Quantum," she said. "Where and when get slippery. When we stopped taking up space, we took up more time instead."

Danny felt himself start to tremble. He looked at the girls, who were watching calmly as the two of them went to pieces. "Do you want to leave?" he asked them.

They stepped forward suddenly and grabbed his new arm. The communication was instantaneous, lasting forever and barely a moment, and he understood all of it only for as long as it was occurring. When it was done, he was left only with scraps and parts of images. But it was enough. He understood that he wasn't seeing four nine-year-old girls, or anyone else he or Vic knew or didn't know. He didn't understand exactly what kind of life-form it was any more than a hive mind would have understood the concept of individuals, but he did know that it was immature and maimed or damaged in some way, and would remain so as long as it was trapped here.

"Come on," he said, and almost tried to walk through the door before he remembered.

They were halfway up the five flights of fire stairs to the roof when the alarms went off. The racket was almost bad enough to stun. He tried to take the stairs even faster. The little girls had no problem keeping up—sometimes some of them were in front of him—and Vic was so hopped up on adrenaline he stopped taking time to look back and make sure she was okay.

He was afraid that the door to the roof might be locked, and it was, but only on his side, and only with a plain old uncomplicated bolt. He slammed the door open and hurried everyone out. He could hear helicopters approaching, searchlights sweeping the darkness. In the distance, sirens started up, then faded under the swelling noise of propellers.

He turned to the girls. "Okay, you're out. Fly away. Or something."

Vic looked at him as if he were crazy.

"They couldn't—*move* is the only way I can put it—in an enclosed space. But out here—" He gestured at the night sky. The rain had stopped and the clouds were blowing away. He turned back to the girls and was about to say something else when they all lunged at him again and grabbed his arm.

"No!" he screamed, and the light was so bright, he could feel it press against his face and his body. This time, it was as if the power was sucked out of him rather than building up by itself and it was so much stronger this way, there was so much more of it, it seemed, more than he would ever have been able to muster up on his own, because he lacked the know-how and the experience.

The sensation of the roof pressing against his feet vanished. His mind became a silent howl of protest. Of course they had to take him along—he should have realized that from the way it had worked with Vic. Except he was pretty sure that while they had managed to survive here, he wouldn't do nearly as well in their world.

*Don't take it personally, said Jeremy's voice in his mind. The world doesn't know you exist. As an epitaph, it sucked.*

He was suddenly flailing in some kind of turbulence before he fell a short distance and landed on his back. His head rolled over to the right and he saw his arm was gone. The small, wormlike fingers on his stump twitched. He closed his eyes again. Well, that was slightly better than dying in a hostile dimension. If all they needed was the arm, he could thank them for not sacrificing his life to save their own. Now he could get in a lot more practice at trying not to take the world personally.

Vic pounced on him and grabbed his arm. His *right* arm. He opened his eyes and saw that, yes, it was there. If it had been gone before, it was back now. He raised his right hand and stared at it stupidly. All right, then; not only was he through taking the world personally, he was done trying to understand it.

"Come on!" Vic screamed over the roar of the helicopters and pulled him to his feet. The wind was whipping at them, battering them as one of the helicopters turned and hovered almost directly over them, shining searchlights down on them. Talking was impossible. Danny pushed her behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist again. She understood and held on tight while he stretched out his arm and concentrated on feeling the power begin to build in his shoulder.

He was still concentrating, with Vic clinging to his waist, when building security made it up to the roof and took them.

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By dawn it was all over.

Danny spent the night locked in a windowless storeroom among several crates of very lousy instant vending machine coffee. He drifted in and out of sleep, dreaming about nine-year-old girls and helicopters and faceless people in uniforms cuffing his hands behind his back. Sometimes he dreamed that he felt the power building up in his shoulder again but he always woke up just before the flash of light and knew that was one sensation he wasn't ever going to feel again. Not that he was complaining, even to himself. At least they'd left him the arm, and it still worked just fine as a plain old arm. So that was all right.

Unless, of course, Ciel decided to cut it off him as compensation.

He dreamed about that, too, faceless people in uniforms taking him to a white room where Dr. Sibelius was waiting with an apologetic look on her wrinkled face. *Dear boy, I am sorry about this, but they say I've got to do it, they want that arm.*

Then the door opened and he found himself blinking up at Vic. There was a uniform standing behind her.

"So, would you like to go home?"

He swallowed. "I've got to go to the bathroom."

"Hold it till my place," she said, smiling artificially as she leaned down to help him up. "Don't ask for any favors, don't even ask for so much as someone's pardon if you burp. And don't burp, either." She marched him along beside her, not hurrying but still moving fast in spite of his stiff clumsiness. He didn't actually wake up until she pushed him into the back of a yellow cab in a parking garage. She got in next to him and slammed the door. The cab started off, the driver apparently already knowing the destination.

Danny started to say something and she put her hand over his mouth and her own. By the time they got back to Trader Vic's in the thin morning light, he thought he was going to burst, in several different ways.

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"The arm, I take it, is done. Except as an arm." She put a mug of coffee in front of him on the coffee table. He sat on the edge of the couch, wanting more than anything just to stretch out and fall into a coma for several hours.

Danny shrugged. "Could be worse. I thought it was. First I thought they, or it, or whatever that was, I thought they were taking me with them. Then I thought they

took the arm. But I guess they just needed the quantum generator. Considerate of them." He paused with the mug halfway to his mouth. "No, actually, it was probably just a matter of being practical. What they didn't need, they left behind."

Vic raised her eyebrows over her own cup of coffee. "Maybe they *were* being considerate."

"Maybe. But I promised myself not to take everything so personally." He sipped the coffee. It was incredibly good. "Okay. Now, tell me, before I strain myself with curiosity."

"I got us out of it the way I get anything. I'm Trader Vic. I traded."

"What?" he asked.

"Jeremy's code."

"But it expired."

"That doesn't mean you can't take it apart and see how it *did* work. That's what we were doing most of the night. Or rather, a couple of their R&D team were dissecting it and reconstructing it while I sat by and offered suggestions. When they were satisfied that they really had a good piece of merchandise, they took me to see the head guy, who could be Dr. Sibelius's twin, only about thirty years older."

"And?" Danny said.

"And we made a deal. I told her you and I were just a couple of thrill-seeking, joyriding perpetual adolescents who dared each other to get all the way to the Ciel roof undetected, with this bit of pirated software from, oh, hell, I don't know where. And we didn't see anything else. We were on the ninety-first floor when we realized we might not make it, so we got out of the elevator and ran up the rest of the way. That's all we know."

"She bought that?" Danny looked pained. "If she really believes that, she's the dumbest head person in any corporation any time anywhere."

"Actually, it's what she wants most of Ciel to believe that counts. It's very important to her and a few of the other top people that the ninety-first floor room remain ... unremarkable."

"But that charged barrier—security—"

"Charged barriers are apparently pretty unremarkable in the Ciel building, at least on the upper floors where very few get to go," said Vic. "They don't tell security

what they're guarding—they just tell them to guard it. Anyone who wanted to remain an employee at Ciel didn't ask questions they didn't already know the answers to. She wasn't any too happy about the, ah, loss of the residents of the room on the ninety-first floor, but she was a lot less unhappy than she would have been had everyone else seen them. Or if we'd started talking. Not that anyone would have believed us. Nor would we have lived long enough to gain any credibility."

"What about your buyer?"

"My buyer made a small good-faith payment to demonstrate understanding that the fact no names were mentioned is a more desirable outcome as things stand."

Danny sighed with exhaustion. "So we got away with it?"

"We got away with our lives. I'll be doing some fairly heavy trading in the next few months for a new client, and I'd appreciate it if you'd help me out." She hesitated. "Actually, the client insists."

"Sure. But I'd like to sack out on your sofa first."

"Be my guest." She got up and moved away as he stretched out.

Sleep took him almost immediately. He dreamed about nine-year-old girls again, but this time they all had two normal arms. His mother was brushing their hair and calling them angels. He tried not to take it personally, but he woke feeling better than he had in years.

The End