

THE HOT-WIRED DODO

BOOK THREE OF THE WONDERLAND GAMBIT

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*To Roger and to John,
neither of whom I can truly accept as gone.
Roger, I think, would have approved of this one;
John is somewhere with Isaac, adamantly refusing with
his old colleague to believe that there is life after
death. I miss you both.*

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This is the third and probably final chapter in *The Wonderland Gambit* saga. It's been a lot of fun to write and explore, although some may be upset with me for, well, borrowing a trick at the end that you all should have expected but that, all things considered, was absolutely essential and inevitable. Don't worry. Next time I have this terrific new original ending featuring a great white whale . . .

During the course of writing *The Wonderland Gambit* saga, I've lost two very close friends who kind of remained in my mind while I completed this book. Roger Zelazny was very close; I helped him move to Baltimore in the early sixties, and he was active in the Baltimore Science Fiction Society and was a cofounder and hidden financier of early Balticons. We'd have dinner often, or just talk on the phone for long periods, and he often called when stalled or unhappy with something and used me as a sounding board. I may not have my own Hugo, but I'll have you know that the little scene in *Lord of Light* in which the peasants discover their first toilet and try to figure out what it's for is mostly me.

We weren't as close after he moved to Santa Fe, but we still kept in touch and got together occasionally at conventions to marvel over how things had gone and occasionally plot new mischief. The last time I saw him, about nine months before he died, he seemed the happiest he'd been since the old Baltimore days. For the past decade, he was just far enough away physically but still so close in spirit that there's an emotional part of me that knows he's still just out in New Mexico someplace.

John Brunner was also a friend, and a good one. We met originally at conventions, and somehow tended to wind up trading stories-sometimes just the two of us, sometimes with a huge entourage-in a hotel pub or local bar for hours on end. Politically, John was far to the left of my militant centrism, but there was something there between us that was *simpatico*. I was toastmaster at the World SF Convention where

John was guest of honor.

He looked good at Glasgow last August Bank Holiday week. I saw him on Wednesday across the hall, and he saw me, waved, and called my name. I shouted back that we'd rendezvous as usual sometime before the last day of the con. Well, he headed out to dinner and returned with contract offers and a new resurgence in his career, and then he went around and partied all night and we didn't connect. But, what the heck, the con was just beginning.

Timing, John! It's all in the timing! It's one thing to go out at a Worldcon on the upswing of a career that had been down, but on *Monday*, John, not on Thursday morning.

I thought of them when I wrote *The Hot-Wired Dodo*, and there's certainly a good deal of Roger in segments here, and a little bit of Brunner as well, particularly in the moral dilemmas faced by some of the characters and the arguments they make.

I just wanted you to know that they were good people, and that I see them sitting around with Phil Dick and many others now gone and raising glasses to the future, never suspecting they're in a brand-new virtual world.

John wouldn't believe it anyway.

Jack L. Chalker

I WAITING FOR THE END OF THE UNIVERSE

When you're waiting around for the end of the world and you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you've got an immortal soul, you tend to worry less about being good and lean a little more to the bad.

Not that this helped me much, but it did help a little. I mean, I looked like a woman, but I had no reproductive plumbing, no particular sexual urges or desires, and no hair, either, so what the hell. I was more than ready for a new incarnation, but I didn't have any say in when the button would be pressed, and we would have precious little warning when it was. When months went by, though, you did tend to get more than a little bored, particularly when stuck in the middle of nowhere. The most positive thing I'd accomplished since coming to the backup area in central Washington was that I'd managed to mostly break myself of the Brand Box-induced habit of referring to myself in the plural.

I was also "overwhelmed" with depression, but stuck in a body that was constructed in one of Al Stark's little worlds, I really didn't have much capacity for emotion. I was shaped female, but a sexual neuter. I was hairless, and needed a wig just to look presentable. I didn't even have much in the way of taste or smell; it hadn't been necessary in that giant "we're all the same" supermall. I had memories, but it was hard to conjure up physical feelings and emotions when reliving them. So, I used chemicals to feel an approximation of pleasure-and not even all those worked. I was also hampered in doing a lot of the things I would have liked to because we all knew that there wouldn't be much warning when Lee or whoever was now running the institute finally took it through to the next plane.

I certainly understood the setup all too well, having survived two such moves, but I found myself eager to move on from this reality, which had been the worst in several key areas, and impatient that I had to depend on somebody else, somebody I hated. That emotion I seemed to have no problems with.

Thinking through the long term was also more in my line, too, particularly because those thoughts were uncolored by some of the usual human feelings. I had to wonder if in fact we who thought of ourselves as "real" and the rest of the universes as filled with ghosts, or "spooks," created by computer in some vast virtual reality were in fact any more real than the spooks were. Maybe we were even less so-nobody had ever been able to go backward and find out if the rest of the old universe was still there.

Suppose *we* were the electronic creations, going through a series of parallel realities? Suppose the great missing genius, Matthew Brand, almost our god figure in all this, had in fact found the gateway to infinite numbers of parallel universes, each as real as the one in which he'd been born? It wasn't out of the question or more Lewis Carroll-type nonsense; the far-out edges of New Physics postulated parallel universes anyway, and used them to explain a lot of anomalies in "reality." Okay, so suppose that was it. Suppose all the rest were real and *we* were the creatures of fantasy created by Brand. It could be that *we* were the Mad Hatters and March Hares and Mock Turtles, Duchesses and Caterpillars, and those who seemed so "normal" really were just that. Instead of *me* as Alice, I was really the Cheshire Cat, fading in and out of realities, but alien to normality.

It was possible.

That, damn it, was the trouble. *Anything* was possible.

What in hell had any of us learned after all these worlds, all these lives, all these existences? Callousness and cruelty? Well, I guess we brought that with us. Lusts for power and back-and-forth combat? Ditto.

Damn it, after all this time, at least some of us must have learned something! Surely it couldn't have been entirely wasted!

Those aliens and their classic little flying saucer, for example. Who were they? Where had they come from?

"The Boojums showed up in a world where we literally got invaded by another planet," Walt reminisced. "No, not them- at least not right off. Even nastier things. Kind of like *War of the Worlds* slimeballs. The Boojums were from someplace else entirely doing some kind of research work and they got blamed for what the 'Slugs From Beyond' were doing. I remember Matt took a chance on them, I think after seeing them battle one of the slug ships, and tried contacting them. Didn't take, until the slugs knocked one of their saucers out of the sky almost on top of us. Matt saved 'em, and, ever since, they've been like high-tech hunting dogs, loyal to a fault and with no place to go."

"But they shouldn't have translated to the next universe," I pointed out. "Nobody else did, except our people."

Walt nodded. "Surprised hell out of us, too. Everybody except Matt, that is. As you've probably noticed, they haven't got a spoken language, and old paranoid AI wanted to blow 'em away and they knew it. Matt got to them, somehow, through the VR interfaces and the Brand Box. I just can't be positive, but I'm pretty damned sure they had no idea of all this until he and they connected. They made a lot of the improvements, in fact-the Brand Box we know today was developed from the early work between Matt and them using their interface with the saucer. That's how Cynthia, or anybody, really, can fly the thing. You put on the head mount and you *are* the ship. It's that easy. Of course, I get the very distinct idea that the little guys and the ship are connected automatically, like the way you had a head mount inside your head. They let us fool with it, but we always know they're there. They're always connected-to the ship and to each other. The principle of the synergy between alien and ship is the same that went into the final Brand Boxes. The material, however, that makes up the core of the boxes also came from the spare parts supply on the alien ship, which is why we can't build any more of them."

That explained that. "But he had the principle before this, I gather, and the meeting with these beings just allowed him to perfect it?"

Walt nodded again. "If you call this perfected, I guess you can say that. What we didn't figure on was that Matt had some concepts and ideas *these* little aliens didn't know. So, in exchange for the manufacture of the existing Brand Boxes that we interfaced to the life-support pods-mostly in the Command Center but also in some backup areas like this-*they* took a lot of the concepts and math from Matt's computers and repaired and rebuilt their ship. When we punched through to the next level, they all got in the ship, and, although most of us didn't know it at the time, they punched through right with us, using the ship as an alternate command center and its life support as their version of the pods."

"Huh? How come you didn't know it at the time?"

He shrugged. "Well, they shifted under cover. They don't tell us much so we all called 'em Boojums, like the Lewis Carroll stuff Matt was so fond of. They don't seem to mind. I doubt if they have names in our sense, either individually or collectively. Matt shifted them here, and sent me and Tanaka up to help 'em out. Cynthia came along for ... well, long story of no consequence. Anyway, the slugs found the Mojave Command Center and forced a punch; we couldn't get down there and thought we were done for. Dan

tried to make it anyway and got creamed, so he wound up in the reincarnation bin. Cynthia and I stayed here, and were surprised as hell when the Boojums pulled us on board and hooked us up to padded sections around the wall on the center level of the saucer. Hell, what choice did we have but to go along? I don't think the Boojums themselves knew if it would work, but they set it up for the punch, and when Matt punched through so did we. Surprised the hell out of us. Inside the ship, we didn't even do an incarnation. We just rode straight through, believe it or not. Just as we were. Pain in the ass-I was already over forty. Since then we've used the boxes; the Booj, they still punch through their way. Never changed, never got any older, and never got any fewer."

"Huh? I saw several get creamed back in Yakima a few lives back," I reminded him. "I even-well-I hit one with the car."

He nodded. "I know. You can kill 'em, burn 'em up, but come the next punch the same bunch comes out of the same saucer just the same way and in the same numbers. They probably *do* reincarnate-but if they read minds, or have some built-in connection to a kind of master Brand Box in the ship, then they're gonna get all the knowledge and memories back the moment the reincarnation happens. Must be nice. That's what Al's been trying to do, I think. Make it a certainty that his complete memory goes through even if he gets blown away as he did this time. He hasn't made it yet, though. I'm pretty sure of that, although the Brand Boxes can record enough of your old self to really get you oriented. It's never *quite* the same, though-usually a different sex for starters, then a slightly different background that makes it seem like you're a peeping Tom in somebody else's mind. I know what it's like. The memory's there, but it's never, somehow, *real*. You get the knowledge, but not the personality."

I nodded. "I know what you mean even if I can't relate to the experience. I remember at least two past lives, but they don't seem to have been *my* lives. I retain the skills and knowledge, but it's like I'm taking it from a recording, not from experience."

"Yeah, that's about it. I sometimes wonder if we *are* the same."

All this explained a lot, but not nearly enough to even start solving this.

"Walt, I think everybody's been too damned passive, particularly since you lost Brand," I told him. "Nobody's really attempting a concerted, long-term program to solve this mystery. Nobody's really looking for the way out, if there is an 'out.' Instead, you're just fighting each other, going back and forth, trying to gain a little power and advantage that's always local at best."

He shrugged. "What can we do? We don't have the Boojums' automatic restoration. When we die, we wake up ignorant. You know that. And there is no team effort from life to life, universe to universe. Everybody's too busy stabbing everybody else in the back. You can't force that kind of programming change. Matt could do some of it, a lot of it maybe, but when he vanished, so did any hope of getting out of this."

"Maybe not," I sighed. "Maybe it's time we said to hell with what should be, worked with what is, and tried to find the answers come hell or high water. Force it. Anybody who wants in, fine. Anybody who doesn't, we shut out."

"With what? The saucer and these few Brand Boxes? Not enough, and definitely not enough computing power."

"Then with the Command Center, the institute, or whatever we want to call it."

Walt gave a dry, humorless chuckle. "To use that, you'd have to take it away from Al and Lee and that crew, and I mean take it by force."

"Then that's our first objective," I responded, already thinking about how to proceed.

Walt laughed. "And what the hell do you think we've been trying to do these past several incarnations? Do you know how many of us there are on this side, not counting the Boojums? I'll tell you-seven. Seven members of the March Hare Network. Now, with you, and if Wilma comes through the next punch, nine. Rick was certainly with us this time, but we'll be back to square one with him again next go-round, and that's part of the problem. I got you into the center to give you a chance to get us inside with the main computer, but it seemed you only got partway into the system before they caught you."

I shrugged. "Look at what my alter ego was able to accomplish inside that grid, and even beyond it. What betrayed me in the end was that I'd hit a stone wall. I'm no Matthew Brand. I did a hell of a lot considering how far back in my memory I had to reach for those skills and how outside my area some of it was-not to mention the fact that I was working under the noses of people who didn't trust me. I had to play coy with everybody just to stay on the plane at all."

"Well, we've been fighting this out for a very long time," he said. "The thing is, though, I'm really beginning to wonder about the competency of the enemy we've been going after for so long."

"He's done pretty good so far."

"Has he?" Walt responded, chewing thoughtfully on his cigar. "I wonder. What has he learned? What the hell have any of them *done!* They've been in charge now for at least the last nine incarnations, maybe longer, ever since Matt vanished into that box. Al was really in charge of it, longer than that, I think, with his toadies and the ones he seduced who think they're smarter than he is. Matt was just too preoccupied to notice. We really started getting somewhere, too, until Matt was taken out. Since then-*nada*, nothing, zilch. All those power games but no real progress. Using the Brand Boxes as their sadistic toys, for playing with their old enemies like you or trying to indoctrinate others through those fake lives. Progress? Any more info on how to get out of this trap, or information on just what the hell we're caught in? Nothing."

"I'm not sure Al really cares anymore," I told him. "We had lots of talks, you know, once he had me inside the box. Talks about lives and relationships that I had no memories of at all. Playing God is Al's game. I don't think he wants much else. If you weren't keeping the heat on him, I don't even think he'd punch through to a new incarnation until we were all old and gray. Lee-Lee's a follower. He likes being around power and basking in it, but he's not the kind to make the hard decisions on its use. Rob has a lot cleaner, more innocent sort of soul but is otherwise the same type. Tanaka has real talent, and to some extent so do Cholder and one or two others, particularly when working together. McKee-she has the will, the administrative experience, and the smarts to run the place as an alternative to Al. I'm just not sure she'd be an improvement."

He nodded. "I know what you mean. My own feeling is that the best hope we have is to get the Boojums in there along with somebody competent at interfacing the system with others. That's you, mostly. A few others on our side can help with the basics, but not a one of them is equal to Tanaka in terms of programming in that medium, and nobody else but you can do that mind-to-machine interfacing. See, they didn't care much about your abilities in that direction, but we need it bad. Or don't you agree with the overall goal?"

I shrugged. "Anything's better than doing this over and over, but I'm not sure just what will happen if we manage it. We don't talk to those people, we interact with them."

"Huh? What d'ya mean?"

"Just that. We don't have conversations with them the way you and I have been speaking. Oh, I think they understand what we say, all right, at least inasmuch as it relates to their own perspective, but we have no real exchange of ideas. They're here. They help out. They hang out. But why? If they know so much from their time with Brand, why are they still stuck here with us? What are their long-term objectives? What makes them occasionally risk life and limb to help us out? In other words, there's no disputing that they're our short-term allies in the sense of righting Al and his group, but are they our long-term friends? Or are they just after this technology, the solution perhaps to their own puzzles over these principles?"

"I don't think they're any kind of long-term threat. I've been with 'em for so many years, it's impossible to count. They've fought with and for me and our people and pulled me out of a lot of jams. More important, I don't think Matt was scared of them, and he got closer than anybody. No, somehow, I just can't bring myself to worry about that."

Driving always had been something I did as much to think and get things out of my system as to actually go anywhere. I don't mean driving to the store or to the big city-just long drives to nowhere and back.

I was down in southeastern Oregon, driving through the desolate remnants of ancient volcanic fury, and I felt depressed but still irritated. Something wasn't right. I kept going around and around, though, and I

couldn't get it out of my head that I wasn't being told the whole truth.

Part of it, I guess, was Good Old Walt with the fast, pat answers. The same Good Old Walt that I'd known as a boss lifetimes ago, and as a friend as well, straight through to the core, only . . . where was the Walt that had coldly shot that kid? He was in there, somewhere, but he'd never emerged, not in front of me, anyway.

Al and Lee and the institute were one thing-they represented the devils I knew. Walt, though, and Cynthia, and Father Pete, and the rest-these were the devils I didn't know, not really. They might have been lighting Al, but they sure didn't do anything to help me or Rick until very recently. They were chummy but still, well, distant. I had this eerie, paranoid feeling that there were still lots of meetings to which I wasn't privy, and lots of things they weren't about to let me in on.

Even paranoids have enemies.

Those aliens-somehow I still couldn't trust them, either, or at least believe that they were just regular good old boys with one hell of a pickup truck. The story about them and Matt rang a bit true, but it seemed, well, simplistic. The elusive, mysterious Matthew Brand was always so, well, *convenient*. "*How're we gonna explain this?*"

"Hmmm. I dunno. How about Matt Brand went out to his garage and built this supercalifragilistic hypo-blaster..."

He was Einstein when somebody needed an Einstein, God when somebody needed a god, and he was missing, which made him too damned convenient.

After all this time, after prowling through the institute and having dialogues with Al and others there, I still didn't really know a lot about them or the institute itself. I'd pulled off some incredible stuff-or, at least my alter ego who thought she was me had-but it was the tip of the iceberg. Who were those people in the Brand Boxes? Who or what were those *presences* just below the institute? And how had Les or Al whipped up a convenient portal out of the last universe just when Wilma and I needed one? It was hard to forget Al's sheer power in that vortex, even though we had considerable power there as well. He knew and controlled more than he was supposed to in his role as the power-mad security chief.

Les did, too. A medical doctor who could conjure up a hole to the spaces between the universes. That kind of power would otherwise be attributed to Matt Brand, but Les wasn't Brand. He wasn't even a programmer, yet he'd managed to divert Al with a wooden club and open up an escape route for Wilma and me in the middle of a warehouse.

And Walt-Walt was the March Hare, all right, and his cronies were more of the opposition to Al, but who was the Caterpillar, and who had left the Dodo? We'd bumped into him in a kind of mental plane outside the virtual universe; Walt's group later took credit for it, sort of, but clearly were making up their story as

they went along without any real knowledge of what had happened except what they pulled from my memories.

For that matter, many lives ago, we'd watched Walt and Cynthia open one of those portals, too, right over the backup center, and the Boojums had been inside, off-loading supplies.

When I'd asked about that, Walt had sloughed it off as a misinterpretation of what I had seen from a distance, that they were really only off-loading from the complex below the desert floor.

It was difficult to focus with real accuracy on such distant memories, but I was pretty damned sure I'd seen what I had seen.

And then there was Wilma. I missed her terribly; she was the one real friend I had in all this who hadn't changed or lost continuity. She also had that power, that way of dropping into that bizarre shaman's plane and often dropping me in there, too. It had saved our asses more than once-but where and what was it? Was it real or some other construct? Was it, somehow, a Brand Box, or outside of the system altogether? While she knew a lot more about it than I did, I felt sure that even she saw it veiled in the terms of her beliefs, not really knowing how it fit into this entire system.

Now, thanks to Al and the institute, she was a vegetable, kept alive in one of our life-support pods, waiting for the next translation when, we hoped, we'd at least get the rest of her back. My only real hope was that somehow she'd managed to opt out, to somehow mentally drop down to the shaman's world, but I had no way of knowing if she'd managed it or even if it was possible under those conditions. I had dropped in there once or twice under stress, apparently following some subconscious pattern, but I couldn't do it voluntarily. I'd tried. I'd tried all sorts of ways, including hypnotism and meditation, and I'd failed.

One thing was for sure-wherever it was, it wasn't in the linear progression of universes we were creating as we lived and died and moved on. The same shaman's world that I'd first encountered in a half nightmare in my previous universe, I'd gone to again from this universe.

And just where did I fit into all this? Everybody seemed to want me around, but nobody seemed to want me very badly. I didn't have the same killer instincts, nor did I have Tanaka's programming brilliance, or other special skill. I was the one who hooked up the wiring so it all functioned with minimum fuss. And nobody, but nobody, either trusted me or cared to trust me with what they knew. Sure, I understood that no matter who or what they were and what powers they had, Les, Al, Walt, and the rest really didn't have a clue how to escape from Wonderland. But they knew a lot more than I'd been told. Off in the distance I could see a row of ancient volcanic cones looking like they'd been formed only a few years ago instead of thousands of years past. For some reason, that made me think of assassins and snipers. Assassins and snipers? Why?

Well, you couldn't create a new plane, a new universe to move to, until you'd zapped the person who

created *this* one. Basically, you had to figure out which one of our happy group was God and kill him, her, or it before anybody could get out alive. Okay, maybe it wasn't that easy, but it was possible. Then you had to anoint a new god to create the next plane, or universe, to which we could move, and you did that, dead or alive, by being the first one into the next level. It was the reason that AI kept so many of us in the Brand Boxes, so he could control things to some degree. You wouldn't want to kill the God Incarnate right away, even if you knew who it was. Not unless you could also be the first one through the next time. Or maybe control who that one was enough to fashion the next plane *through* that God Designate, leaving yourself in command but not in the crosshairs of either side. Maybe that's what AI was trying to do by sticking people he couldn't otherwise dominate inside the Brand Boxes.

Whatever the truth was, the one thing the evidence suggested was that both sides in this had long ago given up trying to get out and were instead just trying to tailor their own worlds.

It was a pretty fruitless task, I thought. Even if you got what you wanted, which was unlikely, then what? In the end, it was still an endless no-win video game that just happened to involve real lives and real people. I wanted *out*, period. Who knew just how long these entire lives really lasted, for one thing? Suppose we were all lying somewhere, hooked into real versions of the life-support modules, all networked together in this bizarre program, but still growing older and totally dependent on the efficiency and maintenance of the LSMs. A batch of thirty to forty dreamers, lying there, dreaming their real lives away, caught in this madness until something went wrong and they died for real.

Rich had opted to live a real life here rather than incarnate. It wouldn't help him escape in the end, but, for now, he was probably the happiest of the group. In a sense, that's what I wanted, too, only I didn't want the illusion.

Networked together. . .

Now, there was a thought. The LSMs weren't really networked together; the Brand Boxes were all independent little universes that could be monitored from outside and entered if one wished. Each Brand Box was its own tailor-made virtual environment.

Like this one . . .

It was a thought that hadn't really occurred to me before for some reason. The schematic, as limited as it was at this stage, was nonetheless clear. *X* equaled the number of people hooked into this thing-probably no more than thirty-five. Each was attached to the server running a master program, which could also run programs independently on top of this connection- the Brand Boxes, for example. Like spokes on a wheel, with people stuck in the ends. The people so connected were not directly connected to each other, but were connected through the central server.

So I was the Maddox spoke, and off of that three programs were now running as subroutines on the end of my link, of which my current incarnation was one.

It was a simple, obvious concept, but where did it lead? Was the institute, or Command Center, the server? It survived in each transition. It went through to the next plane. But it was still limited by the constraints of the master program-it couldn't move until the conditions for a new plane had been met, making it nothing more than a program itself. A different kind of program, though, which was why things could be accessed there and nowhere else.

It was a shell. Like a pretty interface on clunky old operating systems that shielded the user from having to know, see, or understand what was really doing the work. In the same way, it, and its extension shells like the backup region, were merely devices to hide what was behind it. What the Buddhists called the That Which Is Behind All That.

When Rini had tapped into the system, she'd really just tapped into the shell. She'd not been a real person in any sense, although she became one later. AI, or maybe Tanaka at AI's direction, had created her as an object on the shell rather than an object through which one could access the shell. She'd never been "human" in the sense of anyone else in this world, either we incarnations or the folks who went about their lives in ignorance of the greater forces within the plane. In a sense, the institute was a real, live, three-dimensional representation of the server desktop. We interact *through* the desktop to whoever or whatever it hides. The average person here operated according to the rules of the greater shell, the universe so created and left to run as a mathematical model. But Rini-she wasn't of the universe and she wasn't of what was hidden as we were, the two types of objects the system generally dealt with. She was instead a creation of the desktop.

No wonder she could move through its base structure, mentally and physically, and interact with whatever was connected to and through it. AI had created a monster, and that's what eventually bit him. He was lucky if Rini, or the knowledgeable part of me she carried with her, had actually understood the concept, she could have controlled the whole damned institute. It was passive, waiting for us to click on a program or routine, but Rini was a part of it that not only was not passive, but was so integrated that she didn't show up in the command procedures. She had owned the place, lock, stock, and barrel; she just hadn't known how to use it.

But would I have known? In any event, it was a new class of being, one that, once created, could be created again. I couldn't become one, nor could any of the rest of the Elect. We ourselves extended beyond the workstation desktop. Still, inside the institute's computers, somewhere, on some memory module or segment, was the data on just how they'd done it. If that routine could be found, and used judiciously, then whoever the new creation trusted, or had personality elements from, would be able to alter the entire great plane and become virtually a god.

AI had stumbled on just what he'd been seeking, only he hadn't recognized it when he had it. And the programming team, and even the head programmer, probably Dannie Tanaka, had been so intent on creating what AI wanted that they hadn't once thought about all the implications.

Me, I wasn't a genius programmer, I wasn't a key brain in this, just a mechanic, a systems integrator who

took all the stuff the smart people created and put it together into something that worked. A high-tech and somewhat abstract builder, who took disparate elements made by others and eventually came up with something that was greater than the sum of its parts. Not an architect, since I was using the parts they gave me rather than designing them myself, but an engineer who could take off-the-shelf parts and build some neat things with them.

I had the keys to the Command Center, if only I could get in and gain access long enough to put it all together. Once I had that access I would be able to strip at least one more layer away. Rini still hadn't been able to fully perceive the powerful intelligences she saw as lurking below the station, but she didn't know what she might be facing. Fear always limits vision, and she was so awed by the power she felt that she was afraid to look, afraid that, like Moses and the burning bush, if she *had* looked it could have blinded or consumed her.

The problem was, how the hell could I get Walt to take the center, and then give me unlimited access to it, without being able to explain to him just what I was doing?

That problem would have to wait, though. In spite of this very universe being the one that gave us the best chance at an opening, it had come too late.

The March Hare's beeper went off before I got to Crater Lake, and when I called they said, "Get back here as quick as you can if you want to incarnate. There was kind of a palace revolution down South, and Lee's been pretty well deposed for indecision and maybe being a little too heavy-handed with the wrong people. Rita Alvarez is now running the show, and she's ordered a packup and rigging for a punch."

"How soon?" I asked, concerned.

"It could be any time, but it'll probably take them eighteen to twenty-four hours. That's just a guess, though."

"I'm on my way."

I can't tell you how fast the drive back was. While Oregon isn't a very large state when you're traveling south to north, it's big enough, and in this world, the interstate highway system wasn't as comprehensive as it had been in the last one I remembered. Still, I got to the backup site after about six hours of steady driving, and turned down the dirt road leading into the Air Force firing range hoping that nobody had jumped the gun. Rita Alvarez had done a lot of nasty stuff to me in this life; it would be just like her to unknowingly polish me off.

Fortunately, everybody was still there, including the backup station. In fact, getting in was almost an anticlimax, since they were mostly sitting around and waiting.

The March Hare Network looked far less impressive in their human forms, and not very threatening.

There was Walt, of course, and Cynthia, Father Pete, and an older man I'd seen once before, down at the institute long ago, introduced to me as Dr. "just call me Herb" Koeder, who, it turned out, was a paleontologist. Also present was a slightly built brown-skinned woman with corn-rowed hair that I'd never seen before and who was introduced as "Mabel," but that was the only new face.

I looked at Walt. "I thought you said there were seven of you," I reminded him. "Aren't you still missing a couple?"

Walt nodded. "You've never met Doc Koril, at least on this plane. He got himself abducted by Al's boys and taken into the institute. We haven't seen or heard from him since, and I suspect he's one of the folks inside the LSMs there and most likely one of the people our Rini ran into. He's a brilliant man, a research psychiatrist, and I doubt if Al ever thought of him as a threat, let alone on our side, until he made some slip or something. At any rate, he won't be joining us until we can spring him somehow."

"And the seventh?"

"Adrian Martinez. A good-looking Latino with the heart and soul of a certified public accountant. He died in a car crash last winter. Doesn't seem to have been any funny business-he just ran into one of those bad breaks. It's quite possible that this boring piece of shit was his creation. It sort of has that Gary, Indiana, feel to it." He sighed. "So, we're still seven, counting Wilma, who's already in and set up; eight, with you. We'll see who else we can recruit. I've got Brand Box recordings of Adrian and Isaac, as well, if we can spring him sometime, and we'll certainly be looking for others to bring on board. You have any new insights while we wait?"

I decided that it would be better if I didn't discuss things too far. "Not really. Some ideas that are still coming together. What caused the big flare-up that brought me back here and has us all sitting around?"

"Well, we can monitor their general traffic from here, even if we can't do much of anything about it, and we got the word. They've gathered just about everybody left alive on their side who they want to take through, and I expect it's pretty much a done deal. I've got a fair roster, here. There are a few interesting omissions, I notice. No Lee Henreid, no Harker, Santee, Cholder, or Prine, and no Standishes, either, although I think Bernie drowned in some big storm while he was back East."

I looked over the sheet of paper he handed me. Rita Alvarez, Danielle Tanaka, Robyn Henreid-that was interesting!-Dorothy Sloan, also interesting, and Les Cohn, of course. He always seemed to be on the winning side.

"Les is our Talleyrand," Walt noted.

"Who?"

"Talleyrand. Started off as a bureaucrat under King Louis the Sixteenth. Just before the mobs pulled Louis

down, he sought out the revolutionaries and signed on with Robespierre. When Robespierre's time was up, there was Talleyrand on the side of those dragging the dictator to the guillotine. He shows up prominently as Napoleon's foreign minister, but is also the fellow who, years later, engineers the return of the old monarchy. You see what I mean? A real knack for always being on the winning side before it's clear who will win. That's Les. If the good doctor ever approaches us and wants to join, we'll know we already have won."

I stared at him. "I didn't know you knew anything about history."

He shrugged. "You pick up a lot of everything when you live as long as I have. Makes you wonder how smart I might have been if I hadn't been killed at some time in the past, doesn't it?" He grinned. "Just kidding. It gets boring as hell, you got to do something. I already did the alcohol business once, I've never been comfortable with drugs because of that experience, so, well, you do other things. You'll see, if you make it as long as I have."

"How long has it been for you, Walt? How many lives, I mean?" Al had made it through nine lives before we finally plugged him.

He shrugged. "Ten, maybe a dozen. I don't even think about it anymore. Too long, so much wasted time . . ." He began to look glassy-eyed, almost as if he regretted those lives rather than being proud of surviving them. He quickly tried to change the subject.

"You pretty clear on what will happen when the alarm comes?" he asked me.

I nodded. "I think so. We head for the LSMs, hook into the systems, and wait."

He nodded. "Understand, though, this won't be like before. The body will not survive, for one thing. For another, you won't be in Brand Box heaven-you'll be aware the whole time until the dissolve. The difference is that the Box is going to keep your memory codex with you when you slide into the rabbit hole. Everything will be like when you did it before, and I can't tell you which or what type of hole you're going to go through, or whether you'll be alone or with some of us, all of us, or even one or more of *them*. Remember, if you don't get to the dissolve, you don't incarnate. Because you'll be going through this way, you'll stay connected to the backup center here, so no matter what happens, we'll be able to locate you or you will be able to locate this place. Because of that connection, you may well be disoriented when you get into phase with the incarnation. You might not have all the background from the incarnate's life at the start, or you might not remember in detail what you do now, but it'll slowly merge. Give it time."

"Do you have *any* idea of what it'll be like? Next time, I mean? Will it be another variant of this, or what?" The only two I could really remember were pretty similar.

"Not a clue," he responded, "only I don't expect the next one to be even *close* to what we've been having. It's almost dead positive that Alice McKee-academic, tough, radical, and an anthropologist, God help us-

will set the tone, but not consciously. Not that, at least. Her subconscious will do it. Give a pattern. The computer shell will then provide all the detail flowing logically from that premise. I'm not at all looking forward to this one, if you ask me. I think she's the kind that, deep down, wants redress for past perceived grievances. I remember when Ben Sloan was the object. You wouldn't have believed he had any deep-down problems like that at all, but the world we had to survive in was one that the Black Muslims would have been proud to live in. It was mean. Changed him, too. After that one, he was almost drained, a company man. Strange. Sort of like it all came out of his system at once. I was lucky to survive that; a lot of us didn't. I'm not sure we aren't in for another like that. Brace yourself."

I stared at him, and the others all looked uncomfortable. "You really think it's going to be that bad?"

"Could be. Depends on which way you come out the other end, I think. I really wonder if some of us wouldn't be better reincarnating than going through this way, but no matter how good a recording, it's never the same as the real thing, never without losses. I-"

The air was suddenly filled with loud bells, going on and on at earsplitting volume, amplified by the concrete bunkers and metal cabinetry.

I looked at all of them, and there weren't any who didn't have fear on their faces and in their eyes. None of them wanted this, but it was go through with it or be left behind, to be reborn totally anew. Even Cynthia had been uncharacteristically silent and somewhat sullen, and not at all the confident and bossy bitch that was her trademark personality.

Still, nobody hesitated. If you did, you'd wind up not only being left behind, perhaps, but also totally deaf from all those bells.

There was a name on each LSM. I found mine and quickly stripped and entered, pulling the door shut. I heard it hiss and felt the air pressure change, and I also suddenly found myself if not quite in silence, at least well insulated from the bells.

These LSMs were far more automated than the ones used at the institute, or at least the ones I'd seen. Walt and the others had done an impressive job. The breathing mask fitted over my face fine, and there was a spongy material that expanded and form-fitted around my body, holding me firmly in place. I felt all sorts of pinpricks on various parts of my skin as small needles and IVs entered, probed, then settled into place.

Things become totally unreal, and all sound ceased except the noise of my own breathing and heartbeat.

Here we go! I thought, nervous, scared, but excited, too. If, of course, I lived to reach the dissolve once again . . .

*'Round and 'round and 'round she goes,
Where she stops, nobody knows. . .*

Sound suddenly washed over me like a great ocean wave; not loud, obnoxious, or unpleasant sounds, just *sound*. It was the sound of a hollow area, like a cave or large room with smooth walls.

The life-support module melted away, and I stood there a moment, naked, looking out at the tableau. It wasn't bright; instead, it was a great dark room the floor of which was made up of hundreds and hundreds of round colored disk-like lights glowing red and green and yellow and blue and white. They would burn steadily for a little bit; then the colors of just one block of them, perhaps six rows by six, would blink once, twice, three times, then change into a different color pattern. A short while later, a second block would do it, then a third, and so on. When all that I could see had undergone this change, the first one would do it again.

A maze, I realized instinctively. *Some kind of mathematical pattern*. But how did you determine what it was if you hadn't seen anyone or anything else run it? There had to be something more to it, something basic and perhaps even obvious.

I had hopes of seeing a Dodo or some similar creature who might give me a clue or some sort of help, but it didn't look like any were going to show.

There was nothing to do but study the changing patterns and see if there was any logical progression. Certainly the temperature was comfortable, the air dry with a faint metallic odor, so there wasn't a problem taking time that way. The only thing was, I appeared to have consumed my last food and water in this life; I either made it across and was born again, or I died in that maze and said good-bye to memory. Of course, having gone out attached to the LSM, I could get some of it back, but even my older selves present by direct memory seemed ghosts of another life, another time, growing a bit dimmer with each incarnation. The Box could feed back facts and knowledge, but not firsthand experience and wisdom; it was more like borrowing somebody else's data than recalling and using your own.

I didn't want that. I hadn't any knowledge of having done that before, but something in my subconscious said that it was better not to remember at all than to remember that way.

Every transition for the living began with a video game, it seemed. Some sort of challenge that you had to solve to move ahead. Last time it had been giant spiders in a human pinball machine; now it was a complicated version of the kids' electronic game Simon. Simple, really. Figure out the pattern and see the repeats. If you can repeat the pattern, the game would give you a longer, more complex pattern, and so on. This was a clear variation.

I watched it for what seemed like hours, and after a while I was getting pretty good at predicting things. Whoever or whatever set this up wasn't some maniacal monster; it would have been easy to make these tests very nasty. It seemed designed more to require you to at least have some sense, and desire to do it, nothing more.

Take this one. Six-by-six grid, thirty-six lights, but only five colors. Every pattern had the colors in the

same relationship to others of the same color-in other words, the reds might well be 1 A, 2C, no 3, 4B and 4D, and so on. Looked pretty random, but it repeated the same way. Each color was the same in relation to the other five in terms of positioning on the grid. Funny thing was, this left six of them that turned out to be red-green-blue-yellow-white-red each and every time. Finding the pattern was pretty tough, but you were given a fair amount of time to isolate this one combination. Once you had it, you had a kind of outline of a walkway, maybe not straight, but always present. The confirmation was that the next adjoining block continued the master pattern of the first and always linked to the six-in-a-line combo. The tricky part was that you'd have to run it during the period when it was static, after all the blocks had changed, and that period, by my count of several cycles, amounted to but one minute before it started to change again. It wasn't a long distance, but you had to see the whole pattern, run to it, and get through all in that minute; then you were hustling with little margin for error as the rest changed behind you. Not hard, but not child's play, either.

I looked around, somewhat surprised that nobody else was here. For a moment I had the horrible thought that, starting in the LSM, this wasn't a real punch-through at all, but rather just another Brand Box experience. How would I really know?

But, of course, that had been the problem from the start. The hell with it. Having now predicted five patterns in a row and finding myself growing very thirsty, I decided that the next one was it.

The pattern as path seemed obvious; I was either right or I was wrong, but there didn't seem to be any alternative interpretations, so I stepped out and walked, not ran, briskly into the sea of lights.

It was easy to get disoriented the moment you were inside, something I'd thought about, so I'd simply reduced the whole thing to a grid and began repeating the directions. 3F to 2E to 2D to 1C to 2B to 3A. Walk forward, and the next block should start the same sequence; find 3F again and you were on your way farther in. I didn't want to rush it; I felt that the two major traps here were running through-too easy to slip or miss a step-or becoming so cautious you overthought, second-guessed, and wound up with the changing pattern catching up behind you.

Don't think about the pattern behind. Keep going, keep going ...3F, 2E, 2D, 1C, 2B, 3A . . . 3F, 2 . . .

Halfway through, I got that uncertainty edge-you know, your mind goes not quite blank, but what you know as well as the back of your hand suddenly seems totally wrong somehow? Was it 1C or 2C? Keep going, keep going.

The thing had its share of surprises; noises and menacing forms waiting in the dark down various wrong turns, almost like everything lethal was prepared for you to make one wrong step-and it probably was.

I was near the end and could actually *see* the great wall of gray static, a giant television tuned to no channel at all, waiting for me, just one more row . . .

All the lights changed around me.

For a moment I stopped, panicked; then I heard all the shadows that seemed to have been lurking just out of sight start roaring, spitting, and scuttling toward my position.

The hell with this! I thought. *What the hell difference is it if it's only one row?*

Now I kicked off, running out past the lights and straight toward the wall. I heard the things behind me, whatever they were, and something brushed against my thigh, but I didn't look back, didn't stop, and I dove right into the void.

II

THE WORLD DARK ALICE MADE

I began to see why Walt and Al and even Cynthia had made it through so many times after the first one or two. The first time I could remember going through one of those mazes or puzzles, I fortunately had Wilma with me to help out and give me courage. I'm not sure either of us would have gotten through without the other. Still, here I was, past the first danger point and into the queue section; I hadn't panicked, hadn't fallen for any of the tricks, and I'd done it on my own.

I couldn't help wondering if that rabbit hole didn't always change the lights when you got to the last row. I was sure I'd run it in more than enough time; that hadn't been six minutes by any measure. All those creatures in the dark were there to divert you, scare you, make you forget your pattern or where you were, and then that last-minute free-for-all was the final trap. Nothing could really reach you if you just sprinted—but if you froze . . .

It may have been a simple enough game, but the son of a bitch who designed that one had a sadistic streak. Deep down, I hoped it wasn't some earlier version of me.

This second stage had only one trap in it, one I'd fallen into last time and was determined, if possible, not to fall into again. At least here, time didn't really seem to exist, or at least I wasn't conscious of it. I'm not even sure if the existence in the holding area was real in any sense, or just a form our minds created to make sense of a status that had no other interpretation.

It still seemed like it was a factory, and I was on a conveyor belt. Around me were all sorts of exotic shapes and unknowable, futuristic devices designed less to do something than to take as many

unnecessary steps as possible to convey you from point A to point B.

It had a pleasant feel, and you could sense other presences, other minds, like you, riding along in a pleasant, timeless fog, with only a mild awareness of place and no concerns at all. That would be the case until the last of us passed from that crappy world we'd been in to here. Then, stacked up but in the order we'd entered, we'd be processed for the new world. In the meantime, it probably gave the master computer, whatever and wherever that was, more than enough time to construct the universe of the first in line, the late Sister Alice Mary McKee, Ph.D.

I earnestly hoped we wouldn't all be nuns.

A world of cultural anthropologists wouldn't be much better, maybe worse. Her work was more about urban folks than South Pacific aborigines, so it wasn't likely to be Polynesian. Too bad. That might have been fun; at least the climate would be great.

It didn't matter. All of us, including her, were stuck with whatever her subconscious mind had come up with, and it was not only possible, it was likely that she wouldn't like it much more than we would. Or, maybe she would, but it might not be what she would have consciously created. This sort of thing tended to be built on emotion, not rationality. Walt, who seemed to go back farther than anybody, had once told me in a worried tone about a society where torture and self-mutilation and even nastier stuff was the norm. That wasn't even Cynthia's sort of place, and it wasn't certain who had "created" it. It sure wasn't the kind of society anybody we knew of would build rationally. Still, it had been built because, while we were rational beings, we were more than that, too.

I did have the same question this time as last. The normal rule was that if you died, you reincarnated without conscious memory of the past life and as the opposite sex; if you came through alive, as I was doing, you remained the same sex and retained your memories of the past. The problem was, in both cases I'd begun male and had been changed in the first case to female, in this case to a female-appearing neuter. The odds were, though, that I'd wind up male this next time, and while that didn't bother me, it sure as hell worried me. I mean, McKee was a hyperfeminist superwoman who had no strong relationships with men but plenty of casual stuff before becoming a nun. Would she want to get rid of men, or get even with them? Somehow I didn't think equality was a concept that would trouble her very much.

The point was, *it didn't matter*. At least, it didn't matter right now. What mattered most was not repeating what had happened last time, when I'd taken a risk and wound up coming in crippled beyond the ability of medicine to fix. I knew you couldn't come in too early—a five-year-old with a graduate engineer's knowledge and vocabulary would have been pretty obvious and not very clever—but I didn't want to repeat that kind of pattern.

As it turned out, I needn't have worried, at least not on that score.

As Walt had warned, I *did* feel a difference from having started in an LSM attached to a Brand Box that

had recorded all my memories and personality. The backup center somehow moved into the new reality, as would the main Command Center, but they would have to be sought out over time and activated. The master computer that created these universes had the one advantage of being able to back-engineer the new world-first specifying that, say, the Command Center must exist, then going back to create a probability line that would put it there. Even if it turned out to be a nontechnological society, somehow, somewhere, the artifact would exist.

That, of course, might well present a golden opportunity for the "outs" to move "in," except that whoever was in charge when they punched through had programs that could limit access. Rita would be the controller if she was the one heading the operation, and it would proceed in a hierarchy down from her. By the same token, I was now in the backup-center hierarchy, although probably way down the list.

Before, when the process started, I had been able to view my next life from birth as a sort of movie on fast forward, and pick where I was going to enter and when. I'd then entered as my new self, and my old self had crept in, like an old friend rather than some stranger, over the next few months. In this setup, it appeared somewhat reversed.

What I saw now was a dizzying kaleidoscope, moving fast and in a very disorienting way, keeping me from making any real sense of the new world and my place in it. The scenes were odd, confusing, bizarre, and moving at a great speed that was not easy to slow down. Still, I was getting enough to know that I shouldn't waste much of that life if I expected to do anything at all there, and that whatever happened would be pretty tough anyway. None of us, I knew, in all our wildest dreams, had imagined that Alice McKee would come up with something like *this*.

The hell with this crap, I thought, and just inserted. The only hope I had in this new life would be if I could find some other key players, or just somehow get back out alive.

The strange line of souls marching through the celestial factory vanished, to be replaced by a deep but very ordinary sleep.

Okay, now, how best to explain this place where I awoke to somebody who was never there?

Think about spiders. No, no, I don't mean we all had eight legs and ate flies. Think of insect sex.

The females are pretty well dominant in the insect world; males in general exist for only one function. They tend to be small, often colorless, and rather weak, and it's not unusual for the female to devour her lover. The male has only one job to do, and, once it's done, he is otherwise irrelevant.

They say that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, and that's usually true, but we often tend to exaggerate the shade of green. Somebody who starts poor and becomes well educated, rich,

famous, and has everything that everybody would love to have is also a member of a subclass that is part of his or her cultural identity. The Utopian Ideal, somebody called it. The conviction that, no matter how much you have, *they are* still keeping something from you and laughing behind your back.

The Alice McKee of both worlds that I knew was from a good home, extremely well educated, never in want, and always assertive and confident. Occasionally, though, like everybody, she'd been turned down. Maybe it was a lover, a friend, a boss, and maybe it was a really nasty encounter at an early age with a male slimeball, but it was always there, coloring her mind-set just below the surface. The enemy was men. Men could do what she couldn't, men got the best positions, men stepped in front of more talented women. She'd always been one of those "banish-the-white-male-culture-from-society" types in academic circles, but she'd never been particularly hostile to me. Still, deep down, it had to have been more than a posture; more than just a set of committed beliefs, it was a firm and somewhat psychotic view consistent with the rest.

That sure explained *this* world.

First of all, it was a modern world not unlike the one in which I felt most at home, a world that went way beyond indoor plumbing to air conditioning, automobiles, jet planes, and all the rest. It was also in the broadest sense a feminist world, not in terms of all the ideological posturing but just in the fact that, of necessity, women ran things. It wasn't because they seized power or there'd been some great social movement; biology and mathematics dictated it.

First of all, women outnumbered men two or three to one. They tended to live into their seventies in the industrial West, and they were physically bigger and stronger.

Men were not just the significant minority, they were physically smaller, four to five feet tall, at most. Having a "short" chromosome, they tended to be weaker as well, and unlikely to pose much of a threat to women no matter what their disposition. They tended to be more sickly and, even in the advanced countries, tended to die relatively young, often in their forties and fifties.

Figuratively, men didn't wear the pants in this society. In most cases, literally as well, but from a more pragmatic cause, for men did have one function in society and it was very important if very basic. Although they were physically quite small, their sexual organs were, well, *huge*. I couldn't help but remember an old silly song from two lifetimes ago:

*He was dirty and hairy
And full of fleas,
But his terrible tool
Hung down to his knees!
God Bless the Bastard King of Eng-land!*

It wasn't just the "tool," either, but the support structure that, while giving enormous, well, capacity, also

made wearing pants impractical. By the time they finished letting out the crotch area for comfort you pretty well had a kind of skirt anyway.

In English they were always called "kilts," to differentiate from a woman's more exotic formalwear, but in practice the guys wore skirts and the women tended to wear pants, period.

Such a physical makeup, and its attendant testosterone levels, did tend to keep a guy always fighting his hormonal urges, which didn't help at all.

Now, you'd think that with this kind of situation men would wind up going around constantly chasing these big women and most of the time getting the crap knocked out of them by their quarry, but that's not the way societies evolve. Still, make no mistake, this was a society that was designed by and for women, although in the image of the familiar as both Alice McKee's background and the computer's world-building methodology dictated.

That same methodology, in which whatever was not specified was simply fitted to the premise, made for some rather comical history, or at least comical to those of us who had known a different society. The Golden Gate of Santa Francesca was only one such example, and hardly the most outrageous. The government, the names, the institutions, and even the religions were all feminized in the generic sense. Men, in fact, were largely excluded from institutional life; there were no male equivalents of nuns, for instance, since it was accepted that men would go insane trying to keep celibate in that kind of cloistered life, and there were no men in government, since men didn't work well in groups or at consensus-building.

My name was Cory Kassemi, the last being my mother's name in the past two incarnations. I wasn't crippled, that was one thing, and I was in relatively good health for my age and sex. Growing up was a somewhat confining experience. After age three or so, most boys were put in a kind of male boarding school called a Primary Center, raised pretty much apart from family and with friends being the classmates at the center, where we lived in a kind of dorm-style setting. Mothers visited often, and quite often took you out for some kind of treat or short trip, so you always had that attachment, but basically you were kept confined to the school, and all the authority figures were older women. We saw men as janitors and gardeners, but even then always under the supervision of women.

We were taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, but not a lot more in the Primary Center. For one thing, it seemed that boys, including me, tended toward a mild dyslexic condition that didn't prevent learning but made it hard and discouraged studying anything beyond the basics.

The center knew this, and was concerned only with imparting a functional literacy. Much of its real lesson objective, what it really taught and was designed to teach, was discipline, discipline, discipline-self-discipline and control, discipline in groups, discipline in interactions with others. The fiction books, television, and movies-dramas and comedies and cartoons- all had reflections of these lessons and all had strong, heroic women and weak, wimpy, helpless, and trouble-prone boys. "Girl" and "woman" were often used interchangeably, but we were *always* "boys." Creative and intellectual pursuits beyond the basics were discouraged, even cut off as soon as identified. Great women and their accomplishments were

touted over and over; you sort of knew that there had to be some boys around or there wouldn't have been a next generation of great women, but if you ever asked about it, the reply invariably was, "Well, any boy will do for that."

I think they understood genetics a lot better than that, but we weren't supposed to ever get into those areas of knowledge, and the message was hammered into us constantly.

Boys were nothing. They had ugly, boring, plain bodies, and their one main feature, which really started to develop about age twelve, was ugly and didn't seem to belong. By comparison, women were curved, smooth, and exotic. Boys weren't emotionally stable enough, strong enough, or even smart enough to do the kind of big things women did; they were given a use by society almost because they had to do *something*. Boys were needed for the propagation of the species, nothing more. Women had all the responsibility; they had to gestate and bear the children, nurture them while still working in society, make sure the kids were raised and taken care of, and so on and so on.

At maybe a year after puberty, which started about age eleven to thirteen, each boy was expected to go to work and pay back the Primary Center. This tended to be unskilled labor; the aforementioned janitorial stuff, and cleaning, street sweeping, gardening, and repetitive factory work, although much of that was being automated. There were lots of books, articles, and TV shows on what the idle boy would do when automated out of his traditional jobs.

You were never out in the world alone, or unsupervised for long, but it was still a relief to get out and see what seemed *almost* normalcy, at least on a superficial level. Much to my great surprise, I was no longer in the Northwest or California; I was, in fact, in Texas, in a little town called Larimore near Houston-the latter named, of course, for that great Texas liberator Samantha Houston, who'd whipped Juanita de Santa Ana in a battle back 175 years or so ago.

The job I was given was in town maintenance. I don't want to make that sound more important than it was. Every day, a few of us boys took the bus downtown, and checked in at City Hall with a supervisor, a fat old broad named Miz Snoops, who had gray hair and not all her teeth and who wore a pair of overalls that looked like they dated back to Houston's day. In a way it was another put-down, since any one of us was smarter and more capable than Miz Snoops, but she was in charge and that was that. At least my "raging testosterone" never raged around Miz Snoops.

We'd go out with manual equipment and sweep trash off the sidewalks into these little enclosed dustpans on sticks, and then we'd take poles with darts on the end and pick up trash in the parks and such, and there'd be occasional other small jobs for us to do, like repainting weathered trash cans, checking and sometimes replacing parking signs, that kind of thing. It was minimum wage, and we got to keep ten percent of that, the rest going to "repay" our "education," but at least it got us out, and it wasn't exactly demanding.

I was sixteen, had long brown hair, blue eyes, an increasingly hairy body that was supposedly real sexy,

and a soft, high baritone voice that others seemed to find pleasant. I actually looked pretty good in the mirror, at least by old standards. I was in reasonable shape, was a pretty fair cook, and was good enough at mending and fixing that they were talking about letting me try to find a job that paid more and maybe would set me up, with a couple of others, on my own.

The problem was partly scale. It didn't take long to be reminded that I was four foot eight in a six-foot-two society, that I probably didn't weigh ninety pounds, and felt somewhat overwhelmed by everything around me. No matter what, I promised myself, there was no way that I'd ever find humor in short people again, if I ever had.

There were things to recommend the society, particularly if you were female. Just beyond the park you could see school-children, all girls of course, playing field sports and having a good time, then trooping back in probably for algebra and world history-herstory? No, even this world didn't go to *that* extreme. I already knew a ton more than they did, and part of my own sense of self-discipline was hiding that fact both from the women who were my superiors and from my own compatriots, who tended not to be too tolerant of folks different from themselves.

For all the peaceful, unthreatening nature of the town and of society in general, this world was still more dangerous than any I could remember. Women didn't tend to fight nearly as much, or be nearly as violent, but when they *did* fight it was with a ferocity no male could match. The real tragedy was that the society all but consumed the male spirit. Apparently it hadn't always been that way, and there were isolated societies where it was different to some degree, but the gospel assumed that men could not form lasting relationships-most men could and did-and that men didn't care about the children they fathered nor were they competent to assist in raising them when in fact the opposite was true. Oh, there were a lot of the boys who were pretty callous, particularly at my age, but not all. We hadn't actually fathered any children yet, so it was mostly romanticizing and self-aggrandizing rather than real experience that caused the bluster.

And the system insured that we were permanently kept as children rather than as maturing, responsible adults. Still, it produced in most of us a yearning that they wouldn't believe, a yearning for protection and stability. Women lived about the same amount of time regardless of whether they ever married or had kids or whatever; men who were single tended to die by forty, and the older guys were all in long-term relationships.

"Hey, Cory!" led, one of my classmates at the Primary for several years, called to me. He'd just been on a detail painting new yellow curbing on some streets.

"Hi, led," I called back. "So, you paint the whole town yellow now?"

He grinned. "I'd paint it a lot worse than that if they'd gimme some paint. You doin' anything tonight?"

I shrugged. "Should I be?" It wasn't like we could go out on our own and run wild.

"It's payday, and they're gonna have a bus go down to the mall tonight. Miz Conlon's chaperoning, and she's pretty good at lettin' us go a few places."

"You got any money?" I asked him. "I mean, the few bucks we're gettin' tonight won't buy much."

"I been savin' up. Got enough for a coupla games, I think." That's one thing we did, we boys. We played a lot of games-exotic card games, role-playing stuff, all sorts of things.

"What? Nothin' to impress the babes?" He laughed. "Maybe. Depends on how much I got left. If you got a little, you oughta come along. Maybe we can put what you got and I got together and pick up something cool."

Okay, let's face it, even in this new situation there were some things that didn't change. Neither Jed nor I nor, in fact, most of our friends cared a lot about appearance. Sure, there were some guys who were vain, but mostly we were okay if we didn't look mud-soaked and took regular baths. What you *did* care about, though, was that women cared about such things, and they were always on our minds.

Fashion was different from what I was used to in the past. I mean, aside from the kilts, which had a practical reason for existence, the use of more male jewelry than a watch and a ring wasn't too common in either of my past worlds. Here, though, the girls liked that on boys, as well as on themselves, and there was a whole kind of guy-jewelry industry that matched guy colognes and guy shaving lotions. Jewelry and wildly colorful clothing was how we compensated for feeling that we all looked dull and ugly compared to women. Hairstyles were also important, and there was a sense of male fashion way beyond what I was used to in past lives, male or female.

The funny thing was, for all that, the women didn't dress real mannish. In fact, they dressed pretty much the way they always had, which was another part of the problem. I mean, it was hard not to stare and fantasize just watching the world go by. I really was turned on, almost obsessed, with scoring, but between the size differential and the psychological conditioning, I wasn't able to be as forward as I had as a young man in other worlds. Boys didn't go out alone, and they didn't go into bars or other hangouts, and the idea of initiating a new friendship with a girl was as scary in reality as craved in fantasy. I'd been shy in what I considered a conventional world setting; here it was much, much worse.

I tended to wear light, sleeveless shirts and very loose, pleated kilts, and I had earrings, a neck chain, some rings, and fairly short hair because it didn't take any real upkeep. Most boys grew mustaches or beards, but I'd never much liked them in any incarnation and tended to keep myself smooth-shaven. That sort of maintenance was pretty easy, since I had allowed my facial hair to grow in once and I thought I looked awful. Some heads had it, others didn't. Mine definitely wasn't designed for facial hair.

Still, if some girl had come around and said she loved goatees, I'd have grown one without a second thought. None, unfortunately, did, neither saying that nor much else to me. I was a real wallflower, but I wasn't alone.

With the social atmosphere, I admit that there was a lot of jerking off and a lot of boy-boy stuff, just as it was clear looking at folks in town that there was a lot of girl-girl stuff, too, but from my point of view it was mostly a pale shadow of what I wanted and needed and just barely enough to allow me to function without going nuts.

There were some places where you might meet and impress the opposite sex, and these weren't to be ignored. Church was one, of course, even if boys and girls sat in different sections, and there were places like the shopping centers and general work environments, things like that. There were also shows, carnivals, and other areas where there might be some interaction, or at least one side strutting for the other, but it wasn't a constant, day-in-and-day-out type of thing.

I don't know; the women here didn't seem to need it like we did, and weren't in much of a hurry about it, either. It seemed like a lot of marriages were with women far older than we were, while the younger girls might take a fling now and then but were mostly interested in one-night stands. I have to admit that my life mostly consisted of either dreaming about sex, compensating for its absence, or doing things to take my mind off it. I did, however, have enough sense and self-control, probably thanks to the other Corys deep inside my head, that I wasn't going to take any quick way out. In fact, I knew I had a real problem here.

On the one hand, I wanted to get out, get some measure of freedom, and link up if possible with anybody else from the March Hare group, even if, God help us, Cynthia was probably the one of us with the most power in this world. It remained to be seen how Wilma came through, or *if she* came through, considering the gauntlet she'd have to run in her condition. Maybe the link to the box via the LSM had made it possible for her to get through, but even if it did, how sane she might be was a question. Who knew? Maybe that mysterious Mabel, about whom I knew little, was more important now.

Even if Cynthia were running things in her madcap way, it would be preferable to the alternative. Rita Alvarez would be Mistress in Charge of the Command Center now, freed from just about all restraints and highly unlikely to be open to Les tempering the folks in charge since Les would have remained male and thus be in no better shape than me. Knowing Rita, the first thing she'd do after locating and reestablishing control of the Command Center would be to seek out Al, who would be ignorant of his past thanks to Rini and me, but he would be a woman here and thus *still* on the power curve, damn it!

Well, it wasn't like I could do anything. In fact, I might even have caused my own problems. I'd been so skittish about patiently inserting myself that I'd come through relatively young. It was entirely possible that it would be years before all the factors would come together to permit any kind of action. I couldn't count on it, them, or anybody. I couldn't even necessarily count on anybody even setting out to find me, although I suspected that both sides would as usual try to gather in the scattered sheep for purposes of power and control.

The thing was, I was powerless, helpless, in any of that. I was either going to have to commit suicide, wait for a new reincarnation, and wipe out all that I now remembered, or learn to get along in this cockeyed

universe. I didn't want to lose my past, or what knowledge and experience I might have gained, but I sure as hell couldn't live in that set of past lives.

So, after a month or so of adjustment, I put the past aside. Not easily, and not eagerly, but out of necessity. It would be useful only when and if my life here intersected with the other groups. Until then, it was pretty damned irrelevant and wasn't going to get me laid or out of these damned barracks.

My new attitude seemed to gain some notice when it became more consistent. I found it a relief not to brood so much, to take things one day at a time and just go with the flow. And there was at least one area in which this situation was a positive rather than a negative.

Somebody once said that a man's adult life was always a series of "have-to's." You have to work at a job you hate because you have to earn the money and you have to play ball with your kid and you have to take out the garbage. Not here. Here, you were a kid forever, a kid with a real super sex drive. You weren't expected to be more than an immature little guy goofing off when possible and having few if any responsibilities to others or to society. There was in fact no real pressure to do anything other than satisfy your own urges and do the minimum to feed, clothe, and shelter yourself, with a society designed to support you if you for any reason couldn't or wouldn't. Adolescence, in that sense, never ended. You were not expected to exercise responsibility, nor allowed to.

After a while, Mom stepped in and decided that I should at least be put on some kind of track that would get me securely married off. She worked for a design firm in Houston-not clothes, things like parks and civic centers-and that brought her into contact with the politicians and companies that were in the tourist and promotion business. She wangled a position in a hotel-industry training course for boys, and that led to a job with a chain-affiliated hotel in Galveston-close enough to Houston so she could keep an eye on me, far enough away so I'd be really on my own for the first time.

It was almost traumatic, leaving the Primary Center after all that time, but we all promised to keep in contact somehow, and I was damned excited. Galveston was a resort city on the Gulf, informal, lots of beaches and swimming, and lots of young people. While the money for this fairly menial starter job wasn't great, it was, with a staff hotel room and staff restaurant privileges, enough.

It was only at this point, after all those virtual "years," which were as real to me as if I'd been born and lived them all through, that I learned that a lot of guys didn't go the route I had but grew up on their own in society. I found the beach area littered with them, some fairly normal and working the usual male jobs, others living as bums, gigolos, prostitutes, hustlers-you name it. All of them were on the make, all after the well-off and vulnerable tourists. I hadn't realized how naive and sheltered Mom's choices had made me until I was really out in the world.

Most boys were sort of in-between types, and those I found myself most comfortable being around. I particularly latched on to Harry Petrosian, a hustler who was maybe pushing thirty, looked older, and had been born and raised in the city and had worked the city and the Madre Islands offshore since he was small. He wasn't much bigger than me, but he had this thick bushy beard and hair so long I swear he'd

never had a haircut or shaved. He had these big, thick arms and a barrel-shape chest .and he was a sight. I think he was attracted by my fresh-faced naivete, and kind of adopted me. He smoked long, thin cigars and always wore sunglasses, even indoors and at night. I never saw him without them, and he tended to take them off only to clean them.

"Yo' mama sent ya heah to git some street smahts," he commented, flicking the ash off his cigar into the street. There was a big move against smoking going on, but it didn't bother him. It was something you could do to annoy that wasn't illegal and stated your independence and contempt for authority, even though it might be bad for you. "Furst thing you got to remembah is not t'fall foah them sweet young thangs y'see all 'round in them topless string bikinis and shit like that theah. They's on the make, that's all. Want t'suck yo' in, make anothah virgin, then drop you like a hot kettle of steamed shrimp. You been heah a couple weeks now-how many times you been propositioned by them bitches?"

"Seems like all the time," I told him honestly, not even realizing that it might also sound a little egotistical.

"Yep, they can smell a virgin five counties away. How come you ain't took one up on it?"

I sighed. " 'Cause there's always somebody else around who can stop me, that's why! Mama seems to have spread some tips around!"

He roared with laughter. "Well, y'all keep yo' kilt on a bit! Ah'm gonna show you how to pick 'em and keep things safe and still have one good time."

I won't go into the sordid details, but I can tell you that, riding along with Harry in his various tourist vehicles, from pony carts to an electric tram that hit the hot spots along the tourist beachfront and the expensive downtown specialty shops, I got a long narrative tour that didn't get broadcast.

Finally, he introduced me to Trina, who was not my idea of a first sexual partner at all and, fortunately, wasn't intended to be. She wasn't just big, she was huge, nearly six foot six, three hundred pounds, with breasts like watermelons, and the kind of face and voice that said that no matter what you could think of, she'd already been there and done that.

"Harry! He's so *cute!* You didn't tell me that!" She was to be my escort, along with a couple of other women, only slightly smaller but definitely just as worldly, to some of the tourist spots I was too nervous to go into on my own.

A part of me from the past lives still found things uncomfortable, even more so in a nightclub packed with tourists.

"These folks're mostly computer geeks from Austin and Santa Fe who don't get down to the shore much," Trina told me. I was still getting used to being with somebody two feet taller and two hundred or more

pounds heavier than me.

I knew basic dancing from the Primary Center, and Harry had taught me some of the more modern stuff they were doing, and it didn't take a lot of watching before I could get the hang of it.

The one thing about this universe was that there were a lot more women than men, so, no matter how small, insignificant, ignorant, and ugly we might be, in this setting Harry and I were honey and half the room were flies. When Trina and her friends left to do their own kind of socializing, leaving the two of us sitting there at a table gawking at all the noise and music, the flies just started swarming.

Harry was used to this and in his element; I was panicky and nervous and shy but had been put in a position with no escape. His advice wasn't much help in the cacophony around us: *"Pick the one who 'll also talk to you."*

It sounds like strange advice, but I learned what he meant and it was good advice. I mean, I was walking all over beachfront Galveston like I was wearing a sign saying "horny virgin," and that, in the end, had been the real reason I'd exercised my self-discipline there. All the VD lectures in the world wouldn't have stopped me from doing it early and often, but my shyness and the fact that I was being regarded as a thing, just another souvenir of "my vacation in Galveston," that turned me off.

The problem wasn't being talked to here, though; rather, it was in understanding amid the loud music and crush of bodies what anybody was saying.

So, when Harry seemed to vanish, and nobody else came back, and I had no other way out, I did the only thing I could. I danced with whatever girl wanted to dance with me. I can't really say much else about it. I was more than a little drunk, maybe a little high as well, and while I pretty well remember, in a kind of blurry way, all the rest of the night and the sunrise the next morning, I prefer to skip to that sunrise, which found me kind of in a male fantasy, lying on an air mattress on the deck of a rental condo, listening to the sound of the waves crashing in, sandwiched between two naked girls who were as drunk as I was.

They had smiles on their faces, though. That, at least, fed my ego and sense of self-esteem. Experience had counted, and I was the most experienced virgin anybody in this world ever knew-only, of course, I was also endowed as never before.

All things considered, and in spite of the headache and sourness in my stomach, I began to wonder if maybe I wouldn't start to like this place after all.

They were both still asleep, or passed out, and I had to slowly wiggle out from between them. First, I needed a bathroom, and then to find my clothes. The more I moved, the more I began to feel like a couple of trucks had run over me, but it didn't matter. For the first time since insertion into Alice McKee's revenge, I didn't feel hyper-horny and wasn't any more turned on than I would have been in this circumstance in any of my previous male existences. Instead, I felt, somehow, I'd done what I was

designed to do.

I took a quick spray shower, toweled off, and unearthed clothing and sandals. I really needed to sleep for about two days, but I knew I would be up for a while, so I found some coffee and made a pot in the drip coffeemaker. Deep down I was impressed; some of my personal tastes carried from life to life, it seemed, and one was that I liked coffee. Most women here seemed to like flavored decafs and teas with unpronounceable names you had to be a chemist to understand. There was, at least, next to the pound of Bavarian White Chocolate Coffee, whatever *that* was, a pound of regular, solid Colombian. It even had the image of Juanita Valdez on the foil pack. Just its existence meant that my hostesses at least had *some* taste.

I started surveying the contents of the kitchen while the aroma of coffee wafted through the one-story condo. Oddly enough, because it was shared by two women, it didn't have the usual step stools I was used to using to reach high places, but I made do. There was enough food to make a decent all-around breakfast of several types, and, if they didn't stay passed out until I got bored or had to leave, I could fix omelets, crepes, or waffles. I owed them that much, even if I was pretty damned sure I'd given value for value.

And I had, too. In fact, I stayed with them most of the week, leaving only to go to work and check for messages and make sure Mom thought I was being a good boy. Harry was back on the streets, having other things to do himself, but he proved a handy man to run interference, look out for any problems I might not know about before I got home, and provide some local transportation. I actually was saving a good deal of my microscopic spending money, too; I wasn't paying for much of anything at all.

I told you I was going to skip the gory details, no matter how much you might enjoy them, so let's just say I did a lot of dancing, swimming, partying, and sleeping around over the next . . . well, it became kind of a lifestyle. Word got around when you were good; I was good and I knew it. I suspected early on that it was because I'd come from previous lifetimes when the men had been the movers and shakers, and these women hadn't had much experience with guys who were really assertive in bed. I'd also inhabited a woman's body long enough to know where the maximum effort was rewarded in a maximum payoff. In fact, I often wished that I'd had more experience, real sexual experience, as a woman that I could recall clearly-Rini wasn't me, remember-but apparently there was enough left in my subconscious to more than meet the needs.

With my increasing confidence and reputation along the beach, I began to *like* being a boy-toy, particularly when it served all *my* immediate needs. I let myself go, never looked back, and pretty much lived for the moment. You might have said that I forgot where I'd come from and where I'd inevitably go sooner or later, but that wasn't quite true. I just filed it away as something I couldn't control and didn't let it interfere with enjoyment.

The neatest thing was, none of the women I was sleeping with were locals, all were on holidays of fixed duration. None of them were looking for anything beyond a knowledgeable companion with whom to have a good time, someone who knew all the best clubs and local hot places. I certainly picked up that

information, along with quite a reputation among the locals as a kind of conceited but still undeniable King of the Beach.

It never occurred to me that the kings in *Alice in Wonderland* tended to be short and not terribly aggressive and dominated by huge queens. The king, like the chess piece, wasn't a real power here when compared to the queen, but he sure as hell had a privileged position. It just took guts to play his advantage for all it was worth.

How long I lived this life I can't really say. Time became blurred, and with the exception of some minor VD scares and a few bouts of illness, it was all kind of fun. I'm not even sure how sober I was during that period. Not that it was just booze, of course; when you knew, deep down, that no matter what, you were going to wake up fresh and start over without paying for what you did in the past life the way the churches all preached, you didn't worry about things like that.

I think it was several years before somebody found me.

It was the winter season, and while the activity in the resort areas never really stopped, it did slow during this period because the weather could change and become pretty cold, even if it was palm-tree territory. You could get a week of hot, almost summery weather when the wind blew from the east or south; then the temperature would drop to just above freezing, particularly at night, for several days when a big system plunged out of Canada. Not exactly blizzard city, and certainly no Chicago or even Seattle, but it cut down on the number of visitors and drove a lot of activity inside.

By this point I was staying with Harry and his huge women and pretty well living off the tourist girls. I wasn't charging- they just liked to buy me things and give me gifts, so I didn't ever need much. By selling or hocking the items and keeping the proceeds, I was pretty comfortable.

There was something of a chill in the air and there were a lot of clouds building just offshore when I headed out one February afternoon to Mary Jo's Barbecue, a Tex-Mex place serving everything from ribs to shrimp. I never had a big appetite, but I did have good taste, and I knew her cooks were the best at what they did.

I wasn't looking for any action that day, but I couldn't help notice that a couple of classic-looking women in casual dress were eyeing me as I went by, and I flashed my smile at them. When they didn't immediately take me up on the invite, I didn't mind. I just kept walking, but, after another block or so, I began to get the strong impression that somebody was following me.

Knowing the territory, it was easy to position myself to see a half block or more in back of me via reflections in glass storefronts, and it didn't take a lot of smarts to know that the pair I'd passed and smiled at were the ones behind me.

The fact that they both seemed a bit grim-faced and professional told me that they weren't likely to be

after me for my charm and services. I took them for cops, but they sure weren't local, and I almost immediately pegged them in my mind as probable narcs.

Well, I had a small amount of marijuana on me, but that was easily disposed of along here with just a little sleight of hand. I also had a small concealed pistol in my shoulder bag, but this being Texas that not only wasn't illegal, it was almost taken for granted.

So, if they were narcs they soon had nothing to pin on me, and if they were something more sinister, the worst they'd get would be a small handgun, if I didn't get a chance to use it, and maybe ten greens in dinner money.

I couldn't shake the feeling, when I was within sight of the barbecue shack, that they were somehow *familiar*, although I was quite sure I hadn't seen them before.

Not in this life, something whispered to me, and I suddenly picked up the pace a bit.

I needed a closer look at them, but not out here on the almost deserted and darkening street.

"*Cor-ree! My so cute enchilada!*" Mary Jo Hernandez called to me as I entered, feeling some relief. She caught my worried look and particularly the relief. "Something is wrong, *sí?*"

"Hi, M.J.! I'm not sure if anything's wrong or not. Two tough girls-maybe cops, maybe not-followed me."

She laughed. "But the girls they *always* follow my little friend, do they not?"

"Not like this. I dunno. Maybe I'm just crazy or somethin', but it don't feel right."

She decided I really was serious. "Well, you sit and eat in here! If they come in, they will deal with me and Conchita and some very big knives. You will be safe here. Then we'll call a cab for you to go home, eh?"

I felt much better on hearing that, and giving her my patented smile, sat down to at least get some decent food.

"What kind do you want today?" Mary Jo called to me.

"Shrimp. Shrimp and a Corona will do. The platter."

She nodded and went in back to start the order. As she did, I saw the pair looking in the window, then at the menu, and, nodding to each other, they both entered and took a table about as far from me as they could. It wasn't a big place; most of the business here was carry-out, so we weren't sitting all that far apart, and not nearly far enough.

Without seeming to stare and maybe tip them off, I started playing the identity game with their features. Both *did* look very familiar, yet neither looked like any women I'd known here, nor any I'd known at least in the past life, the memory of which was already growing dimmer and less detailed as time passed.

Maybe I'm wrong, I told myself, but the fact was that the longer this close proximity lasted the stronger the sense of familiarity, and danger, became. Something was registering in my mind, but not on a level I could yet tap.

Face it, there weren't that many that were a real threat, considering. Neither of these was Dorothy Sloan, for sure, and certainly neither was Rita Alvarez, or Dan Tanaka, and they absolutely bore no resemblance to Cynthia or the newer and little-known Mabel.

Mary Jo brought the platter out herself, and leaned over. "Them?" she whispered.

"Uh-huh," I barely muttered under my breath.

"See what y'mean," she commented, but then went over, spoke to them pleasantly, and took their orders, acting like everything was just fine. I knew, though, that I was being watched over, at least a little bit, by friends, and it sure helped.

I was actually through the tiny bit of salad and starting on the shrimp when it suddenly occurred to me that I'd been going about it the wrong way. I had assumed these women, or at least one of them, would be an incarnate, but what if they were *reincarnates*? It was tough to mentally turn the two women into men, particularly since my view of men had been so prejudiced by this world for such a long time, but I managed.

Nawwww . . . Couldn't be!

The resemblance wasn't exact, but the smaller of the two, at maybe six feet even, very well built, muscular, tough-looking, still bore at least a family-type similarity to ...

Oh, my god! It's Stark!

Stark made a hell of an imposing female figure, as we'd all feared would be the case. The surprising thing was how feminine his manner was, how different from the usual military demeanor. Still, with the jacket off, she showed muscle every time she flexed an arm, the kind of muscle one got from passionate bodybuilding. It wasn't everybody who could project a somewhat sexy, exotic, tough-girl look while still giving a strong impression that breaking a steel bar over her head might only irritate her.

The other one, the blonde, was even bigger and more statuesque. She had longer hair, expertly applied makeup, nice earrings and bracelets, but it was only an attempt to disguise a mannish face and chunkier

construction. There was a kind of Nordic pioneer look to her, and it took me almost to the end of my meal to peg her.

Lee Henreid. But I'd left Lee alive, and he'd taken charge of the institute when Al was shot.

Clearly Rita's palace revolution was bloodier than we'd been led to believe.

So both these characters had died last time, and now were back as women. Okay, fair enough. It meant they really weren't quite the folks we'd known before, but they still wouldn't necessarily be candidates for Friends and Lovers of Cory Kassemi, and they were here, stalking me, which said volumes.

They knew who I was. Somehow, they'd found me. I might dodge them here, but not for long, that was clear. If they could recognize me here, and follow me this closely, then they weren't going to be put off by an escape by taxi and maybe a few days hiding out in Corpus Christa or Austin.

They might well not want to tangle with Mary Jo and Con-chita, either, although both these old "friends" looked like they could take maybe a dozen strong women with their bare hands if they wanted to.

The fact that they were eating sandwiches instead indicated that they didn't want to make a big fuss here and draw attention to themselves. They clearly hadn't been a hundred percent sure it was me at first look, but they knew now, if not from Brand Box memory then from briefings.

The two unanswered questions were whether they were aware that I knew who they were and that they were after me, and, of course, whether that fact mattered at all to any of us.

III

CATERPILLAR EMPOWERMENT

Mary Jo came out with my check, and I paid it. "Called you a cab," she whispered. "It's sitting out front now. Juanita's a cousin and she was right down the street."

"Thanks, I owe you," I whispered back, and got up and walked confidently toward the door, almost past them.

They got up and started to follow, but I could hear Mary Jo's booming accented voice stopping them cold.

"Hey! You two! You got to pay before you run out on me!"

Lee fumbled quickly for a bill and I knew the two were going to just leave it, but I was out the door by then, saw the taxi sitting there, and got in without any problems. I'd used Juanita before. She could be quite handy, if she happened to be anywhere close.

She floored it the moment I was inside, sending me reeling into the seat. "Ow! Take it easy!"

"We don't know if they got a car handy or what," Juanita called back. "Till then, we lose 'em a little, huh? Don't worry-put the call out on the radio. Ain't no cab gonna pick dem up for at least five, ten minutes!"

Well, that was a help.

"Where you want to go when I'm sure you're clear?" she asked me.

That was a good point. Where could I go that they couldn't find me? And what kind of life did I want to lead? It had been one thing, so long ago, to cut out for the hinterlands with Riki, but who did I have here? And, unlike Riki or me in that world, I didn't have any good way to go it alone, particularly without much in the way of assets.

There was only one possibility, as bleak and as hopeless as that might be, that would at least afford me some protection.

"Juanita, baby, I got to get to Austin. It's my only hope to really shake those goons."

"Hey! I like to help you, *muchacho*, but Austin's a little out of my meter district and I got choir practice at eight!" She thought a moment. "Maybe I could let you have enough for bus fare, that's about it."

"It'll have to do. You can stop by Trina's and they'll be able to pay you back out of my lockbox there. I know they can all open it. I can count."

She laughed. "You are something else, my little one! *Si!* I have maybe fifty greens here. That should be enough for a oneway ticket to Austin, I would think, if there's a bus leaving any time soon. Maybe a couple of meals as well!"

I thought a moment. "Not the bus station, then."

"Sorry, I don't have enough for air!"

"No, no. I just was thinking that I'd have to go via Houston and probably Dallas, too, and change coaches at some point, so if you could take me to the west-side station where the locals stop, that would keep me from being in the main bus station, where they're sure to look."

"Not bad. Cheaper, too, if slower. All right, then! Hold on!"

I don't know if Al and Lee-or whatever their names were here-were really trying to follow me at this point, but I felt a lot better when I got to the small corner minimall on the west side where they sold coffee, Cokes, and local bus tickets to all the small towns from here to Houston.

The run to Houston was hourly. I bought a ticket on the first bus that came along, figuring I'd play each stage by ear, and by whatever was left in this modest bank.

I did start feeling a little paranoid, though. Damn it, it always seemed like I was either running from them or trying to live a life they then moved to ruin! It wasn't fair! Al could be a sadistic son of a bitch and have fun, Cynthia always seemed to enjoy herself, and the others got to play around with all sorts of things, but me-I was just a damned target. If they wanted me, why the hell didn't they at least make me feel like the kingpin in the grand plot to rule all the universes? That at least would feed my ego and make my suffering a little more meaningful.

As usual, I got some attention and some pickup lines on the bus, but I wasn't in the mood. For the first time since I could remember, I wasn't in the mood. Everybody seemed to take on a slightly sinister cast all of a sudden, and there seemed a dark cloud over my head that I might not be able to keep from descending on top of me.

Obviously, if they figured out what I had done, they would either race ahead to Houston-the local took four hours to make the basically little more than an hour drive, stopping everywhere in East Texas-or they'd call ahead for others to be there and stake out every arriving bus.

I began to hate Alice McKee for stacking the deck so solidly against men in general and me in particular. I wasn't any angel or role model, but, damn it, even Rini had been given more outs than I had here. There were far fewer males, so we stuck out. There was no disguising anything, since we were simply not big enough, strong enough, or important enough. Hiding out, going underground, these just weren't valid options, and when everybody who could help tended to think of you as some kind of child it was even worse. I was on the run, and there was very little I could do about it except scream for Mama, who might not even care. I didn't dare give her a call; not now, not from Houston. They'd surely have that angle figured out. Maybe from some rest stop along the way, some pay phone, but not now.

The fact that it was Al, personally, made it all the more intolerable. I'd been partly responsible for this, I knew; damn it, Al should be in my place in this kind of world and see how it felt for once!

I was still pouting and feeling sorry for myself, though. If I'd really been on a crusade for truth, justice, and the American way, I sure as hell wouldn't be running home to Mama.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that even Mama wasn't going to be a lot of protection. I

looked out the window at the cars speeding past in both directions and considered the ultimate solution: getting so lost even I couldn't find myself.

That had been my first impulse in times past, hadn't it? I'd done it with Riki in what I thought of as my "original" world even though I now knew it wasn't, and Rini, thinking she was me, had done much the same thing getting out of the institute-and for what? Riki and I had wound up as drugged-out bums out on the barrier islands not too far south of Galveston, and ultimately getting sucked into what proved to be the shaman's world. We'd run for nothing.

Rini had run right into the hands of a pimp, which was even worse. That could be my fate here, too, of course; the reversal of sexual roles here didn't change everything. There was always a market, there were always lonely people, and the weaker boys could always be forced into it, kept there by drugs and lack of options.

Still, it was tempting. Get off, start hitching, see if I couldn't get picked up by some really good-looking babe who'd fall for my charms and take me away from all this.

And what had I argued about with Walt? That we should take these bastards on, make somebody and something *move*, not just continue in this endless petty skirmish for control. Big talk, but what the hell could we do about it? Walt was surely no bigger or stronger or more powerful than me, nor were the others. Father Pete couldn't even be a priest here, and the biggest intellect who could make things happen in that group was who-Cynthia? Gimme a break! Cynthia versus Al, Lee, and Rita!

Still, I needed to make a series of decisions and I needed to make them quickly. What, exactly, did I want to try to do? Run? That would be consistent with my current personality, but some part of me kind of drew the line there. I'd spent most of my time up to now goofing off, seeking pleasure, and never looking beyond tomorrow. It was time I grew up a little. If I ran, lost myself in a hedonistic life, and died young, I would only wind up in their hands anyway without any memory of what was going on.

Not this time. Been there, done that. Run directly to Mom? Well, as an expedient, that might be necessary. Mom here wasn't the nice little old lady of my youth; she was still a very strong and influential person, still in her fifties, an executive with some clout, and she did offer the largest measure of cover. The problem was, she wasn't going to be very easy to convince that I wasn't just trying to come back and live off her. I mean, what could I tell her? She wasn't even one of us, so latent memory wasn't even a factor.

"Gee, Mom, I know this is hard to believe, but you are a construct created by a giant computer someplace, see. And just about everybody you know is, too. Except for maybe two or three dozen folks who keep getting reincarnated, and they're after me 'cause I'm one of them. I know you remember me being born and that every moment of my life can be traced, but, see, that's all just part of a program ..."

Sooner or later-probably sooner-I'd be put in this nice place in the country with bars on the windows and

doors while folks in white coats attempted to convince me, by any means necessary, that my hallucinations were really brought on by my sense of powerlessness.

So Mom *could* protect me and give me cover, but not without me giving her a whale of a convincing story, one she might doubt but still go along with. I hadn't really thought of that.

And even if I did come up with a good idea, one she'd accept, then what? I'd have a target on myself, because that's one place they were sure to have staked out already. I'd be nailed eventually and that would be that.

The fact that that pair of goons was out and about meant that the Command Center was definitely up and active in this world. And if it was up, so was the backup, I guessed. Where the hell was it? Or was it up? Only three of us from the March Hare Network were women: one I didn't know, one who was a vegetable the last I saw her, and one who was more than a little insane and working with a lot of little men from outer space.

Wait a minute! Maybe I'm going at this the wrong way! I told myself. What, in fact, did the areas I had been in so far have in common? Anything? Western Washington State, the Bay Area in California, now East Texas.

No, that was wrong. Not East Texas-Austin. At least that's where I was eventually headed, right?

In all three worlds, all three areas were centers for computer companies and high-tech industries.

The Command Center had been in Yakima the first time, but at Stanford the second. Why couldn't it be in the middle of Texas this time? Austin, perhaps, or College Station, where the big university was?

It was a thought. If the Command Center was now in Texas, then maybe the backup was relatively close as well. Unlike the CC, the backup had been in the same place both times, though, and that might as well have been a million miles away.

That had to be it. The Command Center moved, but the backup didn't, perhaps so it could always be located. That of course brought up a question: Why hadn't the CC folks taken a crack at controlling it, too? But there were forces behind all of this that might have blinded them, or it might just be too damned well protected, somehow. Certainly the saucer was there.

If that was the case, then I was half a continent, fifteen hundred miles or more, from any allies, and I was as of now heading toward my enemies' headquarters. That seemed a bit stupid.

But forty Georgia Washingtons weren't going to get me a distance like that, and I sure had no way to get there otherwise.

Maybe running away from here was the best plan, but not running toward them. Maybe I should run away from here and aim toward someplace else.

As the local finally pulled into Houston and headed for downtown and the main bus station, I seriously considered making for central Washington. I could hock my watch and rings for a few bucks, maybe, or luck it out if I got the right set of hitches. Hitchhiking from here to beyond Yakima, though, would be a long and dangerous haul. I was up to that part, I felt sure, and it was only the fact that it was already pitch dark outside that stopped me.

It was February. It wouldn't be so bad in June or July, but I'd now been in the Gulf area so long I was forgetting that I was proposing not only heading north, but heading through the high mountains. I had no heavy winter clothes, and I was proposing hitchhiking through all that snow and ice and wind and subzero cold?

Even Al didn't seem quite as threatening as that.

Pulling into the Houston station, I was still unsure of what I was going to do, but I was on the lookout for suspicious folks who seemed like cops or other agents. It wouldn't have to be a big government group out to get me; Al could just have asked the local cops to pick me up saying I was wanted for something.

There were a couple of faces like that, but they were kind of cruising the platforms and there were a lot of buses with people moving in and out, back and forth. This was one time, too, when being small helped; I just got in the middle of a bunch of the biggest preoccupied women I could manage and did my best to keep pace. In no time at all, I was through the loading area and the terminal doors, and I slipped easily to one side and down a dark alley toward the street on the far side of the bus depot.

Houston . . . Who did I know in Houston? I kept close to the storefronts and moved rapidly away from the bus station and into the general hustle and bustle of the city downtown. I fought off the feeling of paranoia that was the natural outgrowth of being a tiny man in a world of huge women and tried to keep focused. I didn't stand out, anyway; while it was true that most of the people you saw were women, there were men of varying ages and economic situations about, and the big trick was to just look as confident here as I was in Galveston.

Although the Primary Center wasn't that many miles down the pike from here, I wasn't really familiar with or comfortable in Houston, a place more of the mind in my growing-up years than in reality, where one was taken to the zoo or to a movie as part of a big trip but which wasn't really familiar. It was always hard to remember sometimes that the destinations of tourists and pleasure seekers were actually real places with real citizens and not just abstract Disneylands.

Still, something resonated about Houston. Somebody had come from here, somebody I'd known well.

Jed Crocker! Sure! My old buddy for several years at the Primary had come back here to live and work

when I'd left for Galveston. But where to find a Jed Crocker in a city of maybe a million? Maybe he'd moved. Maybe he'd gotten married and wasn't a Crocker anymore. Well, it didn't hurt to look him up and see.

I found a phone booth inside a small diner and wrestled with the phone book, which seemed to weigh three tons. Reading was slow and hard, too; I really had to concentrate, and I had the distinct impression that I badly needed reading glasses. Still, I managed it.

There were two and a half pages of Crockers, and it was unlikely he'd have a listing himself. His mother's name was Edna, I recalled, and there was an Edna Crocker listed. Hell, it was worth a quarter.

"Hello?" The strongly accented voice was that of an older woman, but not the Spanish/Mexican accent I expected. This sounded almost British. "Crocker residence."

I suddenly became a little shy and uncertain, but it was too late to back out now. "Uh-hi! My name is Cory, and I went to school with a Jed Crocker at the Larimore Academy. I'm trying to get in touch with him. Is this his mother's residence?"

There was a slight pause, as if the person on the other end was thinking it over; then she said, "Yes, madam has a son named Jedediah. I'm afraid he doesn't live here, though." My heart sank. It was too much to ask, but it was a big hope. "He has a flat-an apartment-of his own with some other friends. I can give you the number if you would like."

I was soaring again. "Yes, very much, thank you!" I had nothing to write it down with, but I wasn't going to forget *this* number.

"Five-five-five, nine-five-one-oh," she told me. "Please do not call here again. I'm afraid Master Jedediah and the mistress are not currently on speaking terms."

There was a click, but all I was doing was concentrating on that number.

I fished out another quarter and dialed the number. It rang for quite a while, and I got worried that nobody was home, but finally an unfamiliar guy's voice answered. "Yeah?"

"I'm looking for Jed Crocker and I got this number," I told him. "He's an old friend of mine. Is he there?"

"Naw. Not right now. He'll be down at the store till midnight. You oughta check there."

"I'm from out of town and it's been a while. What store is it and where is it located?"

When he told me, I had at least part of the answer for Jed's estrangement.

I couldn't find my way around Houston on a bet, so there was nothing to do but to spring for a cab. The cabbie shrugged and we went maybe a mile and a half northwest, through a kind of small business area that had seen better days, and pulled up in front of the store. It wasn't the kind of neighborhood I'd have found on my own.

It wasn't hard to figure out what was sold in a store called the Hard as a Rock Place. The real clue wasn't the rather plain window that just said books-magazines-pictures but the graffiti scrawled all over it and around it, mostly too high for folks like me to reach.

In this society, women swung both ways most of the time and usually had a real relationship with another woman while using us boys mainly as studs, but it wasn't too popular for men to have much interest in other men once they left the confines of Primary Centers. It was hard to establish a real relationship with a woman, though, or to think about any sort of exclusivity, so this sort of thing wasn't at all unusual, if officially frowned upon.

I hardly recognized Jed behind the counter, with the long earrings, heavy makeup, chains, leather, and lavender beard and hair. For a moment he wasn't sure it was me he was seeing, but then his mouth opened and he gaped at me. "Cory? That really *you*?"

"I should say that line to you," I responded. "Man, I knew you liked it where we were, but I didn't expect *this*."

He gave kind of an embarrassed laugh. "Well, the look is kinda for the commercial part, y'know. I don't think I'd dye the hair otherwise. The rest, though-well, this is the real counterculture, Cory, my boy! We live as much as possible in a world of men only. See the scale here? It's echoed in the apartments and other stuff as well. It fits us. We have our own restaurants, our own nightclubs, our own social groups, and we interact with the world of women only when we have to."

"Doesn't sound like you'd make a lot of money that way," I noted.

He shrugged. "Money isn't everything. A lot of us hold regular jobs, it's true, but we're better organized than you think, almost self-contained in some ways. And we even got a couple of fair-sized ranches where no woman's been in ages. You don't know the freedom you feel in them." He paused. "But I don't think you're that far to my side. Never did. What made you go to what must be a lot of trouble to find me?"

I sighed. "I didn't know where you were or what you were doing, but I need help. I'm in trouble, and I'm on the run. I need to hide out until I can sort things out. Maybe get hold of my mother to run interference and fund a better getaway."

"Shit! What'd you do? Rob a bank?"

"No, nothin' like that." *Think fast. This has to be a convincing cover story!* "Fact is, Mom works for Lone

Star, and she's high up in management. They do a lot of computer stuff for the government. Well, somebody's trying to put the snatch on me, and I'm certain they want to get information from my mom in exchange for me. Sounds real cloak-and-dagger, don't it?"

"You're tellin' me!" But he was swallowing it, hook, line, and sinker. It wasn't that hard to do.

"So what do you need right now?" he asked me, sounding very willing to help.

"I need to get out of Houston and essentially drop off the end of the Earth for a little bit. That at least will get the heat off me."

He nodded, thinking. "Waxadoches Ranch sounds like the best bet, and I don't think you'll feel all that uncomfortable there. Ain't no women gettin' in there without a fight. It's private and flat enough you could see somebody lookin' in from miles away. Course, you'll need me to even get you in there, so stick around. Let's see ... It's Thursday now. I got to work tomorrow, then I'm off until Monday at six p.m. We oughta be able to get you down there and settled by then. In the meantime, relax. Take a look around the store. There's lots of real interesting stuff here."

He wasn't kidding about that. The leather kilts, the silk and dark red leather codpieces, the whips . . .

I spent the night and the whole of the next day with Jed and his companions in their small, seedy apartment in a run-down section of town, and felt at least temporarily safe. The two other guys who shared the place seemed fairly nice if a bit odd, but it wasn't too different from the years I'd spent in the Larimore Academy. As long as they didn't ask me to join in their lifestyle, I was satisfied to cook them some decent meals to pay for my taking up space.

I didn't watch much TV back in Galveston, and even less did I watch the news, but it happened to be on one day while I was cooking lunch and I kind of glanced at it now and then. I suddenly froze and became raptly attentive, though, when one story came on.

"A High Mass will be celebrated this Sunday at the Cathedral of Saint Joan the Divine in honor of the recent elevation of San Antonio's Bishop Alvarez to Archbishop of East Texas. The new archbishop, a Houston native, shown here at her consecration in Rome . . ."

I didn't need glasses for this. The picture shown was absolutely that of a rather good-looking, statuesque Rita Alvarez in full white robes and high, white bishop's hat being escorted down a big cathedral aisle by two others, at least one of whom was one of the Standishes-no, *both* the black-garbed priestesses with Rita were the Standishes. Looked like one had died in the old life, the other hadn't, and now they were *both* women, happily serving God. They'd always been fundamentalists, and this church wasn't all that friendly to fundamentalist beliefs, but if you were a holy woman inside the Church power structure, there was probably a lot of compensation.

Well, okay then. The fact that Rita and the Standishes were Texans, and that their district ran from the coast to Austin and then to San Antonio, meant several things, much more important than just seeing Al and Lee. First, the gang was all here as adults. Ages would vary, of course, depending on when the insertion was chosen, but the bottom line was that we were all in the world. So many in this region, particularly those who were at the institute when it punched through, had to mean that the Command Center was here as well. Not necessarily in Houston, but certainly between here and San Antonio, and probably somewhere between Austin and San Antonio, since that was where Rita was based. She certainly wouldn't dare be this publicly and this prominently visible unless she was damned secure, too.

On Saturday morning, I got in the sidecar of Jed's motorcycle and we headed off out of the city south and west toward the ranch. It was kind of harrowing to ride that openly, but I didn't drive and this was what was available. Little led, with the leather jacket and helmet, seemed dwarfed atop the big roaring Harlette, or as they were often referred to, Harlots.

Being so exposed, I felt like everybody was looking at us, and they probably were. But most people wouldn't remember many details of what they'd seen ten minutes later.

It was a good ride, almost three hours, to the ranch, barely "next door" in Texas terms, but I couldn't help notice when we turned off the highway and onto the approach road that there were lots of posted warnings, a set of mighty mean-looking gates, and an elevated guardhouse that would look more appropriate for a prison entrance. The guys in the tower were seated and seemed fairly relaxed, but they had fixed machine guns mounted in the concrete wall in front of them.

I stared in amazement. "Expecting an attack from Mexico?"

Jed laughed. "Nope. But the Church, that's something else again, and sometimes just our ever-lovin' friends and neighbors. There's folks who'll attack anybody they think is different or who don't play by their rules. We got lots of places where there's heavy weapons here."

Once I'd been introduced, inspected, and okayed, which included a pat-down search of my person, we were allowed past and continued on for a ways. led was right: there were two other fixed towers on the way in, although no gates.

The ranch itself was less spectacular, but still impressive. In fact, it looked like a dude ranch, rustic hotel, and working cattle farm all rolled into one. There were three main buildings - a big ranch house that was clearly administration, two long barracks-like structures that had big air conditioners on them, several barns and outbuildings, silos, and a corral with horses. It was pretty damned impressive.

"From when we passed the gate, you were in an area where no women are allowed," Jed told me proudly. "Men built all this and men run it. It's nearly self-sufficient. We raise plenty of beef, some pork, and have a separate sheep range for wool and mutton. Our fields grow corn, wheat, veggies, you name it, and way down the road there is a massive chicken house that provides eggs and poultry. We trade with other

ranches for cotton and building materials that we don't have locally. Electricity's from our own generator, and there's been a few oil wells paying off so that helps fund the whole thing. We move a lot of stuff up to Houston - would you believe we hire on independent women truckers to come to a loading area and pick up the stuff? They drive it up and drop it in the wholesale farmer's markets, and bring back what we need."

"So some women do come in to pick up stuff?"

"Nope. See them tracks over there? Little electrical railroad can take stuff from here to the loading docks, and there's spurs to the areas. We bring it in here by wagon and cart the old way."

I looked around, amazed. "But who *owns* this? I mean, it's such a huge operation!"

"A foundation owns it. Lots of inheritances here, and bequests, all building on a will years ago that one of the pioneer families that had only boys set up so they'd always have a place. Then there was a reformatory over half a mile that way that closed and we bought and annexed it, and it's just kinda been growin' since. This is one of the few places in the country, maybe in the world, where the guys run things."

Well, of course, it was something of a surprise, and I couldn't deny their pride or their industry, but it was founded as much or more on male insecurity as on male aspirations or even sexual orientation.

Alice McKee's subconscious had created the conditions for all that. The women were in charge, and the men were physically and numerically crippled so that they could in fact only perform one role. You couldn't be a scientific genius-hell, reading and writing and arithmetic were hard thanks to that dyslexia nicely put in the Y gene. Boys could do art, but the critics never took male art seriously. I was surprised that when we'd had a crack at computers at Primary, I didn't even excel in that area. The type of programming and the way of operation was so visual and object-oriented that it was beyond anything I'd known, and it sprang from an entirely different origin. The end product was the same as the computers I'd known, of course, but it had evolved from the female spatial and problem-solving thought-stream rather than the linear mathematical male model and was obtuse to the old guard like me.

Face facts-there was only one thing the male body and mind were designed to do in this life, and that was easily and quickly done and did not require further participation in society.

So, for all its impressive scale, Waxadoches Ranch still had a kind of sad, almost pathetic aura around it, particularly when you saw how many of the small, weak guys it took to do what one Texas cowboy of my earlier world wouldn't have thought twice about doing. They had created an almost cartoon society rejecting the "outside," meaning women.

I always had the impression in the past that there was some genetic or biochemical component to homosexuality. I still did, but most of the homosexuality here wasn't as outrageous as indicated by the store back in Houston or the way Jed and some of the others dressed; it was more rebellion, rebellion in

the only way they knew how, and rebellion in a kind of silly, immature way. Only when you knew other worlds and other societies did you realize how pathetic this attempt was. But it was all they had.

They were delighted to get a new cook, and hired me on the spot. Nobody asked much about me or where I'd come from or why I was there, although the ranch boss, a man named Fedders, who looked as old and worn as the stables, had gotten the word that I was hiding out from some sort of kidnap plot.

"Well, nobody's gonna come here and do a snatch," he assured me. "Too many folks around too much of the time. You're never really alone here, which is the other good thing. If anything gets dangerous, whether it's uninvited guests or rattlesnakes, you just give a holler and you'll be surprised how fast everybody shows up to help."

For what it was worth, I believed him.

In the very meager stack of reading materials in the main house was a book called *If Men Ruled the World*. It was a fairly simplistic book, large type, very simplified language for easy reading, but basically it theorized that if men ran things instead of women there would be world peace, mutual trust, brotherhood, safety, and goodwill. They could hardly conceive of how naive they were.

The problem, of course, was that finding a hideout had never been a serious problem for me, although sometimes getting out of that hideout had been difficult. This time, though, I was determined not to do that, not to fall into that trap. I wanted to be a player; that's what that LSM hookup at the backup station had been all about. Using that backup, assuming I made it through as I did, whoever reactivated the center should be able to find me without problems. Maybe it was Cynthia, and she wasn't too great about those kinds of technical things, but there would be the Boojums with their fancy little flying saucer to help out, and they and Cynthia had looked right cozy the last time I'd seen them together.

Well, that wasn't much of a hope. I found that the communications shack had phone books for half of creation, and I began looking through the various yellow pages starting with San Antonio and Austin, trying to find something that would sound like the institute or the Zyzzx Software Factory or anything that would indicate "Command Center." The problem wasn't that there was a lack of candidates; on the contrary, there were more possibilities than I could count.

The real problem was how the hell could I go incognito in a society like this?

The answer struck me about my fifth day there, when I was watching some of the boys just horsing around in the corral area. That's just what they looked like-boys playing. I still had a pretty good head of hair. If I shaved especially clean, and if I combed and styled the hair right, then dressed in girls' clothing, I just might be able to pass for, oh, a prepubescent eleven- or twelve-year-old girl. With a little care about how I spoke, and if I didn't talk much, I might also get away with that part. Hell, I knew what it was like

to be a girl; now was the time to put those memories into a kind of method acting. The one outstanding problem, the oversized member, could be handled with baggy-cut pants and some restraint, physical if need be, against the thigh. I was sure I could pull it off, at least for a few days. Long enough, I hoped, to reconnoiter the likely suspects.

The other problem would be transportation. Twelve was a bit young to be using motorized transport alone and these were fair-sized cities, particularly San Antonio. A *lot* of area to cover. There was no way around it, though. Once I got in, I'd have to use either public transit or a bicycle. Anything else would be more than obvious and would certainly attract attention.

There were some guys on the ranch who could help, too. I'd never thought of cross-dressing as part of a power trip, but it could be in this nutty world. They even had stilts to gain quite a bit of height, and the clothing could be padded out, but I knew it would take far too much practice for me to get convincing with some of that. On the other hand, the hairdressers and seamsters and makeup specialists could create a pretty convincing proto-teen out of somebody like me. They even dyed my hair a kind of strawberry blond, and brushed on stuff that made my eyebrows match, dramatically changing my looks, particularly with the kind of pixie cut they gave me. One thing for sure I'd proven last lifetime was that I had the kind of face that could be either sex. This really proved it.

The neat thing was, they took it as something of a challenge, a creative endeavor; nobody once asked me why the hell I was doing it or what it was all for. Everybody had their own secrets and motives, and nobody much cared so long as it wasn't a threat to the group. There was even a kind of lozenge you could suck on that lasted for hours but didn't taste all that great. It coated not only the throat but the larynx and other air passages and actually shifted the voice a half octave. It didn't work forever-about ten minutes after it was completely gone, or if you drank hot liquids, the effect wore off-but it would be handy. Getting used to the taste, though, which was kind of a cross between Listerine and day-old grass clippings, was a problem. Apparently any attempt to flavor it also caused it to lose its effect.

Almost as bad was this bath they called the "sheep dip," which smelled and looked a lot like its namesake. It was kind of acidic and greasy, and you didn't bathe in it, you had it applied to you, almost *all* of you, and it stung like a bad all-over sunburn. After it hardened to a dark, glistening substance, it was dissolved in a very soapy and very hot bath. When it was over, you'd lost almost all your body hair. Most of your body was kind of a pinkish red, too, but that went away after a few days. What didn't was the effect. That stuff pretty well killed hair at the roots. My hairy body had been reduced to just the pubic area and what was on the top of my head. When it was all over, and I put on the specially tailored clothes and cowgirl hat, I looked very much like a young girl. To be frank, it wasn't at all comfortable, but it *looked* right.

I knew that playing this role wouldn't be a problem, but if I got caught, or couldn't find what I was looking for, then things would start to get tough. Still, I had a number to call to get a ride back to the ranch if need be from anywhere in the big-cities corridor. The only thing I really lacked was money. Fortunately, Jed had managed to get in contact with Harry in Galveston, and Harry had gotten Trina to transfer the funds I had there to Jed's store. I could then draw it at the ranch. Not nearly as much as I'd like, but it was a few hundred bucks.

"Enough to get a kid knocked over or worse," one of the guys at the ranch warned me. "Make sure nobody sees more than a tiny bit of that money."

He didn't know the half of it. The fact was, for all the problems, there was a hell of a lot less crime and violence in this country than in any incarnation I could recall. There was still petty crime and bigotry and intolerance, things that knew no gender barrier, but it really was pretty safe to walk most streets at night.

These people, even the guys, had no idea what kind of defenses you had to have back in my old worlds just to go shopping downtown. Still, I wasn't about to argue with the sentiment "Lead them not into temptation."

In fact, everything was going so perfectly that it wasn't until I was studying street maps of Austin and looking at the university area, office buildings and industrial parks along the area where the computer companies were, that somebody asked me the question that should ha/e been the first one asked.

"Don't want to get nosy, and I'm not, but what happens if you find this place you're looking for?" one of the guys asked me. "These sure ain't your friends or you wouldn't be goin' to so much trouble."

He was right. What if I *did* find the Command Center?

Would it matter? What could I do? Walk in and say, "Okay, everybody up against the wall. I'm taking over now"?

All I could do was press on for now and keep improvising. Hell, the odds were I'd wind up dead and buried anyway. Still, I responded, "Well, there's friends as well as enemies in this. Once I know where the bad girls are, I figure I can search for the cavalry next."

It was pure bravado, but, damn it, I was bound and determined that this time, the time when it made the most sense to lay low and let everybody else fight, *this* time I was gonna be front and center, right in the middle of things.

I got a ride to Austin with a long-haul trucker named Gail. She seemed real protective, bought the story about me being poor and needing to get home from a work-study program in Houston for the spring-break holidays. The spring-break cover story was handy but limiting to me; I had only a little over a week to be able to get around without somebody asking me why I wasn't in school.

With the aid of the lozenge and by relaxing my mind-set, Gail and the fellow truckers we met at truck stops along the way bought me as a young girl. The guys had done a hell of a good job, and I was able to bring up my previous Brand Box persona enough to keep things convincing. I knew how to move right and, if need be, how to talk right.

In fact, everybody was so taken by me that I had to fend off women trying to buy me things or do me favors. It was a whole different world, a world denied men in this society. I'm not sure what they'd have done if they discovered what I was, but no matter how uncomfortable things were for me, I was bound and determined to keep up the act to the end.

I actually slipped away from Gail at the terminal in Austin; she was talking about taking me directly home, and I didn't want any of that sort of thing. I suspect she'd probably put me down as a runaway of some kind and be worried, but she wouldn't press it. It was a big city and you couldn't solve the world's problems.

The first object was to find a base of operations where I wouldn't be subject to a lot of questions. That probably meant roughing it, although Austin in April was certainly warm enough. I wanted real concealment; the last thing I needed was cops and Juvenile Services and all sorts of questions. This masquerade wouldn't last long under the kind of exam they gave, and my prints would be on file at least at the state level, so they'd know who I was and that would go out on the police wires. It didn't take a lot of imagination from that point to figure who'd show up to claim me.

I found an old pipe-a big one-down in a hollow in a city park that wasn't bad. It would give shelter, wasn't going to fill up with drainage, and a little work with some grass provided just enough comfort for sleeping, with my oversized purse as a pillow. It would do, and did, for my first night there.

The next day, after a fast-food breakfast nearby and some fix-up work in the mirror of the women's bathroom, I set out with a bus map of the city and a lot of change and decided to check out the more public areas. You never knew; I could get lucky.

Naturally, though, that was the last thing that happened, and it became a pretty boring routine. What exactly was I looking for, anyway? I mean, in both cases the Command. Center had occupied a two-story administrative building and, in one case, a second warehouse-like building where all the real work was done, with a third for storage and cafeteria. In the last incarnation, it was just one large, two-story building that wound up having a couple of levels buried deep underground. The common elements were few beyond that, and not much help.

In both cases, Al had worked for the government, but in one he'd been plainclothes and in the other a navy security officer.

After three days of riding all over the city and meeting lots of dead ends, I had to face it. Unless I saw and recognized somebody, it was hopeless. I might as well call for a pickup now.

That night, dead tired, discouraged to the point of depression, sitting on the grass near the old pipe worriedly watching some lightning and hearing the sound of distant thunder, I began to wonder what the hell I thought I could do.

The fact was, I just wanted to do something, *anything* other than going back to being a beach bum or a bull cook for a herd of gay caballeros, and, most of all, I didn't want to wind up crawling back to Mom.

It was very dark in the park, except for the occasional distant flashes of lightning through the trees, and the insect noise and thunder made it both dramatic and more than a little bit scary. I wondered just how solid that pipe was in a downpour, and whether or not it was metal.

Not in any kind of real sense, but in a kind of vision in my mind to which I was but a third party, a visitor looking on, I suddenly saw and heard-someone. *"Who are you!"* the caterpillar asked. "Cory, same as always," I responded automatically, the way you respond "Fine, thank you" to "How are you doing?" even if you're about to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge.

"Wrong!" responded the caterpillar. *"Holy, shit, Maddox! Haven't you learned anything yet?"*

"Huh? What. . . ?"

"You always were the most clueless idiot of the bunch, but I'd hoped by now you'd at least have a little more grasp of things. You've had all that experience now, all that knowledge, and you have the benefit of Rini's own power trip as well. And you've learned nothing ? "

"Huh? What do you mean? Who *are* you?"

The caterpillar sighed in frustration. Finally it asked, *"You see that approaching thunderstorm out there?"*

"Yeah, sure. So?"

"Make it stop."

"Huh? I don't get you at all."

"That is becoming increasingly obvious. Still, for the first time in a long time you have an advantage here. You are still linked to the master computer through the backup systems.

That's the key, you know. That's how they draw the power for the saucer, that's how they become the March Hare or the Mock Turtle, that's how they open up rabbit holes and get out as well as in. When Rini connected to the March Hare Network when imprisoned in the house with the pimp, she connected to the main computer through that same backup. She 'd already been processed by Al through the central nexus, so she was conducive to the hookup. You didn't need that processing. You exist in, through, and beyond this shell. Before, though, you weren't connected. You didn't come into a new incarnation still attached to the master computer. This time you did. You have the power. Use it. Or do you think all this is somehow real?"

"I-I don't know how. Even if I followed what you were saying, I don't know how!" I felt close to tears.

"Rini had no education at all and she could do it. You know why? She didn't think about it so much, she just did it! Think of objects! Everything, everyone, objects, collections of objects, sets, classes, subclasses. You're not God, not even here. You can't manipulate them all. But you sure as hell can pick one."

What the hell was I being told? That I had more power than I realized? Or had I just gained that power when I incarnated through the backup center? Even so, the implication was that I'd had it all the time I was here. Had it then, have it now.

The first time I'd connected to the greater net, the caterpillar had done it, and given me a choice. The second time, I connected by mere proximity to the massive power being drawn in by the experiments in Yakima. Connected so completely that I could switch bodies, travel along lines of force and wires of copper. . .

And then Rini, set up as a separate object within her own world by Al and Dannie at the institute and reprogrammed as an alternate "me." She, too, had drawn from the institute, from the main computer, while a prisoner there. Enough to actually influence things, escape, get away. And, later, in Vern's place, at that basement computer console, she had been able to tap into the backup center and receive just what she needed- empowerment, a direct link.

The caterpillar was saying that I didn't need that. That I could do it without having some program merge in my head.

Program? Wait. . . Damn it, it was so obvious! I mean, we *knew* that this universe came out of an interaction of Alice McKee's subconscious and the master program. The whole thing, one vast shell, and we were all objects on it. No, *everything* was an object or collection of objects on it!

A little knowledge was a dangerous thing, and the power was as limited as that knowledge, but it was *something*, by god! I wasn't powerless! None of us were, if we understood even the most elementary part of what we were really doing.

That was one reason why they tried so hard to either conceal it all from us or get us all under control. Otherwise, we few were potentially the most dangerous people in the universe- *any* universe, at least any one we were in.

I tried to clear my mind and manage wireframe mode the way Rini had, but I couldn't quite get it. She'd had a device, of course-but the damned device was really just an add-on piece of code, an object, as well. She had needed the code patch, but did I?

Concentrate . . . concentrate . . . the hell with the thunder and lightning, it's just there to distract, a running subroutine . . .

The night and the park came alive in ghostly off-white outline. It was fascinating to see, to watch. I put out my hand and looked, and saw that it was like some white-on-black pencil sketch, but slickly animated. I kept looking, and saw that the hand and wrist were far more complex underneath, with structures almost too complex to follow . . . with number and letter codes and occasional little rectangular labels with long Latin names on them.

How far down could I go? Would there be labels or part numbers or reference numbers for each cell, each component of a cell, each *atom*? If you blew it up enough to see, would a cell have little labels saying mitochondria and genetic helix? Or would it be even more detailed?

The storm suddenly broke all around me and I got very, very wet in a hurry even in the shelter of the tree. I was extremely pissed off at this interruption to my wonder. I looked up at the storm and saw its wild fury as a sequence of numbers, ones and zeros changing faster, faster, ever faster, but not quite a blur.

I didn't make it stop; I ordered it to keep away from me, and it moved damned fast off to the north.

Being soaked was miserable and uncomfortable, but I could see where the storm had created the patch set and I simply deleted that patch.

I was suddenly completely dry, as if never rained on.

This thing had real possibilities!

"One last thing!" I heard the caterpillar call, his voice seemingly growing fainter as if falling fast. *"When you do it, they can monitor it! I'd get the hell out of there and stop playing games if I were you!"*

IV

A MESSAGE FROM THE OTHER SIDE

In the recordings of Rini's experiences with this sort of thing that I'd gotten from the Brand Box in my past life, I knew something of what it was like and what it could do, but, frankly, the real thing was something else again. I did have a sort of godlike feeling, knowing I could influence various things, that I was suddenly at least a minor programmer in the universe's largest AutoCAD simulation.

This had been what the caterpillar had been grooming me for since the start, the assumption of some sort

of power and control. And, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, while I might have had the power all along, I needed to go through a lot before I believed it.

The last warning from my ally, whoever or whatever it might be, was the flip side of this new power. It *was* limited. You didn't just tune in to something this complex and change it to suit you. And the others certainly knew how to handle it, at least most of them. AI wasn't as much of a threat, I was certain, since he would have lost the firsthand knowledge, the feel experience would give him, and the others would have as much or perhaps slightly more control than me thanks to living a few more lives. I wasn't sure if I was ready for Rita yet, for example. Still, the two most powerful would be men in this woman-dominated world-Les, wherever he was, and Walt.

And Cynthia Matalon as well, I suddenly realized. Flaky, uneducated, she shouldn't be underrated because of her nuttiness.

Well, if I had to take care in exercising this new power not to reveal myself, there was an advantage. Now that I knew how to sensitize myself to this kind of energy, this programming mode, wouldn't others also be obvious to *me*? Perhaps there was a different, more absolute way to the Command Center.

I let my mind go nearly blank, casting out in all directions and letting sensations come in, sensations beyond those that mere mortals could perceive.

There *was* something. Somebody. Several somebodies, in fact. Over there, maybe a mile and a quarter from the park, over by the Capitol building. They were moving, probably in a car, but I sensed them, or, rather, sensed their difference from all the other people in the city.

I cast my net a bit wider, not wanting to draw attention to myself in the same way, and sensed a sudden, more powerful concentration of the same sort of beings out beyond the city, but not very far. There were too many beings and too much of a sense of throbbing power for it to be just a few of us going here and there. It had to be the Command Center in whatever guise it existed in this universe.

I was too tired in spite of my excitement to do much tonight toward reaching that goal, but now that I knew how to zero in on it, I might well be able to go right up to it. What I'd do then I didn't know. I sure didn't want to fall into Rita's hands at this stage, but I really wanted to know who and where and what they were.

I brought the cast back in, looking for any local threat. The ones in the car were several blocks past by this point and heading away from me, but I suddenly felt a contrary cast and a sensation of puzzlement. What I could do, they could do.

Still, the power and skill of whoever it was wasn't anywhere near being up to mine, and I was just beginning to experiment with it. Even one-on-one, I felt pretty sure I could take these folks in a contest of wills.

I wasn't so sure about the others, and I wasn't at all certain, either, that just because something wasn't real it couldn't hurt or possibly even kill. People had delusions all the time-the old bit about believing you were Napoleon or Alexander or that somebody close was possessed by the devil was very real to them-and I had felt enough pain, even in *this* life, to know that there were levels beyond which you couldn't go no matter if it was "real" or not.

I waited there, just "listening," but none of the presences I could perceive grew any closer or more familiar, and, finally, I decided to get some sleep and see what the bright light of day would bring.

It turned out that control, the ability to either turn this power off or to make it unconscious in use, was the key to survival. If I were in Chicago and none of the other "incarnates" was within three states, it would make no difference, but here, in Austin, where a number, perhaps the majority, were congregated, it was something I had to master and fast.

I was getting dirty and it was tough to keep myself presentable, particularly masquerading as a kid. This was really the day; I either found what I was looking for or I packed it in.

I took a bus as far as I could in the direction of the strongest presence, and felt the almost magnetic attraction grow stronger and stronger as I went south and west. Eventually, I ran out of at least the knowledge of how to continue on by local bus, so I got off and started walking. It filled most of the morning and half of the afternoon, but I was too close now not to follow the draw even if it took till past midnight. The walk through the suburbs and local small business districts did give me an odd sense of this world, or at least the North American take on it, whose details hadn't really struck me. Perhaps it was getting closer to that energy source, but it seemed as if more and more of the old me, both old versions of me, surfaced, and for the first time I saw this world through an outsider's eyes rather than as an inhabitant.

As Cory Kassemi, I'd focused mostly on my own role and my own interrelationships. Most of my experience, though, had been in a resort city and in a downtown urban setting. Things that I'd pretty much not noticed or had taken for granted seemed to leap out at me now, maybe because of the energy, maybe because I had little else to think about.

. There was little in the way of single-family housing, even out here, for one thing. Oh, there were large homes with lawns and gardens, but they seemed more like group homes, with two or three women living there together, sometimes with one male, sometimes without. There was also a certain casualness I doubted would have worked in my past worlds without causing a lot of trouble. It was kind of startling to see bare-breasted women even though I'd seen a bunch of them in Galveston. Again, it was the setting-mowing the lawn or getting a tan on a lounge chair. Not everybody had the body for it, of course, and not everybody who didn't have the body for it refrained from exposure anyway, but it was the casualness of it all, the lack of concern. Men were around for the one function for which they were needed, but they weren't any threat.

There were kids around, more than I thought there would be, and they, too, showed a remarkable lack of

concern for their safety and well-being. There were all sorts of nationalistic and cultural differences that divided the world up, and lots of tensions, but on a local level this world simply had less violence.

In the affluent areas, the kids tended to be almost exclusively female. Male children were either kept inside, sent away to cloistered boarding schools like I'd been, or given over to some common greater family care. Only in the poorer neighborhoods did you see boys, who tended to be dirty, bruised, picked on, and often just plain miserable, with nothing but giant diapers or ankle-length pullovers to wear. Their relative status and value was clear from the contrast with their sisters.

I recalled what Walt had called this. A revenge world, he'd said. Not justice, but reversal. Deep down, Alice McKee hadn't wanted the equality and social justice she had preached and probably had convinced herself she wanted; deep down, Alice McKee had wanted to get even with men and make them suffer under an exaggerated sense of social oppression she firmly believed was aimed at women in the worlds she'd lived in. Sort of like slaves decrying and hating slavery, until they revolted and became the leaders and, instead of abolishing slavery, enslaved those who'd once been their masters. So much for principle. It was proof of a cynical view of the human mind, but in none of the worlds did it look as if humanity had produced a majority of saints.

Shortly after five in the afternoon, I found the Command Center. I can tell you the exact time because of the huge church whose bells pealed the passing of the hour just before I found what I'd been searching for.

It wasn't in the church or on church property, although that wouldn't have surprised me much. Just beyond the church, which had the usual Tex-Mex, Spanish Colonial look about it and seemed as large as a cathedral, there was a small service road that a sign on the corner said led to the applied physics lab. Exactly whose lab it didn't say. I guess you were supposed to know.

At any rate, I turned down the path, and felt very strong presences just to my right as I passed the church. The home of Rita and the Standishes and maybe others? I wondered. Probably. Its proximity was just too convenient.

The road ran into a fairly dense grove of trees perhaps two hundred yards beyond the back of the church and its rectory, a grove I felt sure had been planted to shield any view of what was beyond from the street. Until now I'd played the casual walker, but as soon as I reached the woods without anybody grabbing me, I got off the side of the road and headed into the shelter of the trees.

It didn't matter. The trees were maybe a city block thick, and then I hit the fences. In some cases, the outermost fence actually threaded its way between the last stand of trees. Looking back toward where the road was, I could see a gatehouse and a whole set of controls for access. Looking up at the fence, which was maybe fifteen feet high, I could see nasty barbed wire on top and a lot of other even more gruesome devices to impale anybody nutty enough to try getting over it. At my height, it was absurd to even think of it.

Beyond the first barrier was a second fence, looking much like the first but having an array of incredibly fancy gadgets on top, the purpose of which I couldn't guess except that it wouldn't be nice for anybody climbing it to find out. You could hear a steady sixty-cycle hum coming from it as well, and I suspected it wasn't just to power whatever they had on top.

Beyond that was a grassy area with wheel ruts, as if made by Jeeps on countless patrols, and beyond that was a solid green fence with an angled top that prevented any view inside. Beyond the green fence was the source of the power I was feeling, but that was all I could see, feel, or understand.

There were two sudden thoughts rising in me, each at war with the other. On the one hand, if I had the power to divert a storm or dry myself instantly, I almost certainly had the power to walk right through that line of fences and alarms and live. On the other hand, since others like me could sense the use of such power and since those others were pretty well concentrated here, to do so would be to invite a lot of company real fast.

I had a very strong feeling that all this wasn't to keep me out, but to invite me in and effect another social transformation-male spider to tiny little fly.

Okay, then, Cory, why the hell are you here in the lion's den in the first place?

Good question, one I'd asked myself more than once by this point. Just knowing where the enemy was did provide some advantage, albeit a small one, but the question of "*now what?*" loomed ever larger as I sat there in the gathering twilight. Certainly I wasn't going anywhere until after dark, maybe until well after dark.

I took out my last candy bar and nibbled on it idly, wishing I had brought a canteen as well.

Having gone into the den, though, I at least decided that I'd get as much of a look at their setup as I could. I eased myself through the trees, checking as carefully as I could to insure that they hadn't also put some kind of booby traps here, and got to a point where I was still concealed but had a fairly direct view of the gatehouse and road going in.

At least the sign on the gatehouse-not the one warning of dire consequences for unauthorized entry-told me what I was supposedly outside of. TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY APPLIED PHYSICS LABORATORY, it read, and, in smaller lettering, OPERATED FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD BY TANAKA INDUSTRIES.

Yeah, uh-huh. Nothing like not bothering to be subtle. When you paint a target so big and so obvious that all your real enemies can see it and then you scream, "Kick me!" said enemies have a right to be suspicious. On the other hand, said target might well be overconfident. Rini, who hadn't even been one of us, had stumbled into and managed to outfox and even destroy quite a number of these selfsame bastards. If they had enough power, if they could draw up and switch on like they had before, then I knew well that

none could sense another presence, not in that level of energy field. The same thing that would give them vast power both collectively and as individuals would also mask an enemy. It had more than once before, and I learned real well.

At least, I hoped I knew what I was doing. There wasn't a lot of traffic going in and out, but the occasional car indicated that this was a twenty-four-hour operation, all right. The gates were nicely angled so that nobody could

see straight in, and it was next to impossible to get an idea of just what was beyond the green fence and its gate. You could probably see it fine from the air, but it would look much like any of a hundred other private or public research facilities, either government or corporate, in the surrounding area and would be unlikely to reveal anything. Somehow I suspected that the air defense was pretty good, since they'd had to figure in the outlandish possibility of a flying-saucer attack.

I doubted that the Boojums would be dumb enough to go that route anyway, although they had been convinced once to try a ground assault.

Most of the cars didn't give me a sense of having fellow-incarnates inside, although one sleek one with two tough-looking women inside it, one smoking a big cigar, sure did. The night was too dark and the car was moving too fast for me to get a really good look at anything, but there were several incarnates, even Danielle Tanaka, who could give off that kind of strong energy signature.

I began to wonder if the concept of an energy signature might not be literally true. I hadn't really been able to determine a sufficient variation in anything except amplitude that would let me differentiate one from the other, but might there be some way to do it, reliably, even from a distance, without going to wireframe and risking detection? I wished I knew. I wished that the damned caterpillar had given me more information than he did. If it was so important to him that I grow and learn to use this power, then why the hell didn't he hand me an operator's manual?

I sighed and settled down for what I hoped would be an uneventful night. After a while, just out of sheer boredom and awash with the proximity I felt to the Command Center, I dozed off.

And promptly fell several feet onto hot sand.

It had been quite a while since I'd been here, but it hadn't changed very much. The shaman's world still had the varicolored beach; the black, warm, eerily still water; and the huge, gnarled forest that went up thousands of feet toward the cavernous fairyland ceiling.

I still didn't understand what the place was, or why it had such stability, but here it was, and I was almost getting comfortable with it, alien though it was to anything in my "human" experience.

In the past, I had arrived in the form of some sort of gargoyle, or flying monstrosity, but not this time. Just

as Rini had been able to somehow access this place and arrive in her own form, this time I was there as my Cory Kassemi self, only naked and exposed.

Maybe I was small and not terribly strong, but at least I knew my way around here a little. I walked back off the beach, whose sand was not only sticky but also hot, and into the vast tangle of roots and deadwood from the trees that were so huge that even their remnants created habitats and pathways large enough to travel through. I knew that there had been a shaman's pit of some sort over to my left a few hundred yards or so, and I made for it as deliberately as I could. If someone, *anyone*, else was here and could speak with me, it would be a breakthrough. If Wilma had recovered and was somehow here, that would be even better. Except for my first experience, Wilma had always been here, or had come, when I'd fallen through. She could do it any time she wanted to, if, of course, she still remembered how.

I found the pit after a short hike, but there was no one there and the fire was cold. It looked, in fact, as if no one had been there in quite a long time, perhaps since the last visit that registered in my memory. That worried me; Wilma wasn't the only one who'd been able to make it here, and my last visit had been a lifetime ago. Was this place somehow dying, or losing its ability to draw those who could find it? That was a very disturbing thought. This strange place had initially frightened the living hell out of me, but, over time, it had instead turned into a bedrock of sanity, a safe area where only those I could trust might be found.

Why was I here now? Had I been brought here, or had I unwittingly triggered a subroutine in the master program that controlled my own existence that tripped me into here? I had wound up here most often when I had felt particularly lost, alone, abandoned, and with nowhere else to turn; while that summed up my predicament, I hadn't had the sense of outright *desperation* that had triggered my other visits here.

This was a world of magic, elemental creatures, and minor gods. Perhaps they, too, were nothing more than computer-generated creations, but, if so, they were outside the continuous, endless progression of realities.

I sat at the fire pit for quite a long time, just staring at it and wondering why I was here, for how long, and just what I was supposed to do.

There was a rustling, a wind in the giant trees, that was eerie and startling; this place had the most static air I'd ever experienced.

I looked up, but could see barely a ripple in the trees or feel any real movement of air on my body. Still, the sound of rustling high above came in waves, like a breeze in the faraway topside regions of the ceiling-sky.

"Light the fire..."

I frowned. It was an eerie sound, more like a great creature's exhale than real speech, yet it sounded as if

the breeze itself were speaking to me.

"Light the fire..."

I looked around. Suppose it was some sort of message, some kind of sentient attempt to reach me by one of those mysterious "Powers" that seemed to always be hovering around? Not the caterpillar, certainly. Not here. But something else, something powerful, nonetheless.

"Light the fire..."

I frowned again. "With what?" I asked, aloud, more puzzled than upset. I had no matches, no lighter, and even if I'd had a lens there was no sun to give me the energy to focus it. Still, there had to be *some* way to do it. I seemed to remember that the shamans hadn't exactly arrived in business suits.

Rub two sticks together? Hell, I'd tried that many times. It was possible, I knew, but without a bow to help generate the necessary friction, you could get the sticks hot, but not hot enough.

But what about the rock? *"Light the fire..."*

I looked up to the heavens, irritated. "I'm trying! I'm trying!" I told whoever or whatever it was. "You want instant gratification, next time teleport a Boy Scout!"

I searched frantically for something to work with and finally saw several well-worn stones on a small bed of straw near the fire pit. I could recognize flint when I saw it, and the straw was incredibly dry. I had no idea what was the proper way to do this, so I just started experimenting, putting the larger well-worn rock down into the straw and using the rounded second one to draw along the first in a fairly rapid series of motions. I got sparks, in some cases big sparks, but nothing seemed to catch.

In all my lives I remembered seeing news stories about huge fires caused by carelessness, accidents, or a freak of nature that would burn down half a country. But when I was presented with the basic tools to start a blaze in dry grass, it didn't seem to work.

Momentarily giving up, I finally examined the pit itself. There was a kind of liquid there, viscous and smelly, with a kind of scum or oil slick on top of it. Some sort of fuel for the bigger fire? Maybe, but what good did it do me? I wasn't going to try and spark flint into it. I'd be more scared it would flare up and engulf me in the flame as well.

But if I could either hold my nose and scoop a little out onto the straw, or maybe dip some straw into it and put it back in the pile, then . . .

It was worth a try.

It wasn't a very professional job, but I managed to get a thick clump of straw together, dip it in, swirl it around, then put it back on the pile. I figured I must be on the right track; the old ghostly voice hadn't kept nagging me. Maybe I hurt its feelings.

My wrist took a beating and I still wasn't getting anywhere after repeated attempts to ignite it. Finally, I sighed, sat back, and decided that maybe putting the big stone right on the wet straw wasn't smart. How about angling it over so the sparks would leap out?

I took a deep breath, planted the stone, and tried it. First try, nothing. Second try, nothing. I decided that third time was either the charm or I'd drop back ten yards and punt. One more time . . .

The oily straw exploded into flame, and I fell backward, off balance and momentarily blinded by the unexpected brilliance. Still, it was burning almost as fast as flash paper. I rolled back over, tried to grab the little bit that wasn't still in flame, and tossed it into the fire pit.

For a moment I thought nothing had happened or that the flame had been suffocated before it could ignite the rest of the oily liquid. Then, suddenly, I was pushed back again by a wave of heat and the flames shot up in a huge vertical column.

I scuttled away, sliding rearward on my ass, not wanting to take the time to get up. The column looked much too regular and symmetrical to be natural.

It rose up and up, but never quite reached the height of the trees or the ceiling, and seemed to terminate abruptly like the top of a Doric column.

Closer to my level, at least seven or eight feet up from the pit, what almost looked like a fearsome, ghostly face formed in the column, which had become a uniform yellow-orange. I couldn't really make out much, but there were definitely eyes there, and a mouth, and perhaps some semblance of nostrils, although what such a creature might breathe is beyond me.

"G... down... rub... ter and cover you... wi... san..." it said, the words broken by crackles of static. *"Need... cond... Hurry! The con... last long!"*

For a moment I couldn't figure out what the hell it wanted. There wasn't enough information, and my face mirrored my confusion. "Need cond"? Cond what? *Think!* "G'down"? Get down? Go down? Go down, next word had to be "to," but to where? "Ter"? Ter what? Or what ter? *Water! Go down to the water and cover you-*

All of a sudden, I put two and two together. The last time I had a vision of this place, a bunch of the shamen all covered with colored sand had been sitting around this *thing* that had formed from the smoke in a far less active pit. I got up and hurried back down the path to the water. I jumped in over my head, getting myself nice and wet, and surged back to the beach and rolled around in the sand until I was

literally covered with fine golden grains that stuck to my skin like glue.

The sand must be some kind of electrical conductor. The damned thing was a communication device!

I tripped several times on the way back, but the column was still there when I finally returned. The burning column was maybe half the height it had been and was very slowly shrinking. It wasn't kidding. This connection wasn't going to last long at this rate.

I came up as close as I could, feeling the heat, and sat down. "*Think!*" the voice commanded, far more clearly, sounding almost human now. "*Concentrate!*"

"Who are you?" I shouted.

"It would be meaningless to you if I told you. What you *can* understand, I believe, is that I am not inside the matrix that you are trapped in. You *do* know what I mean by that?"

"More or less. You're not stuck in this never-ending series of lives and programs. I'm talking with somebody from the real world."

"Who can tell what the real world is?" it responded, not very reassuringly. "At least I'm not in your fix. I know what you're going through. We've been working on this for some time but we've been able to reach very few people who can figure out we're not gods, demons, or dementia. Listen carefully, because time's very short and I don't know how many times we can do this before we burn out the connection."

"I'm listening!" The top of the column was getting lower and lower, almost to the level of the ghostly face, which began moving down the column to compensate.

"We believe we have developed a solution to get you all out of there, but it is complex. We are going to transmit the programming sequence if time permits. It must be administered to the Core Computer, not the backups, via a Brand Box connection. There's not enough time to explain any more at this time. If you trust us, if you want a chance at getting out, then you must reach into what is left of the flame and do it *now!* Without hesitation!"

"But I'll burn!"

"Do you think that this body is any more real than the others you've had? *Now or never!*"

The hell with it. So what if I burned up here? Somehow I knew I was still also asleep, or comatose, back in the world. I leaned forward and plunged both hands into the column.

The sensation wasn't what I expected at all, less a burn than a tremendous electric shock, and then my whole mind, my whole consciousness kind of disintegrated, and I felt a mass of incomprehensible stuff

just flooding into unused areas of my head. I was frozen, unable to move, unable to act, unable to think, just experiencing.

And then it stopped, and the column was gone completely. The last thing I got, and the only thing I could rationally comprehend, was "*Transmission terminated by loss of connection.*"

I felt very dizzy and not a little nauseated. I fell back onto the sand, so stunned I didn't even look to see if my arms were still there.

Before I passed out, there was enough rationality left inside my mind to wonder, *Loss of connection? Did I get the whole thing or not?* And what had I gotten? I felt weird, light-headed, dizzy, and confused, but I had no access at all to whatever they'd sent, and no knowledge of how to interpret it anyway.

Sensation suddenly roared back into me, and with it an incredible wave of pain so bad that I screamed and passed out completely.

The tolling of the church bells woke me up well into daylight, and the area had a busier sound. I could hear lawn mowers and the sound of highway traffic just beyond the trees. I hadn't done a precise count of the number of chimes, being still groggy from the experience and the nearly comatose sleep that followed, but it seemed to last pretty long. Nine, maybe ten counts.

Finally I managed a look at my watch, but since it said 10:42, it was no help at all. Something had knocked it off.

The first thing I had to think about once my head cleared enough was whether or not what I'd experienced was real even in the sense in which I now understood reality. Had I actually translated into that strange shaman region or did I just wish that I had and allowed my dreams and exhaustion to fulfill the desire? And, if it was real, what, exactly, had happened? Did I, somehow, actually make communication with people outside of our endless existence? Was there now code in my head to rescue us, and, if so, did it all get transferred before the connection was lost? And, finally, assuming it was all true up to this point, what assurance did I have that the ghostly face in the fire and the transferred code were what he'd said they were?

The proof that I'd had at least *some* transcendental experience was clear when I absently looked at my hands. I'd been white and fair-skinned before; the hands I saw were a deep golden brown. I looked down at my chest and at my legs and saw the same thing. I was pretty sure I hadn't changed form; something had turned my complexion very dark. I rummaged in the purse for the small compact and looked at my face in the mirror. Yeah, it was still the same old me, but the coloration had continued to darken me beyond the usual levels of a good tan. This wasn't any suntan; it was a real change. My hair hadn't gone the same way, though-it was white, giving me a very strange, almost unearthly look.

The code, or whatever had been transferred to me from the fire column, had done this, perhaps in connection with the sand. I suspected I was permanently changed, but that it was some side effect. All it would do would be to make me less recognizable to those who knew me, while making me stand out in any crowd even to total strangers. It was not helpful. No matter what else happened, one very quick purchase was going to be some black hair dye. Even my *eyebrows* were white! Good thing I had bathed in the sheep dip to get rid of my body hair, though. I could just imagine the effect of all that stark white hair on somebody who was now very dark and still looked twelve years old.

Enough of that, I told myself. No easy way to wash up or get breakfast around here, or so it seemed. There was a mini-mart that I'd passed on the way, about three blocks down the road, but those places never had rest rooms, not even in this female-dominated society.

Of course, I could just walk up to the installation and introduce myself, but while that would have gotten me cleaned up and most likely fed, I wasn't too thrilled about the dinner possibilities.

Okay, so what now? I had code I couldn't use unless I could get inside the Command Center, I had some power that I couldn't use without alerting all my worst enemies, and I had no allies in this world that I knew of or at least that I knew where to find.

Damn it, Cynthia! Where the hell are you when I really need you ?

Hell, what did I know about anybody's condition here at the moment? I'd been in touch with nobody, and I'd been tracked down and was on the run from my enemies.

What I really needed was just somebody else to talk to who wouldn't immediately call the psycho ward. The face in the fire had also warned that the backup facility wouldn't do; I'd need a Brand Box from the Command Center, since it was the only one with a direct connection to the master computer. That meant here, not central Washington, if in fact that was where the damned backup center still was. If the big one was here, they might well be anywhere.

This level of virtual reality was becoming the pits.

There was no way I was going to sit there hungry and thirsty all day long; besides, I needed some time to think. Walking out the way I came in, though, wasn't practical. There were too many people around now. Best to see how far this stand of trees really went and what was beyond. If I intersected with a less traveled street a few blocks down, it wouldn't bother me a bit.

I could *feel* them around me, beyond the fence, in back of me, in and around the church. There was no way to shut the sensations out, and I could only pray that just having this sensation wasn't necessarily drawing them to me. Of course, if I could sense them, the odds were pretty good that the reverse was true, but unlike them, I wouldn't necessarily expect others of my kind to be around.

Texas is mostly flat and it's mostly prairie, even if it's often overdeveloped in spots. That means most "forests" are planted and most high cover is deliberate, so the trees gave out pretty quickly after I reached the limits of the APL grounds. Unfortunately, that also was the limit of development in this direction; I was looking out at a more typical flat landscape with only mild contours. In the distance, the road by the church, whose twin steeples I could still see behind me, melded with the interstate going south and west from here. At that point there was an interchange with the usual services: a gas station, minimart, and restaurant. I wasn't too sure I wanted to eat in that restaurant, considering that it might well be used by locals on a break, but that kind of minimart was designed for travelers and it would have a rest room and snacks that would be sufficient. I doubted if it would have Clairol, but you never knew.

I was pretty rank and I knew it. I needed more than just a quick wash by this point; I needed a bath with heavily scented bath soaps, I needed industrial-strength shampoo, and I needed to cremate these clothes with full military honors and find new ones. None of that was really in the cards at the moment, but what the hell could I do?

There wasn't much business at this time of the morning, which suited me fine, considering my changed look and gamy appearance. I made right for the women's room and took a good look at myself in the mirror. Gross. I washed up as best I could, then went to a stall, shut and locked it, and relieved myself.

I tried at least to brush off as much of the grime as I could and was thankful that my hair was short and I had a hat, as limp as the hat was by this point. There was nothing I could do about the sides or eyebrows, but it didn't look too ridiculous.

Back in the minimart, I picked up a couple of doughnuts and a big bottle of grapefruit juice and took a look for hair dye. No such luck.

I popped one of the voice-changing lozenges into my mouth after eating and drinking, figuring I was going to have to do some acting for a while, and went back outside. It made no sense to call from here; that just would keep me nailed close to the Command Center and increase the likelihood that I'd be picked up. Until I could figure out what I wanted to do next, and maybe experiment with this newfound power somewhere away from Rita and company, I figured I'd taken enough risks for now.

I walked over the overpass that took traffic to and from the road heading back toward the city and looked down at the traffic.. Hell, hitching was illegal, but it was worth taking a chance. It was close enough to the city line that I figured the state police wouldn't bother coming this far, and the city police would be staked out farther down the road to catch speeders.

I walked down the entrance ramp and stayed carefully on the shoulder, but I walked just enough ahead that I could be seen by people coming from under the overpass in time for them to decide whether or not to stop. I wasn't sure what the initial reaction would be to somebody my size and build hitchhiking there, but I could lie like the best of them, and I was only trying to get back downtown.

I stood there for about twenty minutes in the increasing heat-even early April can be pretty damned hot in central Texas-and several cars slowed down, but no takers. Finally, a low, dark-blue sedan slowed and pulled over. I ran to the window, hoping that nothing had screwed up the voice change. The woman inside didn't have a dangerous feel to her, and looked pretty ordinary. Thirties, maybe, short black hair, Hispanic-looking, and with a nice smile.

"Where you goin', sweet thing?" she asked in a heavy South Texas accent.

"Just downtown. I was ridin' my bike and got a flat. They said up there they'd hold it for me, but I gotta get back and ask my mom to help when she gets off work."

"Com'on. Get in. I'm goin' past theah." I opened the door and slid in, hoping that the woman didn't have much of a sense of smell. I no sooner closed it than we were off.

"You look like you been on the road a good long time," she noted. "You sure you don't want me to run you all the way home?"

"No, thanks. Couldn't get in anyways. I don't like to bring stuff like house keys and all when I'm ridin' out of the neighborhood. I'll get a ride home from Mom at work."

"Wheah's she work?"

"National Bank Building, just across from the west side of the Capitol. Just let me off at the Capitol and I'll make it the rest of the way."

As the danger point receded from view, I felt some relief. The fact that the nice woman had bought the story and asked no questions of any importance also helped. I began to feel really relieved.

What had taken me the better part of a day to get to by bus and on foot took twenty minutes to retrace by car. Austin, for all its government, industry, and educational institutions, really wasn't a big city by anybody's measure, and certainly not by Texas standards.

As we neared the Capitol, I found myself almost involuntarily going into that curious wireframe mode while staring ahead. When I realized I'd done it and saw how strange everything looked, I glanced over at the woman and realized just how easy it would be to reprogram her to do anything I wanted her to do, even drive me to the ranch. I resisted it, though, since the power it would require would surely register back at the Command Center. Maybe if I had been in New York, Chicago, or L.A. I would have risked it, but not this close to them.

I risked only one slight use of the power as she pulled up on the west side of the Capitol building and I got out and thanked her. I told her to completely forget that she'd done this or ever seen me, and she seemed to freeze for a moment, look confused, then lose interest in me and drive on, as if wondering why the hell

she'd stopped in the first place.

I kind of liked this sort of power, if only I could use it in a less restrictive environment. I particularly liked it in this world, where I was part of the minority of humanity that had no power at all. I think that was the worst part of being a male in this society. It was sort of like blacks in the Old South must have felt, living in a nation that had the freedoms, the affluence, and the rights most folks only dreamed of, and because of color in that case, and gender in this one, there was simply no way you could ever share in or have any part of that.

There were a couple of presences in the area, so I decided to get on the move. Even that little use of the power might have attracted somebody, and it would be stupid to stick around.

Damn it! What good was all this power if it betrayed you? This was almost more unfair than not having the power at all. This was kind of like getting all of Superman's powers only to discover that everybody else got God's.

I walked down into the business district. It was getting late, but some of the stores stayed open after five and I found my hair dye and got something decent to eat—a hamburger with lettuce and tomato, anyway. That was one advantage of being so small and so light: I didn't have much appetite, and I didn't run to fat.

All through downtown I felt several of the presences, at first in different areas; then, later, I got the distinct feeling that there was some kind of pattern to it. All of a sudden, I had the really strong sensation that they knew I was here and were coming for me.

All thoughts of calling the ranch and then waiting around the bus station or some other public place until they could pick me up just vanished. I walked on, trying to suppress panic, and got on the first public bus that stopped. I had no idea where it was going, but the odds were it wasn't going anywhere near the APL.

It wasn't. It headed out, slowly, as I made my way toward the back and tried not to be crushed by the standing-room-only crowd. Somebody in back took pity on me and gave up her seat; I smiled as gratefully as possible and sat down. It was one of the seats that put my back to the window, so I was able to look either forward or back, more or less, and I wanted to look back.

If you ever want to really make somebody trying to tail you miserable, take a city bus at rush hour. No matter what you do, you can't be inconspicuous following a city bus that stops almost every block or two. Auto traffic just doesn't work that way, and you become much more obvious when the bus leaves the city center and there's some space between cars. There was no question, though, in spite of inflicting such grief on the presences, I was spotted and they knew I was on the bus.

So now what?

We came up to what seemed to be a major transfer point. I got off with a whole crowd of women and

made my way back toward several apartment buildings and across a children's playground. You couldn't drive a Chevy through here, which put my pursuers on foot, and I was pretty sure that there were no more than two of them.

I had no idea where I was going and I didn't care. I just wanted to shake them, one way or the other.

One of them had gotten out where I'd left the bus and was in back of me, coming at a brisk but not running pace. The other seemed to be still in the car, and circling around, and I figured they were going to try and squeeze me between them when I inevitably had to emerge from the playground. Both were incarnates, neither seemed so overwhelmingly powerful that they were likely to be really dangerous compared to me in a confrontation. On the other hand, they probably had more practice and more confidence in using their power than I did, and there *were* two of them.

Well, hell, maybe it was all over, but if they knew who I was and what I was, then why shouldn't I at least *try* them on that level?

I quickly left the playground and concentrated on an alley between two apartment buildings, trying to imagine a sleek, fast racing bike with headlight and horn. One seemed to draw itself in outline in front of me, set against the brick wall, and then slowly filled, became three-dimensional, and finally clattered against the walk. I picked it up, jumped on it, and started off. It was a perfect fit, just exactly what I would have . wished for.

Win or lose, this was kind of fun. But winning would be better.

I certainly threw them off. The one in back stopped, totally confused by the slight burst of energy and then the sudden more surprising burst of speed I'd shown.

The one in the car suddenly wasn't too sure, either, since they apparently didn't have easy contingency plans. That's what they got for taking me for granted, I thought with some satisfaction.

And Texas, even the towns, is a good place for bikes. Flat, like I said. I didn't want to expose myself at the street level any longer than I had to; that would neutralize the car to an extent, and, possibly, prevent them from a visual sighting that they might not have had.

I could sense that one of them, though, was calling for help, and that was a problem. I could materialize a bike, and be very good on it, and even open up some distance between us, but I was totally lost in this neighborhood and darkness was coming on fast. They knew the city well, and there wasn't any way I could see to dematerialize their two-way radio.

Now would be a good time for the saucer to show up and beam me aboard, I thought frantically. That had saved my ass once, in a past life, but I wasn't counting on it here.

There were several cars converging now, some not having the same kind of danger feel as others but clearly being coordinated with one end in mind. I was getting desperate. I turned back into a massive, two-story development and suddenly found myself in a nearly endless, pitch-dark lane. When I switched to wireframe mode, riding the bike became more like some bizarre computer game in which you had to steer a center course, watch out for obstacles in the path, and still make it to the end of this strange outline landscape. It was not only tense and somewhat disorienting, the fact was I was also growing more and more exhausted. Boys' bodies weren't designed for the amount of exercise I'd been getting today, and I'd had several days of irregular and improper food and drink as well.

I got out of the courtyard but *it* didn't seem to matter. Bright, ghostly figures moved through the wireframe landscape inside the walks and gardens that were in the center of the four big apartment blocks. At that moment, I suddenly realized that my only choices were to either give in to them or figure out some escape that they hadn't prepared for before they caught up to me.

I began to wonder if I could call up a rabbit hole. I didn't know how to do it, but I hadn't known how to materialize a bike, either. Hell, if I could escape alive into a rabbit hole and through to the void, I was more than content to let them play out this world and start again with full knowledge. I aimed for a spot I felt I could make on the bike before anybody got to me and I tried to fix on that spot and concentrate, concentrate, concentrate.

It began to form! I actually could *see* a circular motion beginning dead ahead, developing into a more substantial cavity with every passing moment. I pedaled as hard as I could right for it.

Something or someone hit me in the head. I had the sudden feeling of an enormous shock and the eerie, almost disembodied sensation of flying through the air.

I don't remember landing.

V

THE HOLY ROLLING

My first disappointment was to regain consciousness and discover I wasn't in a tunnel past the void or in the waiting area, but very much alive. I didn't even have a headache, and when I felt my head where I was certain I'd been struck by someone with something hard-nightstick, truncheon, or blackjack- there wasn't a trace of soreness or matted blood.

Either I'd been brought down by some kind of VR weapon or that same ability had been used to completely heal me as soon as they'd determined that I wasn't dead.

Still, I was hurt on the psychological level by the contempt my very status now showed. They hadn't even bothered to restrain me. I was on a very fancy covered bed-silk sheets, ornate posts, and even a canopy that showed a kind of sunburst pattern. The room itself wasn't large but it was ornate and opulent. What looked like gold I suspected probably was, and what looked like marble certainly was.

I got out of the bed and looked back, half expecting to see the remnants of bloodstains there, but there was only the faint outline of my body, looking pitifully small in the wide expanse of the bedding.

I did, however, still have an odor about me, so, having no other alternatives at the moment and suspecting that even my newfound powers weren't going to get me out of that door, I walked over to a smaller door that was open, apparently by default, and clearly led to the bathroom.

There was soap and shampoo there, as I would have expected, along with a hair dryer and the other usual amenities. There were even oversized towels, washcloths, and a bath mat. I looked at myself in the mirror. The black dye-job looked pretty phony, I thought, but the dark golden-bronze complexion wasn't bad on me at all.

I was still very achy from all the exercise I'd done, and none too steady, so I opted for the bath over the shower, at least until I washed my hair. Just getting into hot, lightly scented water, soaping up, and reclining there was heaven after what I'd been through.

The question, of course, was just what had I been through? All those sensations of incarnates in the park-I had to be in the hands of the Command Center, but this wasn't exactly what I pictured as being behind those fences. In fact, while I could sense a few incarnates around this place somewhere, none were even close. They had that little fear of me!

I had to worry a little just on that score. I mean, I wasn't much of a threat, but I had given them something of a run, hadn't I? Lying there in the bath, totally relaxed, I let my mind go and tried to put everything here into wireframe mode and see what I was dealing with.

There was a sudden blast of colors and sounds and total disorientation. There was nothing that I could hold on to, nothing my mind could make sense of. It was like falling into a deep swimming pool with sharks all around and no knowledge of swimming. And it hurt! I withdrew in seconds, and found myself gripping the side of the big tub and gasping for breath.

What the hell was *that!*

I decided not to try any more experiments, not while mostly immersed in a bathtub, anyway.

When I went to shower and wash my hair, I got another surprise. The water seemed to run jet black, ugly, like black ink rolling off my body into the tub. I was so unnerved from the first experience that I froze for a moment, then I realized what was happening and relaxed.

The hair dye, as ugly as it was, hadn't seemed to have bonded to my hair. It was washing out with soap and water, all the way down to the roots.

When it was running clear again, I stepped out of the tub and immediately went to the mirror, pulled over the stool, stood up over the sink, and brushed away the fog from the mirror. My guess was right-I was to have bronze skin and silvery white hair from now on, it seemed.

The more I looked at myself while drying myself and my hair, the more I began to think that there were other changes, perhaps not quite so obvious. I had to do a mental comparison with my old life to work them out. Not that it wasn't my face there, but. . .

I was much thinner, a lot thinner than you could expect from just the past few days. I didn't have an ounce of fat on me, and, from the apparent weight of the rather ordinary hair dryer, not much muscle, either. I didn't look emaciated-far from that- but I sure looked soft enough that a three-year-old toddler could whip me in a fair fight.

The question was, were the modifications part of the file transfer, or had I been gone over by experts after my capture? If you could make a blow to the head that hard and that damaging go away, then what else could you do while your subject was unconscious?

I went back out to the bedroom, sat in a chair in front of the dresser, and tried to access the wireframe mode again. Instantly I got the same painful, disorienting sensations as I had in the bath, and I stopped instantly. Whatever it was, it had shut *that* door just as it was getting to be fun.

I considered it a moment and realized that it was exactly what I would have done if our places had been reversed. No worries about me charming the help, particularly the ones with guns, as I had the driver of that car, and also no problem with me conjuring up any rabbit holes.

So, when they'd healed me and treated my wounds, they'd "appended" my code, as it were, using a basic principle first reported in detail in my memory by a fellow named Pavlov. Make what's a threat untouchable by making it too painful and too unpleasant to try. It wouldn't take too many attempts to teach me *that* lesson, particularly if each attempt seemed to be more intense.

My plumbing also seemed to be a bit more stimulated than usual. I was somewhat turned on, far more than in the past. I had the strangest feeling that in most circumstances I wouldn't just enjoy sex, I'd need it. That time wasn't quite here, but I wasn't sure just what it would take to push me over that edge into addiction. Not much. But not Rita Alvarez. For some reason thinking of her really helped me keep control.

Well, the clothing, or more accurately lack of it, in the room made it clear that this wasn't an accident or hyperactive hormones. What I found was a selection of very sexy satin codpieces and not much else. There was, however, an assortment of jewelry, cosmetics, and perfumes and body colognes. Well, what the hell-if it would get me out of here .. .

I don't know if the use of the makeup, and making myself into a girl-toy fantasy, was really a voluntary act or not, but it seemed like it, and I certainly understood how these minds worked by now. Still, if this was programmed behavior, I probably wouldn't know anyway. That was the insidiousness of it when used skillfully and subtly.

I'd been in something like this kind of a Brand Box world before, long ago, and I began to wonder if I was in one again. The last time young women were the sex slaves; now it was the boys' turn. It would certainly explain a lot about this room, these feelings, and my looks. Dan Tanaka had made pretty young women the objects of his desire in his private Box; would Danielle Tanaka do any different with the opposite sex here in this world?

So I was back again in a Brand Box. When Al had trapped me in one during the last life, it had been a wall-to-wall dump, where sterile identical people all lived in this massive cooperative mall-like enclosure. The only reason I hadn't eventually succumbed to it and become mentally one with the others was Al's use of the temporary VR interface to come in and talk to me, taunt me, argue with me, even bargain with me. This time, I was in Tanaka's hands, and all she wanted was my body.

Well, whoever cooked this one up was kind of ruttid, anyway. Maybe I was a "boy," but scanty clothing, makeup, smooth skin, and even heels were all trademarks of this mind-set.

Only now I was all prettied up with no place to go. A speaker buzzed near the door, startling me. I hadn't even realized it was there.

"Come down to the bottom floor and see me in my office!" a woman's voice commanded. It was strong, firm, and yet familiar. Archbishop Rita was about to have some fun with me, a light amusement using a helmet for a few minutes before going off to the real world once more.

There was no question of not obeying. Even if I had been inclined not to, there was just no question of escape. A subroutine or a plain, outright command, it was nonetheless absolute. They were taking no chances.

I opened the door and walked into a hall, then straight down as if I knew where I was. There were other rooms along the wall to the right, and on the left a railing of gold-plated brass that looked down on a very large and hollow-sounding expanse below. A grand staircase of marble with golden banisters descended, and I came down, the heels clicking on the marble and echoing throughout the structure.

At the bottom, I could see a main entry way but that wasn't for me. I turned right and walked down to the

end of a corridor filled with religious pictures, some remarkable sex reversals of classic scenes, and entered an outer office through a plain wooden door, which I closed behind me. I walked past the empty reception area as if I were in some kind of trance, unable not to follow instructions. I found myself before an inner door that had a cross on it and a nameplate I did not even glance at. Instead, I knocked hard on the door three times, hurting my knuckles a bit.

"Enter!" came the almost familiar voice, and I did so without hesitation.

The archbishop's inner office was quite large, with an ornate, decorative fireplace on the outer wall; expensive art and iconry all around; lots of gold and silver; and a plush carpet that was tough to walk on in the shoes they'd given me. In the center, behind a well-organized desk that looked to be solid redwood with a religious mosaic made of tiny bits of colored woods and beads embedded in its top, was Rita Alvarez as she existed in this world.

She smiled when she saw me, got up, and came around the desk. I dropped to my knee, kissed her ring, and bowed my head.

"Stand up," she told me. "We haven't seen each other in this life and I would like to get something of a look at you."

"Yes, Reverend Mother," I responded automatically and did as instructed.

She really did give me the once-over, and that gave me far fewer worries than the fact that I was clearly in a huge church. This was really Rita as I'd seen her on TV; maybe this *wasn't* a Brand Box.

Rita stood in front of me and I instantly felt even smaller, weaker, and more insignificant than I had before. She was instantly recognizable, perfectly proportioned, but something like six foot six. If she hadn't been wearing the clerical garb, I think I'd have been staring dead into her navel.

She'd definitely been here longer than I. Although she still looked very good, there were lines in her face and neck and sure signs of exceptionally generous aging. Close up, she seemed likely to have had plastic surgery, maybe more than once, and to be covering up gray hair. It was a comforting thought.

After a while, she gave me a patronizing pat on the head, went back around the desk, and sat in her big judge's chair, leaning back and looking very relaxed. "I assume," she said after a bit longer, "that you are trying to figure out what happened and what this situation is. You probably think you're in a Brand Box at the Command Center. Let me disabuse you of that right away. This is the Mission de Santa Paula, the real world, so much as those like you and me can have a real world, and Austin's a few minutes back up the interstate. You've been here two and a half days. As you can see, we did do some work on you, and certainly improved things a great deal from what was brought in. You weren't very attractive, I might say, and you *stank*. Now you smell better and are almost pretty, if that's a word. We don't need to trap you in a Brand Box for this sort of adjustment, you see."

I said nothing. I wanted to, but for some reason I couldn't. She knew what I was going through. "The technique's not much more than what we've all discovered with manipulation of local objects, in wireframe mode, by direct mental command. Dear old AI and his doctor buddy kept the rest of us pretty much under control by keeping that sort of power to themselves, but thanks to your little clone and your own rather remarkable escape last time, we learned more than a little of how to do it. AI would have stopped us from doing anything or probably remembering anything, but you very nicely stopped AI for us. Lee had the mastery, but not the skill or AI's downright brilliance. Instead of covering up, he investigated how and why it all happened, and so we all pretty much learned the secrets. They have made life here *much* easier. Come-you may speak to me here."

Suddenly I could in fact speak, although in the language of what I was beginning to think of in VR terms as my "scenario."

"What will you do with me, Reverend Mother, if this is reality as I knew it?" I asked her.

"Oh, it is. I promise you that, and I see your point. Somebody like you isn't exactly proper for this place. Don't worry, we have plans for you on that score. The program is Dannie Tanaka's, as you might have guessed, with some modifications. With the direct access to the shell by mind alone, she's able to take years of refined code developed in her research and simply append or overwrite the old code. We just needed *you*.

"We've done it with a number of people. Makes one feel much more secure and everything runs much more smoothly and more efficiently as well. AI was doing it for some time, you know. Making us play out scenarios in the Boxes, ordering up different variations. We always thought it was part of the research aimed at getting us out someday, but what it really did was give him precious code for changes he could graft on to us. There's some evidence that he was the one who made me into a cleric, possibly poor Alice as well. If so, it is a kind of technique I can appreciate, since I cannot conceive of and would not want to have any other life. If that feeling is a program, it is as solid and permanent as I can think of. That is Dannie's current research, though. If this kind of change can become permanent, become part of your core personality that transcends even incarnation, there's no limit. We think we know the code, but we can't be sure-at least until we punch again, and we are not going to do *that* for a while. Not when it is so *wonderful* here." She paused and a playful smile came over her. "You do think this is wonderful, don't you?"

"No, Reverend Mother, I do not."

She sat back and grinned. "Well, it doesn't matter because you are stuck. The programming clearly worked: you have all your memories but you are much more pleasant both to look at and to have about. We had word that a young girl was seen here the day before we ran you down in Austin. That was you in disguise?"

"Yes, Reverend Mother."

She frowned, sat up, and stared at me. "Why did you come here? Surely you knew the risks! Whatever did you hope to gain?"

"Reverend Mother, I hoped that I could tap the power of the center as I had before and take command of my own life." Damn it, I couldn't *not* respond to her questions, and I couldn't even think of a lie!

"Very brave. Very stupid, but very brave. Well, we've taken much of that out of you. Have you had any contact with the backup people-Slidecker, Matalon, or the others-since incarnating here?"

"No, Reverend Mother. If I had, I would have gone to them."

"Indeed. So you're here partly out of desperation. I suspect that dizzy dingbat's in command and on some sort of power trip wherever they are. Were there any more women who came through with your backup personnel last time? Other than dear Cynthia?"

I hated myself for being unable to stop from spilling my guts. "Yes, Reverend Mother. One that I did not know. All I know is that she was named Mabel. She looked at least part African-American."

I could see that the news was somewhat unsettling to Rita, and I got a bit of a lift from that reaction. I could swear that Rita didn't have any more idea who Mabel was than I did.

She thought for a moment, idly chewing on the end of a pencil, then said, "Well, we'll take a look through the recording we took; I'm sure over time we'll get your entire life story. All I want to know at the moment is whether or not you actually got through security and inside earlier in the week."

"No, Reverend Mother. I didn't even try."

"So, you picked up the secret of the wireframe as we did, from what happened last incarnation. And all of this coming here was for nothing?"

The first part wasn't a question so I didn't feel compelled to answer it. "Not for nothing, Reverend Mother. I believe I was contacted by one from outside our existence and hold code from him." With a lot more prompting, I told in detail the whole story of the shaman's world and the column of fire. Rita listened intently, and I had the idea I was being recorded, as she took no notes.

Finally, when I was done, she asked, "Do you think that this was a real experience? That the code exists in your head now?"

"I do, Reverend Mother."

"Well, we'll have Dannie take a look at it and see what might be there. I can tell you that, using a cursory scan, I can't detect anything. Well, we'll see. Wouldn't be the first of this kind of delusional episode in the

records, either."

"I am not delusional, Reverend Mother. It happened. The code is there. If you will permit me to try a transfer of it inside the compound, it may actually help break this cycle and allow us to find true reality once more. I am sure of it. If it is a delusion, then what harm?"

"What harm? *What harm?*" She was suddenly near fury, and it scared me. "You little idiot, you never were one of the brighter ones in all this anyway! If what you say is true then I *guarantee* you I won't let you near that compound, let alone a Brand Box! Don't you understand that we already have what most can never achieve? Immortality, power, an infinite variety of lifetimes without permanent cost? Why in the *world* would we want to go back to whatever it was that stuck us here?"

It was a viewpoint I wasn't surprised to see in some, even AI, but I was a bit taken aback to see it in Rita. Still, she wasn't even the same Rita as last time, let alone earlier than that. Power, fame, and position had given her a real taste of the kind of life she'd only dreamed about, and now that she was on top after all this time, she wasn't about to play the heroine.

It was kind of sad. Understandable, but sad.

She got her self-control back fairly quickly.

"Cory, Cory, Cory," she sighed, sounding tired and patient, as if dealing with a mentally deficient student. "Have you ever considered the idea that none of us are any more real than the spooks? I have."

"Huh?"

"What if this is some gigantic, demented computer game? You've seen the transitions before the void. What if we're just the ones representing the players of the game against whatever background the computer creates? Those of us without players go along a preordained path; those with players can do extraordinary things sometimes, or change whole directions, as you did last time. I don't want to know if I'm no more real than the spooks. I'd just as soon never find out."

We were all uncertain about what was happening to us, particularly now that we knew more of the truth, but I couldn't believe that. I just couldn't.

Rita, however, was more concerned with not thinking about such dark concepts anymore. Her sadistic streak rescued her from melancholy this time.

"Now, I'm going to tell you just what Dannie and the techs did to augment you," she continued. "You can't *not* be the way they programmed you, but I want you to appreciate your situation. I couldn't kill you- I always kind of liked you, even if you were such a little computer nerd. I wasn't going to put you in a Brand Box because you got out before, and I'm not sure what you might be able to do once in there. Now,

with what you've told me, I'm going to double that resolve. You're kind of cute, even exotic with that skin tone and hair coloring, and you've got a nice little ass and big brown eyes. Be a shame to waste that. You can also recognize Slidecker's people and even be a magnet that might bring some of them to us. Besides, I owe you a slight debt for the favor of removing AI as controller. Still, we can't have you wandering around. That's why I ordered your reprogramming."

She paused a moment, then continued. "You've certainly discovered that you're rather limited to what boys are *supposed* to be like here. You've got endurance but not strength. The system is natural to you. You *like* being a girl-toy. You must act within the system and as the system demands. You won't lie to a woman, cheat on her, or steal from her. You won't be able to tap into the wireframe anymore because we've added a little conditioning routine developed by AI that we discovered in the archives. You've already experienced it so you may as well forget trying to access it. If you make a promise, you must keep it. You're going to find men more repulsive than sympathetic, and want and need to be around women, making them happy. And, of course, you'll be handy to us, answering questions and maybe solving small problems if something should come up. You know how we're going to do this?"

"No, Reverend Mother," I responded, *but you 're enjoying this so much, you 're just dying to tell me.*

"Why, you're going to be married! Right here! And by the archbishop, no less! Private ceremony, too, but still just as binding. We're going to hold auditions, you see, over the next few days to see who likes you the best, and maybe you will take a liking to one or more of them. You should have a lot of fun. I am told you had a lot of practice at this sort of casual sexual sin over the past few years in Galveston, so you should be right at home. In the end, if neither you nor any of the women hits it off, well, of course, we will arrange something. Everyone is clear on that, which means it is in your best interest to be serious, settle down, and make a good, true choice. You'll be around if required, but otherwise it's going to pretty much put you out of the war. Want me to call your mother when all's ready?"

I had never once thought that Rita Alvarez was kidding, and she certainly wasn't. They moved me to one of the small houses on the church grounds, within sight of the woods and the road into the Command Center, but it was a million miles away as far as I was concerned. I couldn't even feel the power there, just vague presences that got irritating and disturbing when I tried to consciously sense them. They weren't about to have me digitize into the wireframe or electrical system. And, over the next few days, even that faded to nothing, and I had no more sensation of anything extranormal at all. That power had been completely removed from me. I could get it back in only two ways: by incarnation or by death and rebirth. Neither of those seemed imminent.

I was in the most bizarre situation anyone could be in. I knew how it was done, how it was *being* done to me, because I'd done it myself. If I could control the mind and memories of that driver and actually materialize a bicycle out of thin air, then having it done to me wasn't any big surprise. Rita had even demonstrated it. As she'd recited each of the characteristics she wanted in me, they were there. Not like some mind control or hypnotic commands-they were really there, as if they'd always been there, even

though my memory and my intellect said otherwise. It was a demonstration of sheer power, of just how much I was totally under the thumb of—well, Rita first, but any of the others as well, if they knew how to do it.

I was also finding it harder to really think of my past lives as actual existences I'd experienced. I'd recall lots of details of something in my head, only to find on closer examination that it was nonsense. I couldn't follow programming; I barely understood what that meant, except it was the ultimate power here. Part of my mind laid out a past incredible to little Cory here in this life, another part said it was real and the way things should be. They were playing openly with my mind, my emotions, and my knowledge and laughing about it to my face. I was, quite literally, their toy, and finally I just cracked. I didn't know what was real and what wasn't, and I never felt so powerless, terrified, and confused in my whole life. I felt insignificant, hardly human at all, and when I saw those big, beautiful female bodies, the way they walked, talked, and took command, I knew that I could never attain their level. I envied them, yes, but I also loved them and wanted them.

Rita was right. I desperately wanted the security and sense of accomplishment that marriage would bring. I wanted to get married. I knew it wasn't that simple, but the white hair and bronze skin had given me an exotic look that had already gotten me noticed.

Rita set up the auditions, which were a series of dates, sometimes with one woman, sometimes with more, as it was quite common for women to live in small groups of anywhere from two to five. These were among the most bizarre experiences in any of my memories, at least on a personal level.

First, they scared me to death and excited me at the same time. I was bored, scared, and feeling totally defeated; this was at least a chance to rejoin the world, however limited it might be. Second, it was sometimes odd, because the dates would often be with at least one incarnate whom I'd known before in a past existence, and often none too favorably. A couple of them should have had scores to settle with me.

And, finally, some were just what they purported to be—dates. Evenings out to see a show or go to a good restaurant or shopping, and these dates didn't end in some kind of sexual encounter. Hell, I wanted them all to at least end that way, but not all of the women did.

In addition to people I didn't know who were clearly of this reality, I saw and went out with Jamie Cholder, whom I'd once shot dead in a past life; Sally Prine; Betty Marker, who'd lost a hyphenated name in this shift; Bernadette Standish; Dorothy Sloan-Dorothy Briggs here—whose husband I'd digitized into oblivion in the last world; Robin Garnett, who didn't look as much like a horse in this incarnation as in the last; and, last but not least, the inevitable and uncomfortable Danielle Tanaka, beautiful and glamorous as ever.

Standish was a big disappointment. With almost as incredible a face and form as Tanaka, if of a different ethnic background, she was nonetheless still the same dedicated fundamentalist fanatic she'd always been, and so probably the most frustrating and least fun date I could possibly imagine. After seeing her on TV in black garb next to Rita, I thought she was in the priesthood herself. It was a likely career choice, after

all. She was, so she told me, not able to overcome her inner demons, which manifested themselves as vanity and lust, and until she felt she could control them utterly she would remain a "lay person," and, in fact, was Rita's secretary.

I was glad Tanaka arrived with two other women, Marker and Cholder, neither of whom had any real grudges against me that I knew of, because, alone, Dannie scared me to death. I used to think Dan was somewhat amusing, but I was getting a whole new respect for that mind now-cold as ice, brilliant in this bizarre business, with the morals and often the attitudes of a Josef Mengele.

It was odd, but the fact was, even though all of these familiar folks brought things back to me, they did nothing to bring my old confidence, my old self back. In fact, I have to admit that after the initial shock I nearly forgot who they'd been and who I'd been and became cute, sexy little Cory. I needed company that much. I suspect each one of them had been primed or prompted, knowingly or unknowingly, to "adjust" me that way. It didn't prevent me from knowing who they were or had been, but, somehow, once we were over the initial awkwardness, it didn't matter.

The one exception, of course, was Danielle Tanaka. There was no way in hell that I could marry *her*.

What was somewhat surprising was who wasn't there. Where were Lee and Al? I knew they were here, and much their usual selves, yet neither was in the group paraded past me, nor had I seen any trace of them since the initial encounter in Galveston. By the time I realized their absence, it was too late to work in questions to learn where they might be. Even more interesting was the absence in any form of Les Cohn. The good doctor was at least as long-memored as Rita, maybe more so, and thus extremely powerful. For all his faults and evils, Les had been the only person I'd ever known to have the guts to not only thwart Al's fun at the height of his power but also hit the security man with a shovel and get away with it. Even as a male, and hence no medical doctor here, he should have had a harem of women carrying him around in a sedan chair and feeding him peeled grapes. For all I knew, that was going on right now. Les was always the most dangerous of the old crew because nobody was really certain just what he wanted or what he got out of it.

The woman I most wanted to see a second time was Sally Prine. I remembered Sally as a guy in the last life, as unreal as that seemed to me now, and as a good guy as well, even if he was working for the wrong side. I didn't know how he'd wound up dead, but maybe he'd just seen too much and had his fill of it or perhaps had seen too much to be allowed to keep going.

Sally wasn't the best protection against the others, since she was clearly at the same stage in this life that I'd been when I'd first discovered the truth back in Seattle. Still, in the back of her subconscious mind, I suspect she reacted to something she recognized in me from the old days. At least, we started keeping a lot of company together, and without much in the way of moral restraints.

Okay, this wasn't exactly like the kind of thing I'd have done in my previous lives for romance, nor was it a conventional kind of relationship as the old me would have thought of it, but it was a normal sort of

relationship for here, and, thanks to Galveston, I knew how to pour on the charm.

Like just about all normal folks in this world, though, Sally didn't live alone. Since being found by the church working as an inventory control specialist in some automated factory in the Midwest, she'd been given a transfer to a division here, then slowly drawn into this group around Rita. Dorothy Briggs had gotten into some trouble with some of the locals in the area, and Sally took her in, welcoming the more experienced hand. Whether this was arranged by Rita or others wasn't known, but soon Dorothy and Sally were sharing a place not far from here, a two-bedroom condo in a nice area that had provided a welcome distancing from Rita Alvarez.

While she had a kind of classical beauty, Dorothy had always seemed to me to be reserved and somewhat distant, with the kind of personality you expected to find in a school principal or English teacher.

Although Sally and I did have fun, it was Dorothy who pushed for the three of us to join together, something that surprised me. After all, she was an incarnate, like me, and she had to at least suspect that I had something to do with her husband's disappearance. They'd been together in the two lives I'd known them, and that sort of suggested a kind of permanence, like Rick/Riki and me.

I did think of Riki, often. She had to have been reborn here, probably ignorant of this whole thing except for occasional dreams and odd memories. More than anything I would have loved to have seen her, to marry *her* in this world. We always made the best team. But with me stuck here, and her whereabouts unknown, it wasn't something that was practical. In this life, we'd have to be apart.

It appeared, though, that there wasn't the same degree of lingering love between Dorothy and Ben Sloan. I didn't get any details, but the impression was there, and Sally later admitted to me, "I think he was kind of rough on her, at least the last time. She almost seems more scared he's gonna show up than that he's gone."

For Dorothy, it apparently was my looks rather than who I was. The bronze complexion gave me a kind of racially ambivalent cast; I hadn't had it long enough to know for sure, and I hadn't been aware of anybody treating me as more than odd-looking for the brief period I stayed in downtown Austin before the chase, but I did see how I could sort of pass for almost any racial type, even a Polynesian or American Indian.

At any rate, my odd looks seemed to attract Dorothy and seemed irrelevant to Sally, so that was fine with me. Dorothy, on the other hand, still felt uncomfortable where they were living and wanted to move to a stand-alone home nearby, one with a private pool, wooded grounds, and privacy. The kind of place women in this society moved to only when they had a high income and were thinking of family.

I was pretty sure that the women incarnates, at least, were sterile, but it wouldn't stop either of them from finding a third or even a fourth who was a spook-what the Command Center crew called "people created by and in and of a particular plane" and unable to live outside of it-who could have spook kids by me.

I wasn't all that sure about that part, but keeping up a place that size would give me something to do and provide a degree of comfort as well.

Still, during this whole process, I continued to be interrogated now and then by Rita and Tanaka, and I began to get some information that seemed at odds with the way I saw the world these days.

For one thing, Rita had run into my mother at some function and was surprised to discover that she looked sort of Near Eastern Semitic-Lebanese, actually-and not anything like I was now. Rita should have known, and I thought the security staff would have it all laid out, that I hadn't looked like this until very recently. I mean, wouldn't the information that Al and Lee had used, and indeed their own reports, have described a different person?

The fact that everybody seemed to assume even now that I'd been born like this meant that either they had bad information, had used their powers to change reality without somehow changing me, or they simply didn't know.

But they *had* to know. They'd sent Al and Lee to get me! * That had started this whole thing!

As we finalized arrangements for what I figured was going to be a lifetime, I asked Dorothy about the two former security bosses. She seemed quite surprised.

"Haven't seen them. I'd actually been looking forward to seeing at least Al as a woman, with no previous knowledge of his past lives, but neither Al nor Lee has been tracked down yet. Why?"

"But I saw them! And they saw me! Chased me! That's why I ran from Galveston!"

She seemed very thoughtful all of a sudden. "Who else have you told this to?"

"Nobody. They never asked, so I don't think it ever came up."

"Well, don't. Swear to me-this is between us, okay? Promise now!"

I was off balance and a bit confused, but I nodded. "Okay. I promise."

I had to keep my promises. That was one of Rita's conditions.

Still, what the hell had all this been about? I mean, if Al and Lee were tracking down incarnates for the Command Center, then what was the big mystery?

It finally hit me, and I felt suddenly even more stupid and inadequate than before.

Al and Lee weren't working for the Command Center. They had tracked me down either for their own purposes or at somebody else's orders. Both had been reincarnations, so, without the CC Brand Box backup recordings, they had no real memories of the past and were operating on personality and habits they didn't know they had. They wouldn't have the slightest idea that people like the incarnates, the Command Center, or Brand Boxes even existed, nor would they believe it if they were told. Al and Lee, then, weren't working for themselves, and it wouldn't have served anybody else, even a potential power like Les, to have this kind of collection operation when there was no access to the main computer.

Somebody had been damned clever, that much was clear. Diabolical, and with an evil sense of humor. Cynthia, perhaps. It would be just like her. Just like her to find and recruit Al and Lee for her side. But because I had no way of being let in on the joke, instead of retrieving me, she'd only succeeded in panicking me into the hands of the enemy.

Yeah, it had to be Cynthia. It was the kind of dumb, impulsive thing she might very well pull.

And so I'd blown it completely here right from the start. I'd become beach bum, then run from the folks who would have taken me to the very people who could have protected me from Rita.

It was the last straw to any self-confidence, ego, or hope I had left.

The wedding took place on a Saturday in June. It hadn't been necessary for me to marry more than one of them, but they'd decided that they were comfortable doing it together. I had no idea what the generally white, working-class Prine and the African-American but highly educated, upper-middle-class Briggs had to bind one to another, but there it was. Both wore white, since even Dorothy had never been married in this world before, and I wore a custom-fitted boy's black formal, which included a fairly tight floor-length kilt and patent-leather boots. The ceremony was presided over by a beaming Archbishop Alvarez with a group of guests that was a rogue's gallery of incarnates. All the Elect who were at APL now or worked in the region were there, as well as two boys, neither of whom seemed familiar at the start. One of the boys had a fully gray beard and not much hair on top; the other had mushrooming black hair and a really drawn, pockmarked face.

The one who looked like an old geezer even though he clearly wasn't turned out to be a very small and emaciated Larry Santee; he looked embarrassed and didn't say much. The identity of the other one, with the drawn, pockmarked face and cartoon hair, still eluded me, but it was a striking look and the eyes seemed so very old.

We got to the heart of the ceremony, and I had accepted that this was certainly the best for me, that I'd already blown any chance to be an active participant in this cycle, when we got to the oaths. I kept forgetting about how Rita's treatment affected me on things like oaths. Up to now, I'd sort of gone through the ceremony with a mental fantasy that these two women were really Riki and Wilma, when the

archbishop looked down at me and said, "Do you, Cory Andrew Kassemi, take these women as your wives, and do you by so doing swear to all these witnesses and Almighty God that you forsake all others forever, and will love, honor, and obey your wives absolutely and with full devotion and measure so long as you shall live?"

Sally and Dorothy weren't under any programmed commands, or at least I didn't think they were, but the moment I automatically responded, "I do," I felt a sudden and complete change come over me that I'd never experienced before. Any desire or thought of Riki or Wilma or anybody else completely fled, burned from my brain by a total, absolute, and worshipful love for these two women. I would do anything they asked of me, unquestioningly and without hesitation. I loved them, *worshipped* them; they were the only reason for my existence, the total center of my life and my being.

"Do you all swear that, having this union sanctified before God and these witnesses in Her holy Church, that you will at all times remain faithful and obedient to the Church and Her teachings, and accept the Mother of the World as the authority for your lives?"

"We do," we all responded, and I could somehow sense that this was as binding on the two of them as on me. I found it comforting, for this Church had no divorce and thus we would remain a family unit. With my newfound love and total commitment, I felt actually glad that this had worked out as it had, that I had found such love and union, and I knew that the Holy Mother who was God of All had somehow steered me to this.

I did not lose any knowledge; what I lost were my old allegiances, alliances, and orientations. My sense of unfairness about the world and its system was gone, too. I wasn't on the CC side or the backup side anymore; neither was I concerned with right or wrong. I was on the side of whatever my wives committed to and believed in, and I totally accepted their judgments.

At the reception after, we went down and were introduced to the guests we didn't know, including the mysterious little man with the exploding haircut.

"I am Allan Koril-Martinez," he said in a pleasant, unusually low voice. "I am the caretaker of the grounds here. My wives, of course, work inside the laboratory, as yours do."

Even through my rapture and newfound sense of direction and identity, I couldn't help but mentally skip a beat and take a very deep breath.

This fellow, who basically mopped up the cathedral and trimmed the bushes, almost certainly had once been Alice Mary McKee, Ph.D., intellectual, scholar, and the founder of this world. It wasn't very often you got to shake hands with your local god, even if he was totally ignorant of the fact.

It went to show that revenge meant nothing in this system, because the odds were you were going to come out on the wrong end of your own perceived justice. I only hoped that he felt as happy as I did at that

moment, because once we went on, I put him almost completely out of my mind.

After staying awhile, we snuck out the back, got out of the formal dress and pulled on more comfortable clothing-just an old kilt and T-shirt for me, shorts, shirts, and sandals for the women. We went out the back door and into a waiting van. Sally drove first, and Dorothy and I made use of the space in the back and its pre-prepared mattress flooring. A while later, driver and lover switched. I was going to like this, I thought on that ride from Austin to Brownsville. We were heading along the Mexican Gulf Coast to Cancun, and we didn't care how long it took us to drive there.

By the time we reached the coast, I could hardly remember who I was, nor did I care. I could hardly even remember my name, which was, now and till death, Cory Prine-Briggs.

VI

THE MAD HATTER AND THE MARCH HARE

After a couple of weeks of whirlwind fun for all of us, we headed back for Austin once again. My personality and feelings remained radically changed, and totally focused on my two wives. It was probably the cleverest thing Rita could have done, since it in no way affected my knowledge from the past or my long-term memories. I knew who I'd been, I could dredge up old memories, old experiences, and retrace most everything, but the operative word there is "could." I had no desire to do so, no interest in doing so, and absolutely no sense that any of it mattered. I didn't even think on or want the old system anymore; I liked this one just fine.

Whatever powers had been worked on me, they'd also been worked to a far lesser extent on Dorothy and Sally. Dorothy was in a third incarnation here and thus was no slouch at power herself, but Rita apparently went back much farther. With Al out of the way, she'd apparently been about the equal of the indecisive Lee and far more dedicated to control and command than he'd been.

Still, the lusty love I felt for my brides was in some ways reciprocated, and eagerly so, and I got the strong impression that two women had been drawn much closer by all this. All reserves were down when it was just the three of us, and we tended to use pet names reserved only for use by the family. For a lot of reasons, they both called me Doll; pretty good name for a girl-toy anyway. Dorothy was always Dorothy to everyone, but to us alone she was Dee, while Sally was just Sal.

Most of the summer and early fall was taken up with moving and resettling in the new place, which needed a lot of work. This was mostly my job; they, of course, went off to work every day at APL and the Command Center.

No male was permitted inside the gates of the APL, not even spouses. It was as sacrosanct as a women's locker room, and while I was always curious about it, not even my wives described much that went on inside it. Of course, I had an idea what the place looked like, certainly down on the lowest floors, but I admit I wanted to see how different it might be.

Sal was working as a programmer under Tanaka, that I knew, while Dee was in an administrative post with the official title of "scenarist." I got the impression that this involved developing, or overseeing a team that developed new alternative worlds for both Brand Box testing and for possible futures that would then be planted in various of the Elect via the Brand Boxes. Sometimes they took, even without the subjects knowing it, and when it was their turn to become god, the scenario often played out. It just never played out quite the way it was supposed to.

It was none of my business and I didn't press it much, but it was natural to be curious about and interested in what the wives were doing. Me, I ran the house, did the shopping using an electric-powered cart, kind of a giant powered tricycle with a hopper basket on the back for packages. I also picked up things in town for both Sal and Dee when they were too busy or too overloaded, riding the bus in and using one of those pull carts to carry stuff. I was a great judge of clothes and female adornments, it seemed, and if I bought them clothes they tended to look great and to fit perfectly.

What was interesting was that I never felt the least bit tempted to stray or cheat. I respected, liked, and felt most comfortable around women now, but none had the same kind of attraction for me that my wives did. I'm not sure how this manifested itself, but most women seemed to get the same impression, and after a while I found that they tended to feel comfortable around me. Almost all boys were out for only one thing. I wasn't. I also looked exotic and I knew it; heads always turned at the darkly complected boy with the silver hair and baby face. At least nobody who met me during this period ever forgot who I was or missed me a second time. I accented my hair by letting it grow long, doing a lot of styling and pampering, and using male cosmetics and jewelry to make it seem even more exotic, not necessarily to attract anybody but to complement what I felt were the two most gorgeous women in the world.

My whole mind-set remained at all times totally focused on Sal and Dee. Almost everything I did was couched in terms of whether or not they'd like it, not because I had to but because I wanted to.

Occasionally Dee and Sal would work different shifts. I had the idea that some big project was coming up but I didn't know what it was, and if they didn't want to tell me, it wasn't any of my concern, except to make sure that pressures of the job didn't translate to pressure at home.

One time when Dee was working the day shift and Sal nights, Dee arrived back home looking somewhat thoughtful and a little concerned.

"Doll, I been meaning to bring this up for a long time, but for some reason it kept slipping out of my mind," she began over a light supper.

I looked up at her, surprised. "Huh?"

"You remember you said that in this life you weren't always dark with that white hair? Was that true?"

"Sure, honey. I mean, I got turned into this."

"How? I want to know the whole story."

Well, of course, I launched into a detailed account of my hiding out, the side trip to the shaman's world, the face in the fire, the downloaded code, and how I'd awakened this way, possibly from the effects of whatever had been downloaded into my brain.

"You ever have a sense of what's there?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "No sense at all, love. I mean, no dreams, no funny images, none of that. No long strings of numbers or crazy formulas, either. It's like nothing's there."

"But it is?"

I shrugged. "The reverend mother thinks so. She has forbidden me or anyone to act on it, so that is that, I would guess."

Dee looked at me with those big brown eyes. "She didn't forbid me," she responded softly, and I was locked in her gaze. This wasn't like the fear of the power I'd had before being it married. I mean, this was Dee. I'd *die* for Dee.

The thing is, I don't remember what happened for a while after that, and I think I know why. If Dee was going to set aside some of Rita's programming so that I wouldn't resist, she had to do some fancy work around the codes, and I couldn't consciously know anything about it or I might betray it. In fact, I barely remembered the beginning of the conversation. It was as if I looked into those eyes, and then there was a weird jump, and we were sitting slightly differently and things moved a bit on the table, all in an instant. I didn't even think further on it, but I did see on Dee's face that she wasn't entirely happy. She hadn't been able to get to the stuff, either.

"Doll, I want you to swear to me that you'll never tell *anybody*, not even Sal, that we *ever* talked about this, okay?"

"Of course I swear!" Hell, I'd sworn to obey, and I'd do that for either of them.

She paused a little more. "Doll-do you know where Ben Sloan is? I mean now? What happened to him?"

The question took me off guard, yet I'd been expecting it since the first time I'd met Dee in this life. "Yes, honey. I do."

"What happened?"

Again, there was no way I was going to hold back and I had total trust in her, so I told her about how Ben had been digitized and sent into the Brand Box AI had prepared for me. As far as I knew, he was still there.

She seemed astonished. "Digitized? *All* of him? Without a body in an LSM?"

"Didn't need it. I didn't know it was possible myself, but I saw it happen. I know where he went, too, 'cause I'd just come from there. It was kind of like his whole body went to wireframe, then broke up into these tiny dots and was just, well, sucked into the Brand Box." I paused. "Do you miss him? I mean, it wasn't something we did deliberately. It just kind of happened."

"Oh, calm down! I'm not blaming you! He wan't the world's easiest man to live with, let me tell you, but I was kind of used to him. I would like to see him in this kind of setup, too, still a man. But how would you get him out of there in one piece?"

"Going in didn't seem impossible, if you were firmly anchored here both in your own physical body and in your mental connection. That's not to say I could do it, but it probably can be done if you have the kind of power that was around that night and somebody had both the will and self-control to use it. But it wouldn't be Ben who came out. It would be a clone of a chubby little sterile female, like I was last time, white and bald. I'm pretty sure if you get completely digitized you don't go through incarnation or reincarnation. I don't know why I think that, but I do."

She seemed lost in thought. "I wonder... I wonder how much of a change you could make with this digitizing stuff. . ."

I had no answer to that. Only two people that we knew of had gone that route, and they were Matthew Brand and Ben Sloan. They hadn't come back. Wilma and I had done it the other way, but had emerged initially in the forms in which we'd been stuck in the boxes.

"I don't know what really *is* possible with all that power," I told Dee honestly. "I don't think I want to know. I'm happy with you and Sal right here."

She smiled sweetly. "I know you are, but, as always, events have a way of taking over. It was always AI's dream to bring the Command Center up to full power and lock it there, flowing into us, slowly growing until it underlined the whole world. Enough power and the entire master computer data bank to draw on,

that was the dream. Anybody who could draw on it, and that would include the likes of us, would be able to literally be a god, and whoever had seniority in lives would be the ruler of the gods. Then you could make any world you wanted. You'd be immortal, sitting on Olympus, worshiped by the masses. Rita has something of that same dream. She thinks of it in Church terms and calls it the "second coming incarnate." It would be different than Al's dream, but the same idea. But to do it, you have to bring up the power to full and leave it there, stabilized, while everything connects and everyone is brought online. That's what they are going to try to do, in slow stages, soon. Bring up the power."

"You're scaring me again," I told her honestly. "Why does she need to be a goddess? I mean, this world and her place in it isn't so bad as it is, is it?"

She laughed softly. "Don't worry, little one. I don't go back far enough, but ten times Al tried it and ten times he couldn't make it work. Others surely have tried as well. The real question isn't whether she will realize her dream, but whether or not she will destroy some of us while trying and possibly force us *all* into reincarnation." She lapsed into silence, and I didn't know what to say to her.

Finally she gave a chuckle. "Ben in the body of a bald white I girl! Might be almost as much fun as seeing him the other way . . ."

I didn't like the idea of a power-up any more than I liked the motives for it. Something bad always happened when they powered up, something bad for me, for everybody. What would all that power do to Rita's cutting me off from it? Would I know when there was a power-up or would it make me dizzy or sick or even kill me?

I guess I got too worried, because both Dee and Sal grew concerned about my moping. Finally, they took me aside and told me not to be concerned, that they knew what was going on and that they wouldn't let this get out of hand. I wasn't to worry anymore.

It didn't keep me from worrying, even if I was supposed to obey, but it did calm me down a little. I mean, it wasn't as if somebody like me could do anything about it.

It was clear something else was up, though. We started having dinner guests on a more regular basis, almost all folks who worked at the Command Center. Casually, carefully, they wound up pumping me for details of what it felt like to be an active mind in wireframe mode, the energy stream, the details of how to control it. They also wanted information on my Brand Box-that is, the one Al had created for me. It was pretty clear that they were going to try to get Ben out, although I wasn't at all sure they could do it. I mean, even if they knew the method, could they even find him, after all these years, in a society where there was no individuality at all and everybody looked, spoke, and acted the same?

There were also dangers in the operation itself. Could they contain that box and its programs if they did a

blind extraction? How could they tell who was who and what was what? Didn't they risk turning others into just more of those folks? I definitely didn't want to be one of them anymore. I hadn't liked living that way before and I sure didn't now. I liked being a boy in this world married to two wonderful women. I didn't want it to change.

Of course, like everything else in this woman-run world, I didn't have much say in that.

I did, however, try to find out what the hell was going on by pressing Sal, a reincarnate with very little of the sense that longer continuous consciousness brings. Not that I could use any power, but she really couldn't just order me to forget it, either. She was just not Machiavellian; she thought fairly straightforwardly and never looked too deeply at people or events. While this wasn't always a virtue, it did help her stay alive and out of Brand Box hell, and it gave me at least one source from which to learn what was going on.

"They're gonna try'n bring up this power grid in the basement," Sal confirmed. "They say that it's been tried and tried and never worked, but that they're gonna take whatever time is needed to learn how to control it. I'm not real sure what the results will be, but I've been running some routines for Dannie and they don't make any sense at all."

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "Well, it's hard to explain if you never been there."

"I've been there. Not in this life, but I know what's what." She looked at me funny. "Yeah, I keep forgettin'. Sorry, it's just kinda weird thinkin' of a boy doin' my kind of work."

"Well, men and women were different in that life. That's okay. I know what a Brand Box is. I just want to know what they're doing. I never could figure out this power-up business when they tried it before."

She sighed. "Well, I don't understand it, either, really, but I get the idea that it's kinda like, well, like bein' in a Brand Box, only you don't need the box and you're connected direct to the control program of the main computer, the godlike thing that built all this, I guess. I don't know much more. My access is limited and I'm working around the edges of this. I mean, it took me two years to get used to that whole system of programming and to learn the language, and I'm just fair at working with the Brand Box stuff. Nothin' like this scale. I took a look at some of the math and circuitry and it looked like a giant bowl of spaghetti exploded in a math lab. And I'm pretty good at this!"

I smiled. "I know how you feel. Don't feel too bad, honey. I was really good at it once myself, and the more I got sucked into it, the less I found out I actually knew. I'm glad I'm out of that. I just am tryin' to figure out what becomes of us, of me and you and Dee."

She shook her head. "I'm not sure. There's a bunch of folks who aren't too happy about all this, but they

just got to go along, that's all. Some, like Dannie, don't even seem to care who's God, so long as they can make this work. She's a weird one. Absolutely a genius, way beyond the rest of us, but with that body, those looks-and all she does for kicks is vanish into her own Brand Box for a little bit. Never really goes out or has anybody she cares about-boys, girls, horses, you name it. She lives, eats, sleeps, and breathes this stuff. What a waste. If I had her looks . . ."

"You're plenty gorgeous enough for me," I told her sincerely. "I assume the Reverend Mother Alvarez will be at the center of this connection?"

"I guess. She's in the middle now, but they haven't gone that far with me. I only get what I overhear and what Dee tells me. They say that whoever gets connected like this will really be a god, at least as far as we're concerned. Absolute power, and absolute rule, forever. It's kinda scary to think that any one person who was born like me can get that kind of power, but I guess it's better to be a holy woman, huh?"

That was not a pleasant thought. As much as I loved what I was doing and the way I was, my opinions of Rita Alvarez hadn't changed one bit. That was odd, too. She could have easily made me have nothing but worshipful respect for her, but she hadn't. Not that I didn't follow the Church, but I understood that being ordained didn't remove the risk of your going to Hell, and I sure knew Rita.

At least now I knew what they'd been working at all that time. Godhead. Al had lost his bid, and maybe Rita would, too, but I could see the attraction, the reach for absolute power. No wonder Rita didn't want me anywhere near a Brand Box with what might or might not be in my head. She'd have killed me just to wipe it away-if she could be sure that it would be erased that way. In the meantime, it was safer to have me thoroughly domesticated and under total control than to let me roam free, even in a new life

Well, since my only worry was that it might end, I felt little more than natural curiosity. I didn't like the idea of Rita fooling with this, but I did have a sort of gut feeling that, if Al and that crew with all their experience hadn't been able to manage and tame that kind of energy, Rita, who was no computer whiz at all, wasn't going to have any more success, especially with a much less experienced crew. Still, you never know what might come out of it, and for the most part, power-ups hadn't been followed by wonderful things in the past

I belonged to a suburban Boys' Club. There were many such clubs all over, and I guess just about every guy belonged to one. It was the one place where no girls were allowed, everything was at an appropriate scale, and the boys there were all pretty much in the same kind of lifestyle. It wasn't a big deal. Play some poker or pool, sit around and brag or complain, that kind of thing. I used to go down for a while every Wednesday afternoon, even though I didn't find other boys' company all that big a deal. None of us were really friends, or competitors, and I think we found each other pretty dull overall, but it was sort of expected, and there were occasionally some good practical ideas and tips shared. |

It wasn't long after I'd had the discussion about the powerup with Sal that I went down to the club and noticed a new boy there. That really wasn't so odd; what was odd was that nobody else seemed to notice him. ||

He was about four foot six, and had a pot belly, gray hair with a bald spot in the center, and this oversized droopy gray mustache that made him look like an elderly Yosemite Sam. And while boys generally didn't smoke, he was in the smoking lounge with a couple of others puffing on a big, fat stogie. I would have recognized him anywhere, and he was just the person I didn't want to see at this point in my life. The fact that he'd show his face so close to the Command Center, and Rita, right out in the open, meant something, too.

There was no avoiding the confrontation, so I figured I might as well get it over with.

"Hello, kid," he grumbled, even retaining some of that New York gruffness in his voice and tone. "Have a seat," he invited, gesturing to a chair. "And don't look so much like a deer caught in the headlights. I'm not going to bite you. I just want to talk."

"I don't want any part of this, Walt," I told him right off. "I'm happy where I'm at. I'm not in the war this time."

He chuckled. "Sure you are! *We all* are. It's just that, thanks to Rita and some foolishness on everybody's part, we're on opposite sides for the moment. You keep underestimating me, old buddy. Everybody does. It's one of my most valuable survival traits."

I didn't know what to say. "What do you want, Walt?"

He shrugged. "I want to win, of course. I want to be able to take whatever's been put into your head, stick it in a Command Center Brand Box, and find out what happens. Rita wants to be a goddess of the virtual universe and doesn't give a damn about much else, you or me included. And you should get this part straight: either I win or nobody wins. Rita's goal isn't a realistic option. If she ever actually achieved the level of power and had the interface exactly right, it *still* wouldn't work, because she hasn't developed the kind of control over the power that's needed. Al almost had it, but Al's problem was that he wasn't really an engineer at heart. He didn't have that kind of mind-set. I do, and the only one who could have been my equal was Al. That's why they never attacked the backup center even though they knew where it was after that first time. That's why I had the guts to attack *him*. Standoff both times, although I did get really close that one time while you were drawing Al's undivided attention. Now? Well, we'll see."

"You're talking pretty big for a little guy in a world like this," I pointed out.

He shrugged. "I been in worse than this. So have you, you just don't remember. This is actually pretty handy, overall. Nobody expects the boy to have any power here, or have complex knowledge and skills. This built-in dyslexia was a bit of a pain, but I overcame it. Willpower-other kinds of power, too-all work together. I'm the only one around that's been going for the endgame since Matthew Brand digitized himself into oblivion."

I shook my head and sighed. "Look, Walt, all that was a different me than I am now. I don't even try and follow this. Whatever happens, it's out of my hands."

"I know what's been done to you and that you really believe it, son," Walt responded. "Too bad we can't just do it our-selves. But this caterpillar talks only to you, and we don't know who or what it is except that it's helped you. And even though Wilma could get to that shaman's world, whatever it is, and even speak with whatever was there, this Pillar of Fire contact never reached out to her. Only to you. You got to face it, boy. Somebody else, maybe several somebodies for all we know, has put you in play. I just wanted you to know that we know about as much as you and your side, and that we're here. You won't tell Rita about this. You won't tell anybody. You'll find that our conversation, this meeting, totally slips your mind whenever you want to talk about it to others." He got up to go.

"That's it?" I said, amazed. "No pep talk, no attempt at spiriting me away?"

He laughed. "Why would we want to do that? Hell, son, we want you right where you are." With that he walked out of the room and out the door, again with nobody apparently noticing that he had even been there. I don't know why, but I followed him for just a little bit, past the desk and outside, where I saw him get into a big four-wheel-drive vehicle and shut the door. There were three women inside, and all were damned good looking. My eyes weren't the greatest of late, but I knew who they were. Wilma was the dark one with the headband; the brown-skinned one was the mysterious Mabel; and the driver, in an outrageously revealing outfit and smoking a cigarette at the end of a very long holder, was Cynthia Matalon.

Walt looked back from inside at me and grinned. Not one of the three women gave me so much as a glance.

Now I was worried, and I think that was the point of the encounter. Walt was demonstrating to me that he had his finger, as usual, on just about everything, that he had the motive, method, and opportunity, and that I was dead meat.

I was just about to call it an afternoon and go home, not being in the mood to do much else, when I noticed a slick black sedan pull out and move in behind Walt's car, maybe half a block behind. I couldn't make out who was in it, but it very well could have been Marker or somebody else working security. Clearly Walt was being watched. Whether or not he knew it was a different story. Whether or not he cared was even more of a question.

The light changed and the two vehicles moved out. Out from a side street pulled a white car that looked otherwise identical to the security car following Walt. I only got a brief glimpse of the pair inside that one, but I could swear that one of them was Lee, in which case the other one was probably Al.

This was getting *crazy*, and fast.

Was Walt pulling a fast one on Rita's people, or was there still a component I was missing here?

I needed help bad. Fortunately, I wasn't alone in this and the others I could go to for help were soon coming home for dinner.

I headed home, trying to figure out what I could do to keep out of this and finding nothing at all. As long as that crap was in my head, they'd be after me-Walt and his crew to stick me in a Brand Box, Rita and her crew to keep me out of one. Why the hell did it have to be me, anyway? Why did I have to be the one who went to that damned shaman's land?

Dee was already home by the time I got there, and I was very happy to see her. The trouble was, other than the usual reasons, I couldn't think of why I was so glad to see her, so I started dinner. She helped, and by the time Sal got in, we were all ready to eat.

I kept thinking that there was something, something important, that I had to talk over with one or both of them, but for the life of me I couldn't remember what, and, after a while, I promptly forgot it.

Dee had to go back to the APL that evening, but Sal and I cleaned up and then had a little fun until bedtime. By that time I didn't have any idea of what was bugging me, and managed to go to sleep almost immediately.

The funny thing was, my dreams remembered for me. *There was a great woods, and a path through it, and just inside the forest there was this enormous oak, its lowest branch looking like the arm of some fantastic creature out to snare the unwary. At the oak, the path split into two forks going off at right angles to one another. But it was not the branch that drew my attention so much as who, or rather what, was on it.*

The Cheshire Cat grinned when it saw me. It looked good-natured enough, even a bit silly, but it had very long claws and a great many teeth, which commanded some respect.

"Cheshire Puss," I called to it, rather timidly, worried that it might not like the name, but when it grinned a bit wider I felt bolder. "Can you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?"

"That depends a very great deal on where you want to get to, " it responded, in a voice that sounded a lot like Groucho Marx's.

"But I don't want to get anywhere. I'm being pushed into going, but I don't really care to go anyplace I'm being pushed."

"Then it really doesn't matter which path you take," the Cat replied. "Or, of course, if you truly don't wish to go anywhere, you could simply remain where you are."

"I can't remain where I am," I told it. "I've been trying to do just that and all I do is move."

"Then you might as well move anywhere. It'll get you somewhere, after all."

"Can you tell me, then, where these paths lead? "

The Cat thought a moment. "The one on the left goes to the March Hare. He's mad, you know."

"Yes, I believe I've had the pleasure. And the other? "

"To the Hatter. He's mad, too."

I was taken aback. "Must I only travel toward mad people?"

"We're all mad, you see. I'm mad, you're mad, we're all of us quite insane. Who wouldn't be, after all this time doing this crap?"

"Why do you think I'm mad?" I demanded to know, a bit angry at the accusation.

"Why, of course you're mad. If you weren't mad, you wouldn't be here," the Cheshire Cat pointed out. "Well," he said, sighing, "I must be going. I mean to say I cannot stay, I must be going." He began to sing it as a song, and as he did he began to vanish, starting with the tail and going all the way up to the head, until there was nothing left of him but his smile. Suddenly, the whole head became visible again, and he sang, "I'll stay a week or two! I'll stay the summer through! But, I must be going ..." And, with that, he faded from sight.

I was having a tough time finding much to argue with in the cat's logic, though. Like the Cat, I had to be going, and if the path to the left went to the March Hare-well, I already knew who that was. Even the Mad Hatter was better than Walt.

I remember taking the right path this time, and heading through the dense woods, eventually emerging at a Tudor house made of gingerbread with a straw roof that looked like it had been designed by a madman, and with a giant top hat for a chimney.

The Mad Hatter emerged, wearing the tall hat-the tag stating size and price visible-the green almost leprechaunish suit, boots, and a rather aristocratic air for a mere tradesman.

He was, of course, carrying a pot of tea and quite a tall stack of cups and saucers in the other hand, struggling not to trip or drop them as he made his way toward a picnic table in his front yard.

He suddenly spotted me and stumbled, and the cups went up in the air, as did the big pot of tea. As they all came down, the pot miraculously appeared to fill each cup, which then landed, one at a time, in

saucer, in the Hatter's hand. He flicked each in turn onto the table without spilling a drop. It was such an amazing performance I felt the urge to clap as the last one was expertly placed. He seemed so pleased at this that he turned, took a bow, and got conked on the head by the teapot.

I rushed to help him up, and got him unsteadily to a chair. He held his oversized head in his hands for a few moments, then looked up at me and said, "Well, I hope you 're satisfied."

"Huh ? Me? What did I do ? "

"Caused all that, of course, do you deny it? First you show up here, unannounced, uninvited, and as a result you startle me, and then you distract me when I am recovering from the startle. Oh, my! I need a spot of tea. " He leaped up and rushed back into the house. "Back with some in a jiffy!"

I walked over and looked at the half-dozen still-hot cups of tea he'd placed on the table. I picked up one to drink, realized I had no sugar, and reached over to the sugar bowl to get some.

The top of the sugar bowl popped off and the head of a very small creature poked out, then rose to its full height of perhaps six inches. It was a curious creature-fur and tail and feet like a rodent's, but dressed in a nineteenth-century waistcoat complete with tiny pocket watch-and yet the face, the face was very familiar.. .

It was my face. And then it opened its mouth, and in a tiny, slightly inebriated parody of my own voice, it recited:

*"Twinkle, twinkle, little bat.
How I wonder what you're at?
Up above the world you fly
Like a tea tray in the sky."*

"Poor devil. Been like that for some time," the Hatter commented just behind me. He was back now and drinking from an enormous teacup.

"What happened to him?" I asked, uneasy at the sight of myself this way.

"Decided he was too little and too defenseless to do much of anything, and wound up getting his mind zapped by everybody as a result. To him, it's always six o'clock and the world's a dizzy place he wants no part of, so he hunkers in the sugar bowl and stays on a permanent sugar high. Sleeps a lot. Utterly useless."

I was getting the point. "But-if he's the Dormouse, then who am I? "

"Beats me. You just showed up here uninvited and unannounced, remember?"

I cleared my throat, a bit embarrassed. "Um, yes. But, you see, I had to come somewhere, and here was where somewhere turned out to be."

"But you also could go anywhere else and still be somewhere, " the Hatter pointed out. "You should consider the lessons you should have learned from this experience. Everyone's a walrus, you know, or a carpenter-or an oyster. You look ruddy well like an oyster to me right now. First one that ever wanted to be eaten."

"I don't want to be eaten! "

"Could have fooled me. Tell you what I'm gonna do," he went on, going from a mild, kind of cartoonish Cockney accent to that of a carnival barker. "I'm gonna make you an offah! I'm gonna give you not three, not two, but at least one big chance! For a limited time only, when you feel that powah surge through body, mind, and soul, you 'II be free. Just that once, you 'II be free. You can run, you can pick a side, you can do anything ya want t'do! But-that's it. You're also free to crawl back into yer shell and pull down the lid and do nothin', nothin' but hope no hungry walrus or carpenter comes along with a good shucking knife ..."

I woke up in a cold sweat. It was daylight, and Sal was already up and had apparently gone. There was no sign at all of Dee. It was an eerie, empty house, and I remembered just what I wanted to talk over with them.

Trouble was, I knew I'd forget again if I ever tried to actually talk it over.

The Mad Hatter had put it right on the line. I was absolutely alone on this one, and that was just exactly where I didn't want to be.

I didn't know if the dream had been anything more than a dream or not. The *Alice in Wonderland* imagery was growing pretty old by this point, but did I remember it in that kind of detail? When had I read *Alice!* As a kid, sure, but which childhood? I might have read it in the last life, being cooped up like I was; I sure didn't remember reading it earlier, although *Alice* was a theme even then. Damn Matthew Brand! Why the hell all these nonsense symbols?

Dee was dead tired when she got home, and I discovered what she'd been doing on her own, in addition to what they were preparing down there. I wasn't sure I liked it-not that I could do or say much about it.

Dee-with the aid of Sal, who could tell Dee what questions to ask and where to look-had been trying to determine if, and if so how, you could remove a totally digitized person from a Brand Box. I was pretty sure she wasn't going fishing for Matt Brand.

"Does Ben really mean that much to you?" I asked her, a bit hurt.

She smiled and squeezed my hand. "Don't worry-I'm not looking for replacements. It's kind of hard to explain. For a long time, we were the only two African-Americans on the whole project. Most black folk don't like or trust computers. Too long being on the receiving end of Big Brother's tender mercies, you might say. We stuck together. I'm not sure we were ever in love, and, Lord knows, he wasn't very good in bed, but he was a friend and partner. I can't let him rot if there's a way to bring him out, and I'm pretty sure he'd do the same for me."

"But if it's like it was with me, he won't come out recognizable. And I remember Wilma, after her time in that horrible place, coming out a vegetable. If he comes out, there may be nothing mentally left. No memories, nothing. Just a clone of what I was just before incarnating here."

"Lots of things can mess up memories," she told me. "Blows to the head, diseases, you name it. Brand Box recordings can restore a measure of things, and when we translate again, it'll be there."

"If we translate again," I pointed out. "I didn't think that was the object of the exercise."

She smiled. "Only Dannie and Rita seem to believe it's possible, as far as we know now. We'll see." She sighed. "When we try the first power-up experiments, there may be sufficient energy for us to attempt our own retrieval program. Maybe. I have to try. They worked on this problem a lot, it seems, several lifetimes ago, when Brand vanished into that Box of his. There was a ton of stuff, a lot more advanced than we could ever work out and a lot more complicated than we could even follow, but clearly aimed at only one thing. The difference was, they never really used it. They couldn't locate Brand specifically, if it's possible to locate him, and they didn't want to feed it through the entire energy grid. None of us really understands that, you see, and we have no idea what it will do."

I stared at her. "Then you've found Ben using the VR helmet interface?"

She seemed startled that I could use these terms so easily, but the more she discussed this, the more my knowledge came back.

"It was quite a job rebuilding it," she said with a trace of irony in her voice. "Seems somebody really fried the circuitry. Yes, I've been in there, and no, as of now, I can't tell one of those people from the other. You know, though, it's extremely peaceful in there and the society works rather well. Not a single thing that pollutes all our existences really creeps in there. There's no racism, no sexism, no envy, no jealousy-it's quite amazing. I never had that sense of total *belonging* before. It's quite seductive."

"Just don't think of going there to live," I responded, a little bit alarmed. "I don't want to lose you in there."

She smiled. "But you're in there, too, of course. All of them are based on a version, or vision, of you."

Perhaps that's why it's so comfortable. Poor Ben. It must have driven him insane." I wasn't all too thrilled with extracting an insane Ben Sloan in one of my images, but I wasn't too thrilled about any of this. "Does Madam Tanaka know of your intention to do this?"

"I think she's been so wrapped up in this project, she probably hasn't even noticed. Why?"

"I was just wondering if running your program while the power was completely up, while they were running their experiments, might not cause some unexpected results, that's all. I don't feel good about this at all."

"Don't you worry any about this, Doll. We know what we're doing, and it's a lot less ambitious than what they are doing."

I was still worried, because I wasn't sure that anybody in this mess really knew what they were doing. Al had been startled to see the little alien creatures; nobody figured that you could broadcast a spook through phone lines right into the main computer center; nobody figured you could change minds and bodies until they did it. Nobody knew anything, really.

Three days later, they began the power-up. Neither Sal nor Dee told me, but I knew by their general nervousness and by the fact that they were working double shifts and staying down at the Command Center. Dee at least knew what it was like; for Sal, this was going to either wake up her residual memory or be a whole new, unique, and not necessarily positive experience.

There was nothing I could do or say to make them not go. They were confident and determined, and I loved them at least for that. I even admired, to an extent, Dee's sense of loyalty to Ben. Still, I knew that crunch time was coming. Not right away-they wouldn't be bringing up power levels and holding them tonight, or for several more nights, but it certainly was starting.

So, was the Mad Hatter real? The March Hare had been, and he was most certainly mad. If the Hatter was real, I would have one chance during this period to make a decision. One chance only, without being hindered by Rita's spells or my specific current personality.

I knew what they wanted me to do. I also knew that what I wanted to do was crawl into a shell, but I was too obvious, the oyster on top of the pile. If I got into that shell and buried my head, I was sure enough gonna get shucked by all sides.

What the hell *did* I want, anyway? I didn't want Rita to win, certainly, and I really didn't want Walt to win, either. I didn't want to lose my wives and my security, but how could I keep that without somebody winning?

That evening, for the first time since waking up in the Mission and going down to face Rita, I felt the power again. I was actually lying down in a sofa chair, listening to some music and more asleep than

awake when it hit. It made me dizzy, nauseated, and caused a fair amount of pain, but as it went on the discomfort seemed to lessen, almost as if I were getting used to it. Then it was gone, and things were back the way they had been.

Shaken, I'd gone into the bar and looked for something strong. I found some Wild Turkey, 100-proof bourbon, poured some in a glass, and drank it down. It tasted good, but it burned. I poured some more, this time adding a couple of cubes of ice, swirled it around, and drank it down.

It didn't take long for it to hit me. It felt kind of like the first power-up; I was dizzy, certainly, and a bit sour in the stomach, but there was no pain and no nausea. In fact, I felt really kind of good, silly even, and very turned on. I slipped out of my clothes and went around turning the lights out. I don't know why I did it; I'm not at all sure if I was thinking at all. Soon the only light was the little one over the bar, and I went over and poured another drink. I took it with me, turning out that last light, leaving myself in total darkness. It was no big deal; I knew the layout of the house better than I knew the back of my hand.

The music was still playing, and I did a little dance, humming along with the music as I went out the patio door and onto the deck in back of the house, stark naked. It was dark and hot, and the air felt very still and heavy, like a blanket of velvet caressing me.

The power-up sensation hit again, but this time it only partly penetrated. I looked off to the south and east of the house and saw the greenish glow on the horizon. Then, suddenly, I looked down at myself and I could see that I, too, was outlined by a very dim aura of the same greenish energy. I wondered idly if anybody could see me glowing in the dark like this, but I didn't wonder long.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little bat! How I wonder what you're at!" I recited to the darkness, giggling. God! I couldn't believe how turned on I felt! If either of the girls came home now, they might not survive me! I wanted them, both of them, and I wanted them bad. I stared at the greenish glow and got drunkenly pissed off at it. They were over *there*, I thought. Over in that glow instead of back here with their husband who needed them so badly.

Along with love and hate, and all the primal emotions, lust was one of the most powerful. Wasn't that why vampires were always so sexy? If I were a vampire, I'd fly to that green glow and I'd find 'em and do 'em all!

The glow winked out again, and I almost collapsed in the darkness. I was feeling no pain now, but I couldn't find the rest of my drink. I fumbled around, searching for it, oblivious to anything else. I finally gave up and sat down on a chaise lounge, looking around at the darkness. The lights burned in some other houses not too far away, and I could hear the distant sound of traffic.

Gawd! Was I horny! I wanted Dee and Sal and I wanted them here and now, and my growing frustration made me feel like some kind of weak-kneed nothing, and instead of reinforcing my own sense of low esteem, that made me mad.

The glow returned. I stood up and faced it and, with the aid of the booze, let it consume my attention and interest, my desires and my fury. And, in the darkness between the Command Center and where I stood, images seemed to form, images taking their form from inside my own mind.

The Dodo had fallen into a small gully, really only a few feet deep and not much over his stupid-looking head. With a little bit of effort, he could have jumped and grabbed the side and pulled himself out, but this appeared to be the farthest thing from his rather tiny little mind.

"I say, old chap!" he called to me. "Could you toss me down a shovel?"

"A shovel?" I laughed, calling to him, as ghostly as he was, a pale drawing in glowing green. "What on earth do you need a shovel for?"

"I've fallen in, can't you see? So the only logical thing for me to do is to have you or someone toss me a shovel so I can dig my way out."

"You can't dig your way out! You're going in the wrong direction!"

The Dodo drew itself up to full height and looked haughtily back at me. "Sir, I may be a Dodo, but I am more than willing to accept that the Earth is round. Is that not true?"

"Yes, but-"

"Well, sir, it should be obvious, then, that if I dig down, then, sooner or later, I shall emerge in China, and everyone knows that it's quite a bit easier to go down than to labor to go upward. Otherwise why do so many go so easily to Hell and so few, with great difficulty, to Heaven? Now, sir, the shovel? There's lots of digging to do, you know. If we do not dig together, we shall get nowhere at all!"

The vision faded even as I laughed and called to the poor, dumb bird.

Suddenly I had the terrific sense that I'd just discovered something important, something maybe even vital, profound. But it was probably just the booze, I told myself. It was just the booze. ..

VII

PUNT AND FREE KICK

They ran the power on and off all that night, and I had some weird dreams and even out-of-body type experiences. I was as drunk as a skunk, but the energy was exciting odd parts of my mind that I usually kept under tight control-even some that I didn't know were there.

I also had strange sexual fantasies that I never was sure afterward were only in my imagination: very weird, kinky stuff with anonymous women who kept showing up at the front door begging to have sex with me. The fantasies were punctuated by bizarre visions, animations like that of the Dodo and snippets of scenes from lives I could not remember. I certainly passed out into the deepest stupor I had ever experienced, and coming out of it, like a swimmer rising from the bottom of a pool, desperate for a gulp of air, I had one last vision different from the rest, and therefore seeming much more real.

Dan Tanaka, looking a bit older, paunchier, and grayer than I'd ever seen him, was sitting at a computer bank along with most of the rest of us, all recognizable in spite of obvious physical differences.

"Damn it, Dan, we *have* to use this! If Matt remains trapped in there, fully digitized, for any length of time, he may wind up being untraceable! We'll lose him!" Les Cohn was arguing.

"The doc's right. We got to get him out of there!" Walt seconded, his mere presence at such a gathering showing that whatever rupture had come, it had come after Matthew Brand had been fully absorbed by his own creation.

Several others nodded and agreed. Sally Prine, Jamie Cholder, the other programmers who'd worked on the retrieval system without break since Brand vanished were particularly adamant.

Tanaka sighed and tapped something into his console, then looked back at them. "I'll short out the box and destroy it before I'd allow you inside with what you've got."

"Why? Why are you doing this?" Rick demanded to know. "Because I've run full analysis of the subroutines you've come up with. Over forty billion combinations of practical approach routes and patch points come up, and in not a single one do we get him back as we need him, if we can retrieve him at all. In about a third of the scenarios projected, grave harm is done not just to the Brand Box he's in but also to the Command Center core systems. It would be meltdown-out of control. A practically zero chance of success coupled with a one-in-three chance of crashing the core program-that's death for us. All of us. And everybody else in the whole damn world. I can't allow that. Not even for Matt, and he was my friend. Perhaps the only real friend I've had in years."

I woke up wide-eyed, terrified, drenched in sweat, and with a hangover pounding in my head. Worse, I was on the chaise lounge on the deck and still stark naked. We did have a measure of privacy on the deck, but it wasn't absolute. How long had I been here?

Enduring pain like I hadn't felt in living memory, I managed somehow to ease off the chaise, only to find standing impossible. I crawled on all fours over to the door and hauled myself inside.

I'd been a *baaad* boy.

I tried standing again, but the room kept spinning and my vision doubled and jumped alarmingly. I shut my eyes and it helped a little, but it still felt as if I were walking on a moving ship in a storm.

Taking my bearings by opening one eye for a brief moment and hugging the wall, furniture, and appliances, I managed to make it back toward the bathroom. I got there and had started looking through the medicine cabinet when the sins of the previous night came rushing back and I threw it all up in the toilet.

That actually made me feel better, although it left a godawful smell and an even worse taste in my mouth. My head still throbbed, though, and I looked again through the cabinet and found the leftovers of an old prescription painkiller. It was Sal's, for when she'd wrenched her back. I took one, and even though it was huge, I got it down with water. I then struggled back down the hall to the bedroom, where I collapsed on the big bed and lay there on my back staring at the ceiling.

After about ten or fifteen minutes, the pain began to recede. I decided maybe I could get up, and made the attempt. Whatever that stuff was, it sure was strong. No wonder it had done the job for Sal.

I managed to actually walk back to the bathroom and ran the deodorizer fan. I felt better enough to risk a shower. It was only then that I discovered how bruised I was, and wondered where and how I got the bruises. They seemed to be all over my body, and not the sort of thing you'd get from sitting on a chaise lounge baying at the moon. Well, the dark complexion definitely helped hide them, but I could feel them even through the effects of the narcotic when I touched them. By the time I'd finished the shower, dried myself off, and slipped into something brief but legal, I no longer felt the bruises at all. In fact, I no longer felt much of anything. That was the penalty of taking a drug in a dosage meant for somebody two and a half times your size and weight.

At least it wasn't uncomfortable. I actually felt ravenously hungry, although I usually had very little appetite. When I'd finished eating and finally thought to glance at a clock, I discovered to my complete shock that it was almost four in the afternoon. I switched on the radio and checked to see if any messages had come in.

I kind of figured that Dee and Sal would have called if they were going to be delayed, and they had. Everybody was sleeping in until the initial set of experiments was over. They did start to get worried when I didn't answer all day, but I gave a call over to the lab and left a message that I was okay. Something, though-that last, crystal-clear vision of all of us around Dan at the console-kept haunting me, and I asked that either one, particularly Dee, call me when she could.

When Dee did call, about seven, I omitted a lot of details about my night but described the vision in detail.

"It's in your mind, Doll," Dee insisted. "You just don't want Ben brought back, and you're feeling guilty about it. Your dreams are yelling at you. Was I in the dream? I don't remember ever having a flashback like that."

I tried to think. "I don't remember. I don't think I saw you or Ben. But Sal was there. I'm convinced that there's enough truth to these flashbacks to at least be extra careful. Damn it, run the figures past Tanaka. See what she says."

"Are you kiddin'?" Even if I wanted to get close to the Dragon Lady, that's the last place I want to be. She's gone crazier than anybody. She's acting almost like a mad scientist from a bad movie. She's so convinced she's licked the problem she barely even thinks about others except as minor details. No, we're all staying as far away from her as possible. You, too. I love it that you're worried, and I appreciate your concern, but we do know what we're doing here. Lord knows, we've done it often enough!"

She begged off at that point, having been called to a meeting. I felt depressed as hell, and not from the drink or the drug. I'd done my best. I was absolutely convinced that the memory was a reality, and the routine they were going to use to find and retrieve Ben was based on the same one Tanaka mentioned in the flashback.

I was less worried that Mad Dannie would succeed. Something deep down told me that it wouldn't work any more than the past attempts had. Something I'd worked out last night but just couldn't remember, damn it! Could it have been a real idea, or was it just some aftereffect of the binge that convinced me I had discovered something I hadn't?

Something about Dodo on the road to Hell. . . Forget about it. I was still a nonplayer in this. I was going to try and avoid any more drinking or drugs if I could help it. I couldn't understand what had gotten into me the previous night. I'd never done anything like that. It had been stupid. I could have gotten arrested if anybody had noticed me out there, or, worse, killed myself if I'd taken a header off that deck.

". . . Chance of thunderstorms this evening, possibly severe in places," the radio was warning. "There's a fifty percent chance you'll get dumped on if you're anywhere in the region, and a five-county area is under a tornado watch until four a.m. . . ."

Great. Rita and Dannie would be running their experiments, Dee would be working a dangerous side game that could corrupt everything, and I'd be here, most likely twiddling my thumbs in the dark with no power if one of those suckers hit.

They'd actually run two more power tests during the late afternoon and early evening. Apparently Tanaka wasn't going to go to the next stage until she was dead sure that everything was working precisely as predicted. I'd felt the surges, and again they'd had the odd effect of turning me on. *That's* why I'd taken to the bottle the previous night, I recalled. Trying to dampen down that almost impossible series of animal urges. I could relieve some of the intense physical tension but it wasn't enough.

It wasn't fair, either. If a boy had two wives and only one real function in life, he oughta be able to perform that function with at least one of them!

I was frankly concerned about what would happen to me when the power did get turned up to full. Should I lock myself in a closet or find something to knock me out? Would that help?

The first big thunderstorm hit about eleven that evening, catching me unawares in spite of all the warnings and sending me suddenly around the whole house making sure things were shut down. It made an enormous racket, and, sure enough, the electricity went out within the first few minutes. The pounding of the rain on the roof was very loud, suggesting not only the severity of the storm but also the idea that there might be hail in it. Hail could get nasty in Texas or anywhere else on the plains, and if this storm got any more severe it might well spawn tornadoes. It practically sounded like one anyway, bellowing so much fury and shaking the house that it felt like a freight train was rolling through the living room.

I thought I heard glass breaking, and while frightened by the storm I knew I had to go check on things. I took a flashlight and headed toward the back of the house. One of the patio doors had shattered and there was glass all over, but no sign of what might have caused it. It didn't really look like storm damage, but with all that roaring it was hard to imagine what else it could be.

I turned around to get something to patch it with and the flashlight illuminated a large, standing figure. I gave a muffled cry and switched off the light, but the lightning was more than enough to see by. I was positioned wrong to make a run for it in any direction except through the broken door and out into the storm.

I knew who it was right away. Lee Henreid was unmistakable, female or male, and in this world, where Lee went, Al was surely close by.

It had been a long run, but they had finally caught me.

"Move back into the living room!" Lee commanded over the storm's continuing noise. "Don't run. We have things well covered. Just relax and you won't get hurt!"

I didn't believe that a bit. Not with these two. Still, I had no choice but to obey.

The storm blew through after twenty minutes, although we were still left in the dark without air conditioning.

While Lee held me in the kitchen more with sheer intimidation than with any specific weapons or threats, Al went through the house. I could hear her doing a full-blown search, though I couldn't imagine what

they were looking for.

It was a good thing I was faithful, though, or I might well have tried to seduce Lee. As a man, he had been a rather plastic muscle man-good-looking, blond, and with chiseled body, but kind of hollow inside. Nothing had proven that more than his inability to hold on to administration and protect his own ass from Rita in the period after Al had been shot.

In spite of the Mr. Universe form, Lee made a much better woman. I think that would be the case no matter what world we were in, but this one had oversized everything. She had to be over seven feet tall, and perfectly proportioned for that size, which meant that everything about her was huge. I'd gotten a good look at the two of them back in Galveston, but now, under these circumstances, I could be as impressed as I was scared. She was gorgeous.

I wish I could say that Al looked like a man in drag, but, unfortunately, Al made a pretty good woman as well, although not as absolutely stunning as Lee. Al was smaller-six foot two maybe-and had a leaner build, but the face, even with softened skin and nicely understated makeup, still had that same charm and toughness. It would have been criminal for the naturally blond Lee to not have long, thick hair, but Al's short military-style cut looked just right on her. Al also smoked, something that Lee clearly disapproved of but could do nothing about. As always, there was only one boss.

Al came in, lit a cigarette and then two candles she'd found somewhere in the living room. It gave a ghostly air to the proceedings. She then went around and opened the patio door, letting in some cooler post-storm air. She came back over and stood there, towering over me.

"We've met before," she commented softly. *That is an understatement!* I thought, trying to keep calm. As always, nothing I could do would change a thing. Still, I had a hunch about these two considering their status in this world. "Yes. In Galveston," I responded.

She seemed pleased at that. "So you do remember us! My name is Almira Starkweather and this fine strapping girl is Lee Ann Henreid, and we're not used to being led around by cute little boys in satin coddies. Why'd you run from us back then? What made you nervous?"

"You looked, acted, and smelled like cops," I responded. A hand struck forcefully across my face, and I felt tremendous pain, the blow knocking me off the chair and onto the floor amid the broken glass. I shook my head for a moment, feeling both anger and helplessness, then got back to my feet. Al shoved me back into the chair.

"Little boys need to show some respect," she growled. "Now, what was it you just tried to say?"

I rubbed my jaw and tried to figure what bug she had up her ass. No sense in not trying the obvious first. "I said that you looked, acted, and smelled like cops, *ma'am.*"

She smiled and nodded a bit. "You learn fast. What do you think now? Still think we're cops?"

"I-I don't know, ma'am. I have no idea now who you might be, except that my instinct to run seems to have been in my best interest."

Al smiled. "You're right on that, too. Clever little boy, aren't you? We've known where you were, all about you, for some time now, you know. But we had instructions to let you go for a while, until things started to happen. Well, now things have started to happen."

I wasn't quite sure what all this was about, and certainly not how it concerned me. What were they doing here, and under whose instructions were they operating? One thing grew clear as the night went on: nobody had told either of these two who or what they'd been before, and they didn't know me from Adam when it came to past lives.

I was kind of worried about when the Command Center would start doing more of its power tests. They hadn't done one since Al and Lee had invaded, probably because of the storms. Sooner or later, though, they'd start up again, and I couldn't help but remember the effect it would have on me. With these two here, I just didn't know what I would do. I couldn't exactly overpower either one of them, considering my relative size and strength. Al kept checking the phones, but they appeared to be out as well. Whatever had caused the power failure had probably toppled a couple of phone poles, taking both electricity and communications. They were supposed to bury most power cables in this area, but, somehow, hadn't gotten around to it.

I don't know whether power remained off at the APL or not-I thought I heard the Mission bells chime the hour, and they were on an electrical timer-but clearly somebody over there decided things were back to normal enough to start the tests again. I felt a slight sensation, but wasn't sure if they were actually doing full tests again or not. Certainly it wasn't like the night before.

We moved into the living-room area, which had a reasonable breeze even though it felt more humid than was comfortable. Al had gone out to their car and apparently used a car phone to call whoever she was reporting to. I was low on snacks but had some beer and wine. Al took the beer and pretzels and seemed reasonably content with it; Lee passed on the alcohol but chugged down most of a quart of skim milk.

The phone rang, causing us all to jump. I looked over at them quizzically, and Al nodded to me. "Answer it, but no funny stuff, no messages. Just handle it routinely and get rid of them."

I went over nervously, picked up the receiver, and said, "Hello?"

"This is the phone company," a woman's businesslike voice responded. "Just checking to see if service is restored. Thank you." *Click!*

Seeing me look disgusted and hang up, Al asked, "Who was it?" I told her, and she grinned.

Damn it! Who were they working for and why was I now a prisoner in my own home?

And then they started powering up the Command Center again. Ten percent, like last night, was enough to get me started, and I tried to keep a grip on myself. Still, I found myself staring at the two women, just staring, and noting that I wasn't the only one who had felt the tests resume.

As the power continued to go up, I began to lose self-control to the animal lust and desire, but I managed to keep it contained, while my gaze never wavered from the two women. I watched them start to glow, like I had the night before. Suddenly I realized that they weren't the only ones glowing, but my aura was much stronger than theirs.

The tremendous animal urges simply flowed into the focus I was giving them and there was a sudden flash that must have lit up the whole room to any observer. The energy that was coming from the cast-off portion of the power-up flowed into me and then into my captors. I could see their expressions clearly, even feel their emotions: first confusion, then amazement, then feeble resistance to the titanic arousal we were all feeling. At that point, both of them wanted me as much as I wanted them, and all rational thought fled.

It lasted a very long time. I think the phone rang more than once, but it didn't matter. We should have all dropped from exhaustion long before, but something kept renewing us, kept us precisely at our peak in energy and desire, over and over again.

Only later would we be able to reconstruct what had happened. It was the added program that Dee had used to try and fish Ben out of his digitized state. Somehow it reached into the core of every one of the Elect and energized and renewed them, moment to moment, molecule to molecule. Eventually someone—possibly Rita, or Harker, or even Dee—managed to get enough control to make it to a console and shut the power down. At that precise moment, which might well have been hours, even days later, I simply collapsed. When I awoke again, a very different, very warm sun was streaming through the windows, and I opened my eyes upon a scene of some destruction.

The room was a mess. It looked like a herd of rampaging wild animals had come through. The violence implied by the wreckage was kind of scary, particularly since I remembered nothing about it. In fact, I felt kind of distanced, almost as if I were looking at the scene from outside and not quite comprehending or even recognizing it.

I had no idea where I was. I had no idea *who* I was. I got unsteadily to my feet and had enough presence of mind to realize that, somehow, I must have lost my memory. Some big storm or shock or something must have ripped through the room, taking my past with it.

I was naked, but if I knew that it was irrelevant to me. I had no memories, no cultural comparisons, no real sense of right and wrong. I appeared to have bracelets and anklets and something hanging from my ears, but I had no idea why they were there or what function they served. Until I knew, I decided to leave

them where they were. They might be important, and at the very least, they didn't seem to do any harm.

I headed toward what turned out to be the kitchen and found a girl there, as naked as I, sitting on the floor behind the counter. Her face and black hair were smeared with some red stuff, and she had poured some more of it from a big jar and was painting with it idly on the floor and on her body. She vaguely matched one of those faces and forms in what little memory I had, but she wasn't going to be much help in filling in the details.

"Hi!" she piped up, like a little girl meeting a friend. "This is fun. Want some?" She scooped up some of it from the jar and held it out to me. I got down on my knees and she stuck it in my mouth. It was sweet and sticky, and we wound up alternately eating it and playing with it like two little kids without a care in the world.

Eventually we got bored and started looking around the place. Although she was a lot bigger than I was, there was no sense of aggressiveness between us. We both heard noises out back and went through the open patio door and onto the deck to see what was making them. It turned out to be another girl, even bigger than the other, with yellow hair, naked and dirty, swinging back and forth as hard as she could on the big rocker. She stopped suddenly when she saw us, but without any fear or even curiosity. "Hi! I'm rockin' on the swing!" she told us needlessly. Clearly she didn't have any more idea of what was going on than we did.

"What's your name?" I asked her, probably sounding just as childlike and stupid.

She frowned and then looked puzzled. "Name?" she repeated, as if the very concept was foreign to her. Almost in self-defense she responded, "What's *your* names?"

That, of course, was the problem. "We dunno, neither," the black-haired girl replied. "I can't-'member-*nothin'*."

"Me, neither," the yellow-haired girl responded, then frowned and looked thoughtful. "Maybe ... I 'member both of you. We-we made *love*." She came over, picked me up, and hugged me, then put me back down and hugged Black Hair. "I-I love you." It wasn't said with any sort of passion, rather as a statement of fact.

Black Hair turned and looked down at me as well and smiled. "I love you, too." She paused. "Want to make love now?"

The fact was, I doubted if I was ever out of that mood, but of the three of us I seemed to have most self-control. That in itself was odd, for some reason, but I felt somehow in charge, even though I knew I shouldn't be, as small and weak as I was compared to them.

There was a reason for this. Deep down I knew there was. I just couldn't remember it.

Instead of playing more, I looked around the area in the bright sunlight. Except that it wasn't exactly bright sunlight. There was a yard, and some trees, and a couple of other houses could be seen, but then-nothing. The horizon was a uniform blue with little sparklies in it, not like stars, more like pinholes. And way, way off in the distance the sun was sort of coming up-only it wasn't. It seemed, well, *stuck* there.

My instincts took over. "Let's find something to eat inside," I suggested to them. "Then we can go see what all this looks like."

They shrugged, apparently willing to go along with any suggestion anybody had. In fact, I had the distinct feeling that if I suggested we all get up on the railing and jump down headfirst on the ground, they'd think that was a neat idea, too.

Still, they weren't completely beyond hope. "Is this *our* house?" Black Hair asked as we went back inside. "Ow! Got somethin' stuck in my foot!"

She limped over to a chair, plopped down, and examined the foot, which had a glass shard stuck in it. I looked at it, then pulled it out. It bled, but it didn't seem like it was going to be a real problem.

"Watch where you walk!" I cautioned. "There's lots of stuff like that around here, looks like!"

Okay, so if this was our house, why couldn't I remember it? And if it wasn't our house, whose was it and where were they?

We explored the kitchen and came up with a meal that should have been disgusting, but since we didn't know any better and it all seemed edible, we ate it anyway.

Afterward, we searched the house. We found a couple of pictures of me with two women, all of us kind of dressed up, but they weren't the same women as my companions.

There were no other clues, though. Some maps, books, and paintings on the walls that made no sense to any of us, but nothing really useful. Finally, we decided it wasn't worth looking much further and went back outside. It felt kind of stuffy and hot inside anyway, and smelly, too. Little wonder, as we gave no thought to personal hygiene or even bowel and bladder control.

"Wanna go see if we can find more of us?" Black Hair asked me.

I nodded. "Somebody's got to be around who knows *something*. I'm gettin' thirsty, too. We got to find water, maybe help, too. C'mon."

There was a car out front, but we found nothing useful in it. The car phone looked promising-but when we picked it up, nothing happened. It was dead.

Black Hair frowned, though, and looked over the whole thing. "I almost 'member how to work this. See- this thing is 'Go,' this one's 'Stop,' and you point it with this round thing here." It sounded reasonable, but nothing we tried would get it to actually come to life, so after a while we abandoned it.

I was getting more and more afraid that something really awful had happened, that it wasn't just us but maybe everything that was screwed up. I mean, it was bright enough, but the light seemed weird, wrong, somehow. And the sun wasn't supposed to stay still like that.

We started walking down the driveway and made it to the main street. It was very quiet, and there didn't seem to be anybody around. No sounds of any kind, really, except us.

I think maybe that got to all three of us more than anything else. The complete, utter silence. We could make noise, and echoes would bounce back to us from the surrounding houses, but other than that it was deathly quiet.

The two women were becoming more serious, getting more focused. None of us had regained any more memory, but we were becoming less childlike by the moment.

"This is creepy," Yellow Hair muttered, and we nodded, there being nothing we could add to that observation.

"Which way do we go from here?" Black Hair asked.

I shrugged. "I don't think it matters, since one way's as good as the next." *Where had I heard that logic before? Think!* I shrugged and picked one at random. "This way."

We began walking toward what looked to be a main intersection-maybe some stores would be there-water and maybe people, although if they were around they sure were keeping very quiet.

We weren't walking toward the frozen sun, but at an angle to it. I didn't really want to walk to it; it felt warm and maybe a little dangerous.

Black Hair stopped suddenly, pointed, and hissed, "There's somebody in that car over there!"

I looked, and saw a small form in the passenger seat of a van. Although having as good a case of the creeps as the two girls, I wasn't about to be put off by the sight of another person and I walked straight up to the van. Neither the van nor its occupant made any attempt to move as we approached.

I jumped up on the running board under the door, and pulled it open, then cried out and jumped backward onto the grass as the person inside the car pitched over and fell out.

The two women both gasped, but after I got back on my feet, we approached the body as one and looked down at it.

It had been a boy, like me. A bit older, with a medium complexion and neatly trimmed jet black hair and goatee. It didn't take but a glance at those staring eyes to know he was dead.

"I 'member him from someplace," Black Hair commented, staring, more curious than frightened now. "I *knew* this guy!"

"Me, too!" Yellow Hair agreed.

I stared at the face very carefully, and got an impression that maybe I'd seen him before, but I didn't have the same shock of familiarity as the two women. It was pretty clear, though, that whatever had zapped this area and our memories had done an even nastier job on him.

There wasn't an apparent mark on him, either. It was like he just... died.

"That looks like another one down at the end of the block!" Yellow Hair called to us. "He ain't movin', either!"

I looked up and saw what she was talking about. It was one of those small roadside stands, and it definitely seemed to have somebody inside. We couldn't do much more for this poor devil, so we headed on down the block.

I couldn't make out the colorful hand-drawn sign over the window, but Black Hair stared at it and read, "sno cones one dollar."

Behind the counter was a nice-looking girl of maybe fifteen or sixteen looking out at us and smiling. It was unnerving, that smile, because she wasn't moving at all.

"Miss? Hello?" I called up to her. "Are you dead or alive?" Getting no response, I walked up to the front of the stand and reached out my hand to touch it.

The stand dissolved-very slowly, as if made of syrup- from the point of contact in all directions, dissolving into tiny dots that swirled and sparkled and then evaporated before hitting the ground.

I jumped back, and we watched the process with wide-eyed wonder. Even the girl dissolved. Soon there was nothing at all left of her or of the stand around her. Nothing, that is, but a simple wooden stake in the ground to which a small index card was attached with a single staple. There was some writing on the card, and Black Hair approached it and squinted, trying to read the simple block printing.

"Sno cone stand, quantity one, with attendant (F)," she read. She straightened up and crept backward

toward the rest of us as if the stake and index card were some deadly poison. She looked stricken, terrified, almost panicked, as she gazed down at me and asked, almost plaintively, "What does it mean?"

I sighed. "I wish I knew."

Yellow Hair looked around at the rest of the street. "Will the rest of this dissolve if we touch it?"

There was only one way to find out.

The answer, from a representative sample, was "maybe." Some of the houses and cars dissolved, while others remained as solid as a rock. It made no sense at all.

A few more blocks over, we reached the edge of the Earth.

All semblance of reality as we'd been accepting it ended in a sudden, slightly irregular boundary. The street continued, but it no longer had the solidity or detail of "reality." It became, in a sense, a cartoon, a detailed perspective drawing, white on blue, going off into the distance.

It was a machine drawing, pretty clearly, and it not only had streets and buildings and cars, each item had a label, too. Not index cards, but just little rectangles that said things like

WHISTLE STOP MINIMART, GENERIC TEMPLATE NUMBER 14, and CHEVRON STATION, 6 PUMP, GAS AND GO MODEL 12A ONLY.

"I'm scared to death," Black Hair told us, swallowing hard. "But I just *got* to know."

She went right up to the edge, took a deep breath, then knelt down and put her hand on the blue area where the street was sketched out and labeled. "It's *solid!*" she exclaimed, amazed. "I can feel it. It feels smooth, even a little cold, but it's there."

I just gaped at it. "What the hell is this?" I asked aloud, of nobody in particular.

I didn't much remember the world we'd lived in, but I knew this sure wasn't a part of it.

Stepping out onto that blue world showed that Black Hair had more guts than Yellow Hair and me put together, but once she was out there and started walking around, it became irresistible to follow her.

She was right about it being cooler, and that sort of helped. We were still walking cautiously and carefully, but going up to the drawing of the minimart, I reached out and touched a storefront that was as

solid as the footing I was using but felt just the same-smooth, featureless, and cool.

"How far does this go?" I wondered out loud.

"Looks like it goes all the way as far as you can see," Yellow Hair responded. "All the way to the dark edges."

I looked back at the edge of reality and decided that I just felt more comfortable there for the moment. I walked back, carefully, and felt some relief with the heat, humidity, and real pavement under my feet.

The other two looked around for some time but finally joined me, all of us sitting down on the grass staring out at the impossible view.

"Now what do we do?" Black Hair asked, echoing my own sense of complete befuddlement.

"I'm thirsty. We still didn't find any water," Yellow Hair noted.

I sighed. "Well, I guess we're still looking for water. Beyond that, we have three choices. We stay in this ghost town, we wander around out there until we starve, or we go the other way."

"Walk into the sun?" Yellow Hair gasped.

"I doubt if we'll do that. I just don't know what's there, but something tells me that if we're getting all our heat and light from one direction, and there's nothing else here to give us a direction, then we might as well find out what the heck that really is." I paused. "But water is first."

None of the houses that remained had working water or any other utilities. As some rational procedures established themselves in our minds and we got a bit more pragmatic memory back, we began to remember what some things were for. At least there were some bottled soft drinks and juice in a couple of the refrigerators, even though, without power, they were quickly warming up.

It wasn't much, but it was enough. We had to find some way to get out of this or else figure out a way to survive here. Going toward the bright source of light and heat might not even be possible, but it was something that had to be tried. Taking a couple of cans of warm juice with us, we started off toward that side of the neighborhood, using the edge as a guide.

Now and then, on our right, we saw the occasional shapes of immobile people and animals. We found a couple of others like us, women this time, both as dead as that guy in the van and with not a mark on either. The rest of the people we found dissolved at the touch, leaving little note cards in their place.

Reaching the point where "reality" ended, still facing toward what looked like the sun, all three of us felt a little fear. Still, we knew that the blue would support us, and that if it grew too hot or too bright, we could

always turn around.

Black Hair stepped off first, then me, and Yellow Hair followed. It was hard for me to keep up with them because of their longer stride, but they always waited for me to catch up.

The blue flooring area soon ran out of drawings and labels and became a featureless plane with long, barlike rays of light moving from us toward that bright central point. It wasn't something we could look straight at, but we could feel it.

It was impossible to measure time, but after a while I was just too tired to walk any farther without a rest, so we sat on the now warm, smooth blue floor and took a breather.

"How long you figure we got to go yet?" Yellow Hair asked us.

"Who can say? Doesn't look much closer, does it?" I replied. "Still, we're getting there. Funny thing is, it doesn't seem to be getting much hotter now, at least. I-"

Black Hair suddenly grabbed my arm and I stopped talking and looked up at her quizzically.

"I hear something," she said. "Or somebody."

We all sat very still, and, sure enough, we could hear something or somebody not far away. "Sounds like . . . *digging*," I commented. I got painfully to my feet and started off slowly in the direction of the sound, the two women following.

It didn't take long, walking at a precise right angle to the sun, to find the source of the noise.

There was a hole in the floor. It was a great crack like the kind you'd see in a broken mirror, a jagged, ugly scar. Somebody, or something, was down in the cavity, and they were working hard. I dropped to hands and knees and crept cautiously to the edge and looked down.

Perhaps fifteen or twenty feet down, a curious creature in funny clothes with a giant bird's beak and two big eyes was swinging a pick ax, chipping away.

"Hello!" I called, my voice echoing along the walls of the crack.

The creature looked startled, and began frantically looking around, then shrugged. "Up here!" I called.

It stopped again, then finally looked up and spotted us. "My goodness! *You* again!" it called in a funny accent. "Come back to join me? I'm certain China can't be much farther. I've dug an awfully long way already!"

It was a very odd statement, but it implied that we'd spoken before. "Do you know me?" I called down to it.

"Well, we've never been properly introduced, but we have spoken, yes," the creature admitted. "What? You don't remember?"

"I don't remember anything. None of us do. Something happened up here and it wiped out a lot of the world, killed some folks, and left us without any memories at all."

"Oh, come, now! You must have *some* memories. Otherwise how would you know to speak to me or the words to say? If you had no memories, the way you three look, I might be Dodo barbecue by now! Goodness!"

"Do you know who we are? Where this is?" I asked it.

"As I say, we've never been properly introduced, so how would I know precisely who you are? The other two I don't really know, but they're quite lovely, both of them. Come down! With four of us I am certain we shall come out in China in no time at all!"

"You can't dig all the way to China by doing that!" I told it.

"Indeed? And how do you know that, Mr. Genius, if you don't remember anything?"

He had a point. How did I know that he was wrong? I wasn't too clear on where China was, but I just *knew* you could never get there by digging down through the center of the Earth.

"You should get out of there and come with us!" I told it. "Perhaps we can find a-shorter-way?"

The creature pulled himself up and looked quite proud and determined. "Certainly not! You think just because I'm the last Dodo bird in the universe that you can misdirect me from my purpose! Well, sir, you are quite wrong! I may be the only Dodo now, but, one day, the skies will once more be full of us, the noblest of all birddom!"

I pulled back from the crack and looked at the other two. "I don't know what sort of creature this Dodo is, but I'm sure he's not somebody who can help us. Still, if *that* thing is alive out here, perhaps other, smarter creatures are as well!"

There was no way to argue with me on this, and the only way to find out was to resume our journey. The sounds of digging were soon lost behind us.

As we went back on course toward the hot brightness, we slowly began to get used to it. It wasn't any one moment or any one thing that did it, but the closer we got to the source of all this, the more strength and

comfort we had, and the less either the heat or light bothered us.

Still, we met no one else on our journey after the Dodo, and it took a long time before we finally approached the source of it all.

VIII

THE DODO'S LESSON

It was bright enough that we all looked like dark silhouettes against the radiation pouring out almost in front of us. There was nothing but blue plane to the left and right of us, but there were cracks, lots of cracks. Here was the center of whatever happened. Here we approached the point where the world had cracked.

Looming in front of us was a massive building, with two tall towers and great doors framed by a vast arch. It looked dark and cold, and we decided not to enter it, walking to one side, where, almost out of nowhere, there seemed to form a narrow street like the ones we'd left back in "reality."

"Another dead boy over there, poor dear," Yellow Hair noted, pointing.

He had apparently been trimming the bushes by the giant building when it happened, just sort of frying him in his tracks, though he didn't look burned. Still, we all were getting the feeling that this was something called "radiation," a word that had popped into our minds without any context for explanation, as we'd gotten very close to this point. A burst of fire that didn't burn you outside but went through you and killed you anyway-that was what we knew it to be.

"Old guy," I noted. "Gray beard, white hair. At least he'd been around a while, I guess." Still, like the first body we saw in the van, there was too much of a sense of familiarity about this one to linger. I didn't know who he'd been, but I was certain that, at one time in the past, I had known.

The road went through a patch of forest and finally reached a guardhouse with a bunch of gates and fences. Black Hair went up to the little building, where a tough-looking uniformed guard stood, frozen stiff like the rest. She was as big as Yellow Hair but not as good-looking.

"The sign says that boys are not allowed beyond this point," Black Hair noted. "Want to stay out?"

"Not unless somebody or something stops me," I replied. "Fair enough." Black Hair reached out and touched the guardhouse and it and the assemblage of crossing barriers began to dissolve. In a short time, all that was left was a bunch of sticks in the ground with little note cards saying what they'd been.

The second gate also dissolved, although, interestingly, the fence did not, but the third and final one proved stubborn and quite solid. It appeared to be controlled not from the guardhouse but from inside, where some kind of observation tower could barely be seen. Kind of clever.

"We can't let *this* stop us!" I cried. "Not after coming all this way! Besides, there's no place else to go."

The women found some tools, including sledgehammers, but while their banging made a lot of noise, it didn't get anything open. Finally Black Hair vanished into the gardener's shed behind the big building and came out with some rope and an ugly-looking tool that had a lot of sharp spikes.

She tied one end of the rope to the spiked tool, swung the end around her head, and threw it toward the top. After three tries, she still hadn't hooked it, but the idea was obvious and quite clever.

"Let me do it," Yellow Hair suggested. "I am stronger and taller." Still, it took her two tries to hook it and pull enough to insure that it was solid.

This was one case where being small and light helped, although I wasn't too thrilled about pulling myself. Still, I said, "I'm the lightest. Let me go first, and then if I make it, you two follow. If either of you is too heavy, nobody will get over."

They both nodded, and I took several deep breaths, spat on my hands, grabbed the rope, and pulled myself slowly up to the top of the fence by walking up the wall while holding on for dear life.

The top of the wall was pretty damned high; I hadn't thought it would be so high or so scary to look back down.

"It's too high for me to jump down without hurting myself!" I called to them. "Let me use the rope to get down on this side and I'll see if I can open the gate. It's probably not that tough if you're on this side of the wall."

They didn't like it, but at this point there wasn't much they could do but go along.

In fact, while I hadn't thought of the fact that the tower would need power that didn't exist anymore, there was a manual system to operate the gate. It involved turning a big wheel that moved other gears and levers and opened the gates inward. I shouted my discovery to the women, then tried very hard to move the wheel, without success. It needed more muscle power than I had, damn it.

Why couldn't this part of the shattered world dissolve?

I shouted my problem to them, and Black Hair yelled, "Take the rope and claw to the tower. Throw it off the tower to our side. If one of us can get over, we can open it!"

Good plan. *Boys weren't much for thinking and planning, they were strictly for making love and babies.* Now where had that come from? Still, it represented how I was feeling at that point.

The tower was a hybrid, the first I'd encountered. Part of it dissolved-maybe had already dissolved-but the part facing away from the radiation source was still solid. I hoped I could get up there and toss the rope over without collapsing what remained of the structure.

It wasn't easy, but there was a straight-up ladder on the outside that was clearly a backup to the stairs inside that no longer went all the way to the top. I managed to climb up there with the rope, my whole body screaming at the abuse it was taking. From there, I could see the girls and actually managed to toss the rope down to them. Pretty soon, I had it securely latched again, and Black Hair got up it, although it was a near thing. She was over the other side, jumping down athletically to the ground, and had managed to start turning the big wheel even before I started making my way down.

The gates squealed and screeched, and it took every ounce of strength Black Hair had, but the gates swung open just enough for Yellow Hair to squeeze through.

Both Black Hair and I needed a break and we took it. Yellow Hair, who'd had no problems so far, used the time to do a little exploring, then came back and reported to us.

"There's a bunch of buildings just up ahead. Not all of 'em look all together, but a couple do. It looks like some kind of, like, explosion. The part that was facin' the blast, that's gone. The rest-no damage at all. Still creepy. Bunch of cars were there, all dissolved when I touched 'em."

After a bit of rest, I actually felt worse, but my desire to see what was here and maybe learn something about what had happened overrode even the aches and pains and tiredness.

It was a ghostly scene. Here, close to the "blast," things had evaporated or dissolved when directly exposed and it gave the whole place a sense of melting and decay. More unnerving was the occasional sight of what looked like *parts* of people, often just legs in shoes and socks. Most of the people had clearly been either wholly or partly vaporized; virtually all the rest had been frozen in some kind of weird death tableau, ready to crumble when touched. And yet, for all that, it hardly explained the sticks and cards and labels, or why a few people we'd seen had died but remained otherwise as solid as we were.

The tremendous glow that appeared to be a sunrise from afar turned out to be a bright dome of energy over the whole compound. The center and source of this great frozen blast was clearly just ahead, past the parking area near the end of the road, in a low-slung two-story structure with modern lines and a flat roof.

The other buildings appeared to have been offices, labs, or storerooms, but this one was different. Black Hair walked up to it and squinted at the sign. "Applied physics laboratory, TSU," she read, the words clearly difficult for her and of little apparent sense. "Admittance by level badge only. Secure area. Authorized personnel only. All others keep out." She turned to me. "What do you suppose it means?"

"Well, 'keep out' is pretty clear," I answered. "I think some people were fooling around with stuff they didn't know how to control and it blew up on them. I can't think of any other reason for it. Blew up and killed them and most other folks, too."

Black Hair nodded, but looked somewhat troubled. "Why not us, though? Why didn't it do the same thing to us?"

"Why didn't it melt *this* building?" Yellow Hair asked us, feeling as strange and uncomfortable as I did. "I mean, isn't this where it went *bang*?"

"Maybe it did," Black Hair mused, then reached out and touched the door. It was solid, as were the walls.

Yellow Hair walked completely around the very long building, finally coming back from the other direction. "All four walls are there and they are solid," she reported. "But it is warm to the touch."

I began to have a feeling that it wasn't the environment that had changed but rather we who'd changed as we'd come closer and closer to this point. We should have been blinded, burned up, fried. There was no way we should have been able to stand here and survive, we all felt that.

"Maybe we can't die," Black Hair mused. "You remember my cut?" She lifted her foot and showed us. It was dirty, but there wasn't a trace of a cut even though it had been a fair gash. "I didn't feel anything there since we started toward this place."

Yellow Hair looked around with an almost awestruck expression. "Maybe whatever killed them made us like gods or something."

"Maybe we should go inside if we can and see if we can find out anything else," I suggested, trying to shake this sense of being totally alone, the sole survivors of a disaster. Gods may enjoy good food and drink but they sure didn't need it, and they sure didn't feel the kind of muscle aches and bone tiredness I felt.

Black Hair tried the door, and it opened with a groaning sound. With the aid of a hand from Yellow Hair, I made it to my feet and followed Black Hair in. Yellow Hair brought up the rear.

Inside the environment was somewhat different, as if the very air was some kind of solid thing, a greenish-yellow with sparks that seemed nonetheless rather frozen, static. We sort of cut through it, and it felt like walking through cobwebs, tingling and tickling the body.

There were no lights inside, but at least this static energy seemed to radiate sufficient light for our needs, even where there were no windows.

We looked around the first floor before going farther, and found several solid bodies, all women. We were at the point of expecting them now.

The second floor was mostly offices and big workrooms. Much of the first floor had been that way, too, although the whole middle seemed to be filled with all sorts of complicated machinery.

"You notice somethin' funny 'bout the last couple of bodies?" Black Hair asked us. "Huh?"

"Look at 'em again. It's kinda like they're not made up of one person but two, and those two weren't anyways alike. It's kinda weird, but take a look."

I saw what she meant. It wasn't twisted features, it was more like they had been in the process of melting, but instead of melting into nothing, they were melting into somebody else. Somebody whose body was shorter, chunkier, and maybe bald.

And all with a kind of dark brown skin tone, darker and different than mine.

"Listen!" The word was whispered in a frightened, tense hiss by Black Hair.

We froze and listened. It was a kind of steady whining noise, somewhere in the distance. It didn't sound like anything I could relate to, as little as that was.

"It's comin' from down there," Yellow Hair noted, pointing at a stairway.

"What is it?" I wondered aloud.

Black Hair shook her head. "I dunno, but we didn't come here to run." She looked around, found a metal bar, and held it up like a club. She started silently for the stairs, and, after a moment, we followed.

The noise grew louder as we descended, and when we reached a landing, there was a sensation that we were somehow in a different type of environment, one that seemed only slightly related to the one above.

It was bright and warm down at the bottom, almost stifling hot, and the very walls seemed to blaze. It never seemed to have occurred to any of us that we might be killing ourselves by walking into this radiation; it just wasn't a thought that came to mind. The future was the next hallway, not the next month or week or even the next hour.

We passed down a corridor with a lot of colored lights, all blazing, and at the end we followed the ones

that led left because that's where the noise was coming from.

"You feel something?" Black Hair whispered.

We did. The air, the static, frozen air, was neither static nor frozen here. We were entering an area where the air was moving and there was a definite if slight breeze.

We emerged into a large chamber-completely underground and cut off from the surface except by that corridor and stairs-where things weren't static at all. The same radiation that had seemed so static elsewhere wasn't static here; instead, it throbbed around the room, giving off some heat but shielding us, I think, from the tremendous kaleidoscope of horribly intense lights springing from a point in the floor ahead of us. The lights were swirling around, apparently causing the agitation we saw in the air around us, and they gave off an eerie, colorful show that we could only bear to look at for seconds at a time. All around us was a ghastly tableau.

There were seven women in the room, at least as far as we could tell. There might have been more, but we couldn't see anything past that central area.

They were all identical, and they were all frozen in midmotion, not keeled over like the others we'd seen. They were real enough. One close to me had her mouth open as if she were shouting and was pointing toward the breach in the floor, an expression of sheer terror on her face. Another was frozen in the act of frantically pushing some controls on a massive console, not quite able to reach one last big, round, red button. The hand, clenched in a fist, was maybe a quarter inch from it.

The others were similarly frozen in midmotion, and it was clear from their expressions that they all knew they were in trouble and had been in the process of trying to stop it when it caught them. One sat reclined on a chair and had this helmet-like contraption on that covered her eyes and ears. I wondered what the heck she'd been doing. The thing was attached to a wall console by a thick cable. Her expression was the most curious of the whole bunch-total and complete surprise.

They were all *small*, too, for girls. They were only a few inches taller than me, bulkier, with dark brown skin. They were all bald and they all looked exactly alike.

"How come they don't look like us?" Yellow Hair asked, puzzled.

"It changed 'em," Black Hair guessed. " 'Member the ones upstairs? Kinda half and half? This is what they was changin' into, I bet."

I nodded, but it cleared nothing up. "I know what an explosion is, even though I can't think of ever seeing one," I told them. "Still, if whatever it was exploded right over there, caught these girls, and then mostly caught the ones above us, why didn't it change them all the way? Or us, too, and everybody else?"

"Cause it couldn't, I bet," Black Hair, responded, thinking. "Something stopped it. Froze it in midexplosion. It just sorta shut everything down, 'cept us. Us and that nutty Dodo we saw diggin' out there."

Black Hair went around to the other side and examined this wall of rectangular gizmos. She looked down at them and said, "There's *people* of some kind inside these things! Look!"

We hurried over and Yellow Hair lifted me up so I could see. There was a kind of dark glass wall over each, and, sure enough, inside several were people. They all looked like they were asleep, or at least had been asleep when all this happened, and they, too, had been touched by whatever had changed these folks. They were all naked and had all sorts of wires and probes sticking into them. They also were wearing those helmets, only not everything looked connected and certainly not everything fit them.

"See something funny 'bout them?" Black Hair commented.

"Huh? What?"

"No nipples. Weird. Even boys got nipples. Not them."

She was right.

Yellow Hair put me down and I went back over to look at the girl at the console. That big red button was something she'd been clearly trying to press. It also seemed to have had a thick cover over it that had to be unlatched in order to actually strike the button. That meant it was important but dangerous, I guessed. Not something you wanted to push by accident.

I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if it got pushed, or if in fact it was much too late now to have any effect. Black Hair seemed to read my thoughts and said, rather firmly, "Don't touch it! We dunno what it does! It might start it up again with us here!"

That was certainly true. When she was satisfied that I was moving away from the console and wasn't going to push anything, Black Hair turned and almost bumped into the frozen girl who had been pointing and screaming. I don't know why, or what made her do it, but Black Hair reached out and touched the smaller figure.

There was a sudden motion, like the figure was going to dissolve, and I think we fully expected it, but it didn't happen. Instead, even though Black Hair pulled her hand away quickly, a reaction begun at the point of contact spread over the frozen body, a bizarre and increasingly rapid assemblage of black and then multicolored dots that seemed to consume the whole image. Only that image wasn't being consumed, it was being changed, even *growing* as it attracted more mass from the whistling color bands shooting out of the hole in the floor.

In only thirty or forty seconds, it became an absolute, detailed, duplicate of Black Hair, even to the dirt and crud that covered her body. And it became *alive*, and gasped just as Black Hair gasped and pointed just as Black Hair pointed. They both said at once, in the same voice, "Did you see *that*?"

"Wow! Neat!" Yellow Hair commented.

I stared at the two absolutely identical girls, who now had caught sight of each other. "Uh-oh," they both said at once, looking each other in the eye.

I looked up at the new creation and asked, "Do you remember anything about what went on here?"

She looked puzzled. "Course I don't. I came in here with you!"

"No you didn't," the other one said. "*I* did. You were one of those until I touched you!"

"No! It's the other way around!" the first one insisted, each one so much like the other it was already confusing to tell which one was which.

"It don't matter!" I yelled. "One of you touched one of these things and it became another *you*!"

They both seemed to accept that as at least a starting point. "But which one of us is which?" they both asked.

"Don't matter, I told you! Unless . . . unless the new one's faking it. I doubt it, though. Whatever changed them into the identical girls still works in here. It changed one of you into Black Hair. Don't touch-" I began to warn, but it was already too late.

Absolutely intrigued, Yellow Hair had touched one of the frozen figures, and the same process happened again, only this time, the frozen figure became an animated duplicate of Yellow Hair. Now there were two of each of the girls! Two sets of absolutely identical twins!

"This ain't fair! There's four of you and still one of me!" I complained. "Maybe I should-"

"*No!*" both Black Hairs shouted at once, and I stopped dead still. "Until we figure more of this and get food and water, no more touching folks!"

I bent to that logic, but hoped Yellow Hair-both of her- wouldn't think it was neat to have a tribe of her around. They were big and strong enough that there was no way we could stop her.

"The thing is," Black Hairs both said, "if touching these folks changes 'em into us, then whatever did all the rest is still active in here. That's why the lights and the moving air. In here, we got to be real careful."

That was an understatement. "Then let's move out of here for now and see if we can find that food," I suggested. "We got all the time in the world to come back."

Both Black Hairs nodded. "Agreed," they said.

"I hope we can find some cold drinks, too," I muttered. "There is nothing I want more than a real cold drink."

The same energy stream that had transformed the frozen clones into duplicates of the girls came out in a smaller but equally deliberate manner from the hole and arched over toward me. I got nervous and backed up, but it hit the floor in front of where I'd been. Or, rather, it stopped maybe eight inches above the floor, and began to flow into a shape that, in a matter of seconds, solidified into a waxed-paper soda cup with ice cubes and orange liquid in it.

I reached down, picked it up, and took a sip. It was orange soda and it was really cold.

"Hey! Could *we* do that, I wonder?" the Yellow Hairs asked. They crouched down, looked at the floor, and said, "I wish I had a big, cold drink."

Two identical drinks just like mine were formed in front of them.

The Black Hairs followed suit. We needed drinks more than anything else, and, frankly, while we also could have used some food, that was tougher to wish for. We didn't have a lot of memory of just what we were supposed to eat.

"Wow! This is fun!" the Yellow Hairs commented, drinking their sodas.

"Maybe it is, but I think we oughta get out of here!" I shouted to them. "Look at yourselves! I don't think it's doing any of us good to be in here for too long!"

Their skins had become dark, like they'd been tanned by the sun, and I was beginning to notice that they seemed to be changing slightly, their figures and features becoming more exaggerated. If that was happening to them, then I couldn't guess what was happening to me, but I couldn't hide the fact that I was becoming turned on again.

We headed for the corridor, all five of us now, and were soon back at the bottom of the stairs. It was weird to go back into that stifling, static environment again, but a relief to get out of that bizarre room.

"Wait a minute!" Black Hairs both called to me. "My eyes aren't adjusting right. I can't see my hand in front of my face!"

"Me, neither," both Yellow Hairs agreed.

I looked around and could see just fine.

"Link hands and follow me," I told them. "You keep hold of my hand, and the others keep hold of the one in front. I'll lead us out."

It was a little tough with the stairs, but we managed, and I finally got us all outside. Things seemed normal to me, if a bit bright. "Any better?" I asked them.

"No," they all responded just about in unison. "I can't see a thing!"

I had to face a fact that they hadn't yet allowed themselves to consider. That, for some reason, the radiation hadn't affected me, at least in this way, but it had them.

I had four blind goddesses on my hands.

We didn't try to find food after that; besides, we were too tired, too scared, and too confused. The grass was soft, there was no weather, and nothing seemed terribly threatening, so I suggested that we all try to get some sleep and see if that might help their eyes. I was totally, completely exhausted.

None of us, of course, had any concept that we might be in a severe radiation field, or that there was any other remaining danger. It simply didn't occur to us. It was likely that if we had retained our memories, we probably would have had more sense than to come here in the first place.

Then again, maybe not, since the food was going to run out fast back in that little patch of remaining reality, and death here attempting an escape would be far preferable to death by slow starvation over there.

As achy and exhausted as I was, and without a lot of memories or recriminations to dwell on or worries about a technology I was rediscovering and misunderstanding, I went out like a light.

* * *

They were all there, all lined up at the tea party, all looking starved and thirsty and forlorn, since the Mad Hatter and March Hare had wasted the tea and the Dormouse had eaten all the biscuits and crumpets.

I knew their faces; I knew all their faces, save perhaps one or two, whether they were male or female, big or little, weak or strong. Even Black Hair and Yellow Hair were there, although not copies of them. Of the short, plump woman with no nipples who was cloned in the big room there was no sign.

When I approached them, they all turned to me with pleading eyes and empty teacups and moaned, groaned, and pleaded with me for help. For some reason they believed that only I could help them.

But I wasn't myself. Or was I? I looked down and saw two enormous bird's legs below me, and feathers all around, and my vision was indeed blocked in part by what I'd taken to be a very large nose but proved to be a hard, bulbous beak. I was wearing a waistcoat and tie, and my four-fingered hands held a pocket watch attached to my coat by a gold chain. The watch said that it was one minute to twelve. I was the Dodo.

But I couldn't be the Dodo! I'd seen the Dodo digging and had spoken with him on more than one occasion. I'd even argued with him, or dismissed him as not worth arguing with. Digging through the Earth to get out of a hole instead of taking a hand and being pulled out-it was absurd. Yet, now, I was having a hard time remembering why the logic was absurd. I was beginning to think like a Dodo!

A small child, eyes big as saucers and twice as sad, came up to me, showed me an empty plate, and asked, in a plaintive, heartrending voice, "Please, sir? May I have some more?"

I looked down and hardened my heart at the sight. "Forget it, kid! You 're in the wrong book!" I snapped, then took out my pipe and began to fill it with tobacco. When it was ready, I lit it with a burning piece of straw I pulled from one of the torches outlining the meadow and puffed hard. The smoke billowed out, far disproportionate to the amount of burning weed, and it swirled around and began to take form.

"So you've gotten to that point, have you?" the Cheshire Cat asked, although in the smoke, only the eyes, nose, and mouth were visible. "What point?"

"Must everything have a point?" it retorted. "Why, I'm quite round. Very few points on me, except at the claws and whiskers, I suppose."

"But you said- "

"No, I said that you have gotten to that point. There's a difference."

"Indeed? What?"

"Well, someone else could have gotten to a totally different point, for one thing."

"This is nonsense! I can't remember much of anything right now, but I know that this is not real. It can't be."

"Indeed? It's not as believable as drawings of a city, dissolving cars and people, and a bunch of identical girls who turn into whoever touches them? Oh, my, yes! Now that's a realistic, believable scenario! This,

on the other hand-a lot of folks sitting outside waiting for something to eat and drink and hoping you 'll be a provider. Oh, that's unbelievable, fantastic. Yes, quite so. And you don't believe you are mad!"

I felt very uncertain at this conversation and didn't like its direction. "Am I mad? " I asked it.

"Well, ordinarily I'd say yes, that we're all mad, but since you're a Dodo it might just be stupidity. You know they just stood around and let themselves be killed? Didn't even try to get away? 'Dumb as a Dodo' has more truth than madness in it! No, Dodos might be too stupid or too dense to be mad. But these people-the rest of the group-they're quite clearly mad, because they 're putting their lives and futures in the hands of a stupid Dodo bird!"

"I'm not a Dodo! This whatever it is just made me seem like one! Perhaps I'm dreaming! "

"Ah!" responded the Cat. "But what if you're not? You have no idea how difficult it is to communicate on any rational basis with somebody with a birdbrain."

I hesitated a moment. "Is that what you are doing? Communicating?"

"Well, I'm hardly tap-dancing with you! Of course I'm communicating! Whether or not you can hear me and understand me with all this fog in your Dodo brain is a different question."

"It looks quite clear today to me," I noted.

"Now, see, there you go again!" the Cat said disgustedly. "You've been given as much information as can be gotten through. You are one of the few hopes left that anything can be done. At this very moment, you are the only hope. If you blow it this time, there's no tomorrow. Your friends played with things they didn't understand and they crashed the whole damned program. You don't know what that means because you 're a Dodo."

"Stop saying that! "

"Okay, because you 're a giant stupid ugly bird. Better? If you weren't, you 'd listen. When everything went down, it took your memories with it. Shock blew it mostly out, but now vestigial remnants have returned. You 're starting to remember, but you don't have the data to put names to faces, places to events. Right now, you are running on momentum and inertia, almost a little piece of independent action in a world where it's all gone. That's because of the backup link, which you also don't remember, but it won't remain forever. You can use it if you act quickly, but you are drawing very close to the point where the backup itself will lose what little power is left there."

"Call me a Dodo, then, but I do not understand you," I told him.

"And you'll understand less and less if you don't use what you've got and act! Do I have to spell it out for

you? Okay-Push the damned red button. Is that clear enough? Otherwise, get your shovel and start digging. "

And then all of the people and all of the creatures around the tables in the meadow turned to me and called, in torment and with a heartrending plea, "Help us, Obi-Wan! You're our only hope!"

I drifted off into a deeper sleep where the dreams no longer were of the sort I could remember, and I slept solidly for an unknown period, since time no longer existed.

When I awoke, I half expected to find myself transformed into a giant bird, but I was just a very, very achy boy with a bad headache.

The women were still out cold, and that suited me just fine. I still didn't remember much about the time before the world exploded, but I remembered the dream very well indeed. Most of it seemed nonsensical, as dreams often do, but out of dreams sometimes came sense. Had I been acting like a Dodo? A dumb bird that walked up to its killers and tried to be friends? It wasn't flattering, but it might have made some sense.

And if I was the Dodo, then the one we saw digging out there was me, too. Thing was, we all saw it, so how could it be me?

The main point, though, was that my dream, which maybe was me, too, said to push the red button inside or else we'd start losing it again and finally kill ourselves and everybody else. How I could kill those others, all but a handful of whom were already dead, I didn't know, but somehow I felt that it was true. Maybe, like the frozen women down there, those folks who seemed dead lumps weren't really dead at all, but merely waiting for somebody to do something so they could come back to life.

Not touching them, not changing them. But what?

Pushing the damned red button was what.

I knew that if the women woke up they'd try and talk me out of it, and I had enough conditioning from the world as it had been that I'd probably let them dominate me. Was that the Dodo and its killers? Maybe. I wouldn't hurt any of them and I didn't think they'd hurt me, but if not acting would kill us all, then what difference did it make?

I took a leak and then walked slowly but steadily back toward the building we'd explored, going in as silently as the creaking door would allow, and entered the silent, grim halls.

As I walked back along the route from "yesterday," whenever that really was, I got a sensation that maybe

I wasn't alone, that there was somebody, something, living here.

No, that wasn't right. *Nothing* was living in this world anymore. At best, like me, other would be surviving. That was what made this a fairly easy choice for me. The alternative was this nightmare existence.

I went down the stairs, still filled with self-doubt. Was I about to do something incredibly dumb based on a stupid dream? Did I really know anything? Was I really getting any real communication from somebody, or was it just my compulsion to push that red button? I mean, I had to face it. I really had been tempted to press it the day before, and didn't only because Black Hair didn't really want it.

The closer I got to that bizarre room, though, the more nervous and uncertain I felt. What if this was all there really was? What if we could have a long time just eating and sleeping and screwing? I could have the most fun of all if we turned these frozen folks into Black Hairs and Yellow Hairs and none of them into me.

What if that button blew up the universe or something?

No, that was stupid. Somebody already had blown up the universe. The button couldn't possibly do that. That thought, at least, was a logical comfort to me.

And then, there I was, in the breezy room with all the flashing lights, all the noise, and the power-and that damned red button.

It didn't seem quite as breezy as it had the day before, and it didn't seem quite as bright. There was a real sense, even though it was slight, that things were starting to run down. Made me wonder what the place had been like just after the blowup. Must have been a real mess.

I got a tightness in my stomach as I looked over at that woman, her mouth open, her expression both frightened and determined, and that hand poised just above that button. So close . . .

I think I was most worried that nothing would happen, that it would either be an anticlimax, too late to have any effect, or simply not work anymore. Or, maybe it would just ring a bell or activate warning sirens. That wouldn't get us anywhere.

I approached the console with its ever-frozen occupant and looked at the button. I wasn't even sure I could keep from touching her if I was to press the damned thing. The chair she sat in was on rollers-maybe I could gently roll her away to one side.

It moved at least a couple of inches before it jammed on something, but a couple of inches was enough.

I stood there for a moment and just stared at that big red button, not really thinking, not quite sure if I

should really push it at all...

Something took hold of me and violently flung me away from the console. I was so surprised that I was on my back on the floor before I realized what was happening. Above me loomed this huge shape, and a strange woman's face that glared at me in lunatic triumph. I'd never seen her before that I could remember, but she had the same sort of familiarity we felt when we'd first found the other dead ones. I was pretty sure she was at the big gathering in my dream.

She was stark naked and almost totally black, like ink or charcoal. Her skin was peeling off in little bits from whatever radiation was coming from that hole, and what hair hadn't been burned or fallen out hung there in gray wisps.

But she was still plenty big and strong enough to stop me.

"*You!*" she shrieked, voice cracking. "Of all the people who might have survived - *you!*"

I figured it was better to just lie there. "Y - you know me?"

"I know *everyone* left in this miserable pesthole circle of Hell. That's where we are, you know! We're in Hell! We've been fooling ourselves that we're in some big *machine*, but what kind of sick mind could have dreamed up the kind of depravities and violence and hatred that these worlds contain? Now it's out of the bag. *We're in Hell!* You, me, and maybe the handful of others left when the rest of the universe fell away from lack of interest!"

"I - I don't understand . . ."

"They *want* you to press that button. And you know what'll happen? We'll be reborn, again and again, trapped in a whole new sequence of hells each more terrible than the last. They want you to think that maybe the next one will fix things, but they know better. We're all in Hell because, at heart, we are evil! And the evil in our hearts is what keeps creating horror after horror! Well, it stops here! The true death! *Oblivion!* Here we stop it and cheat the forces of Hell! We worked hard to do it and by damn we did it! And I'm not going to let anyone, particularly not *you*, cheat me out of my cherished goal!"

There was no question she was crazy, but she was one of those crazies that had a whole logical line to their madness. No giant vanishing cats and big stupid birds here. She *wanted* this destruction, which made it all the more important that, somehow, I survive long enough to figure out some way to push that damned red button. But how could I ever get past this madwoman?

"Look!" I cried to her, trying to get her to calm down. "I don't know who you are. I don't even know who I am, let alone what this place is or what's going on here! I'm not trying anything! Why didn't you show yourself when we were down here before?"

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