

# Shadow Twin

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Act I

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One

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Ramon Espejo awoke floating in a sea of darkness. For a moment, he was relaxed and mindless, drifting peacefully, and then his identity returned to him desultorily, like an unwanted afterthought.

He was Ramon Espejo. He was working a prospecting contract out of Nuevo Janeiro. He was ... he was ...

Where he had expected the details of his life to rush in—what he had done last night, what he was to do today, what grudges he was nursing, what resentments had pricked him recently—the next thought simply failed him. He was Ramon Espejo—but he did not know where he was. Or how he had gotten there.

Disturbed, he tried to open his eyes, and found that they were open already. Wherever he was, it was a totally dark place, darker than the jungle night, darker than the darkness in the deep caves in the sandstone cliffs near Swan's Neck.

Or perhaps he was blind.

That thought started a tiny spring of panic within him. There were stories of men who'd got drunk on cheap synthetic Muscat or Sweet Mary and woke up blind. Had he done that? Had he lost that much control of himself? A tiny rivulet of fear traced a cold channel down along his spine. But his head didn't hurt, and his belly didn't burn. He closed his eyes, blinking them hard several times, irrationally hoping to jar his vision back into existence; the only result was an explosion of bright pastel blobs across his retinas, scurrying colors that were somehow more disturbing than the darkness.

His initial sense of drowsy lethargy slid completely away from him, and he tried to call out. He felt his mouth moving slowly, but he heard nothing. Was he deaf too? He tried to roll over and sit up but could not. He lay back against nothing, floating again, not fighting, but his mind racing. He was fully awake now, but he still couldn't remember where he was or how he had gotten there. Perhaps he was in danger: his immobility was both suggestive and ominous. Had he been in a mine cave-in? Perhaps a rockfall had pinned him down. He tried to concentrate on the feel of his body, sharpening his sensitivity to it, and finally decided that he could feel no weight or pressure, nothing actually pinioning him. *You might not feel anything if your spinal cord had been cut*, he thought with a flash of cold horror. But a moment's further consideration convinced him that it could not be so: he *could* move his body a little, although when he tried to sit up, something stopped him, pulled his spine straight, pulled his arms and shoulders back down from where he'd raised them. It was like moving through syrup, only the syrup pushed back, holding him gently, firmly, implacably in place.

He could feel no moisture against his skin, no air, no breeze, no heat or cold. Nor did he seem to be resting on anything solid. Apparently, his first impression had been correct. He was floating, trapped in darkness, held in place. He imagined himself like an insect in amber, caught fast in the gooey syrup that surrounded him, in which he seemed to be totally submerged. But how was he breathing?

He *wasn't*, he realized. *He wasn't breathing.*

Panic shattered him like glass. All vestiges of thought blinked out, and he fought like an animal for his life. He clawed the enfolding nothingness, trying to pull his way up toward some imagined air. He tried to scream. Time stopped meaning anything, the struggle consuming him entirely, so that he couldn't say how long it was before he fell back, exhausted. The syrup around him gently, firmly, pulled him back precisely as he had been—back into place. He felt as if he should have been panting, expected to hear his blood pounding in his ears, feel his heart hammering at his chest—but there was nothing. No breath, and no heartbeat. No burning for air.

He was dead.

He was dead and floating on a vast dry sea that stretched away to eternity in all directions. Even blind and deaf, he could sense the immensity of it, of that measureless midnight ocean.

He was dead and in Limbo, waiting in darkness for the Day of Judgment.

He almost laughed at the thought—it was better than what the Catholic priest in the tiny adobe church in his little village in the mountains of northern Mexico had promised him; Father Ortega had often assured him that he'd go right to the flames and torments of Hell as soon as he died unshriven—but he could not push it away. He had died, and this emptiness—infinite darkness, infinite stillness, trapped alone with only his own mind—was what had always waited for him all his life, in spite of all the blessings and benedictions of the Church, in spite of all his sins and occasional semi-sincere repentances. None of it had made any difference.

But *how* had it happened? How had he died? His memory seemed sluggish, unresponsive as a tractor's engine on a cold winter morning—hard to start and hard to keep in motion without sputtering and stalling. He began with what was most familiar, imagining his room in Deigotown—the small window over his cot, the thick pounded-earth walls. The faucets in his sink, already rusting and ancient though humanity had hardly been on the planet for sixteen years. The tiny scarlet skitterlings that scurried across the ceiling, multiple rows of legs flailing like oars. The sharp smells of iceroot and *ganja*, spilled tequila and roasting peppers. The sounds of the transports flying overhead, grinding their way up through the air and into orbit.

Slowly, the recent events of his life took shape, still fuzzy as a badly aligned projection. He had been in Diegotown for the Blessing of the Fleet. He had eaten roasted fish and saffron rice from a street vendor and watched the fireworks. The smoke had smelled like a strip mine from all the explosions, and the spent fireworks had hissed like serpents as they plunged into the sea. But that was before ... yes, before.

There had been a fight. He'd fought with Eleana. The sound of her voice—high and accusing and mean as a pitbull. He'd hit her. He remembered that. She'd screamed and clawed at his eyes and tried to kick him in the balls. And they'd made up afterwards like they always did. Afterward, she had run her fingers along the machete scars on his arm as he fell into a sated sleep.

He remembered now.

He'd left her before first light, sneaking out of a room heavy with the smell of sweat and sex while she was still asleep so he wouldn't have to talk to her, feeling the morning breeze cool against his skin. Flatfurs scurrying away from him as he walked down the muddy street, making their alarm cries like panicked oboes. He'd flown his van to the outfitter's station because he was going ...

His mind balked. It was not the nauseating forgetfulness that seemed to have consumed his world, but something else. There was something his mind didn't want to recall. Slowly, gritting his teeth, he forced his memory to his will.

He'd spent the day realigning two lift tubes in the van. Someone had been there with him. Sanchez, bitching about parts. And then he had flown off into the wastelands, the outback, *terreno cimarron* ...

Had his heart been beating, it would have stopped then in remembered terror. He had gone to the mountains—and he had *seen* it.

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Two

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"This going to be the big one?" Old Sanchez asked, the way he always did.

"Yes," Ramon said as he clamped down the cowl on his left-rear lift tube. "This time, I'm coming back with enough good claims to make the *pinche* lawyers start working for *me*."

The outfitters shop was a mix of junkyard and clean room—great scraps of the vans and transports Old Sanchez had gathered up over the years to strip for parts or else retool into cheap buys for people even more desperate than themselves lay among storage units of picocircuitry that it would have taken Ramon half his life to pay for. Old Sanchez himself waddled through the work bays with a glass of iced tea in his hand. When Ramon had first known him, it had been whiskey. Never say that times don't change.

"You better hope not," Old Sanchez said. "Too much money kills men like you and me. God meant us to be poor, or he wouldn't have made us so mean."

Ramon tested the tubes. The yields were balanced and good enough, and the hum from them was like a promise of escape.

"God meant you to be mean, Sanchito. He just didn't want me taking any shit."

"Eleana know you're going out? Last time she came here looking for you two days after you left. You're gonna have to do something about that bitch. Kill her or get married."

The knot in Ramon's belly went a notch tighter. He wasn't sure if it was dread at leaving her behind or the need to be gone. Both, maybe.

"She knows I'm going this time. And when I get back, she'll be happy to help me spend what I get. You watch. This is going to be the big one."

. . . . .

It was a crisp clear day in October. He flew his beat-up old van north across the Fingerlands, the Greenglass country, the river marshes, the *Océano Tétrico*, heading deep into unknown territory. North of Fiddler's Jump were thousands of hectares that no one had ever explored, or even thought of exploring, land so far only glimpsed from orbit during the first colony surveys.

The human colony on the planet of São Paulo was only a little more than ten years old, and the majority of its towns were situated in the subtropic zone of the snaky eastern continent that stretched almost from pole to pole. The colonists were mostly from the Brazilian Commonwealth, Mexico, Jamaica, and Hispaniola, and their natural inclination was to expand south, into the steamy lands near the equator—they were not effete *norteamericanos*, after all; they were used to such climates, they knew how to live with the heat, they knew how to farm the jungles, their skins did not sear in the sun. So they looked to the south and tended to ignore the cold northern territories, perhaps because of an unvocalized common conviction—one anticipated centuries before by the first Spanish settlers in the New World of the Americas—that life was not worth living any place where there was even a remote possibility of snow.

Ramon, however, was part Yaqui and had grown up in the rugged plateau country of northern Mexico. He liked the hills and white water, and he didn't mind the cold. He also knew that the Sierra Hueso chain in the northern hemisphere of São Paulo was a more likely place to find rich ore than the flatter country around the Hand or Nuevo Janeiro or Little Dog. The mountains of the Sierra Hueso had been piled up many millions of years before by a collision between continental plates, the colliding plates squeezing an ocean out of existence between them; the former seabottom would have been pinched and pushed high into the air along the collision line, and it would be rich in copper and other metals.

The Sierra Hueso had been mapped from orbit by the colony ramscoop, but no one Ramon knew had ever actually been there, and the territory was still so unexplored that the peaks of the range had not even been individually named. That meant that there were no human settlements within hundreds of miles, and no satellite to relay his network signals this far north; if he got into trouble he would be on his own.

It was probably better that way. Although he was reluctant to admit it, he'd finally come to realize that it was better if he worked someplace away from other prospectors. Away from other people. The bigger prospecting cooperatives might have better contracts, better equipment, but they also had more rum and more women. And between those two, Ramon knew, more fighting. He couldn't trust his own volatile temper, never had been able to. It had held him back for years, the fighting, and the trouble it got him into. No, it *was* better this way—muleback prospecting, just himself and his van.

Besides, he was finding that he liked to be out on his own like this, on a clear day with São Paulo's big soft sun blinking dimly back at him from rivers and lakes and leaves. He found that he was whistling tunelessly as the endless forests beneath the van slowly changed from blackwort and devilwood to the local conifer-equivalents: iceroot, creeping willow, *hierba*. At last, there was no one around to bother him. His stomach had stopped hurting, for the first time that day.

Mountains made a line across the world before him: ice and iron, iron and ice.

The sun was setting, pulling shadows across the mountain faces, when he brought the van to rest in a rugged upland meadow along the southern slopes of the Sierra Hueso range. It took him only moments to set up his bubbletent, light a small fire, and set his simple dinner—a filleted fatfin, rubbed with garlic and habenero—to grilling. While the fish cooked, he lit a cigaret and watched the stone of the mountains darkening with the sky. Other nights, on other trips, he'd have broken out a bottle of tequila or rum or whisky to keep himself company, but he'd deliberately left such distractions behind this time; this time, he needed to be all business. Truth be told, with the immense view spread to the horizon around him, and the stars beginning to show in the cold, blue-black sky, he found, to his surprise, that he didn't miss the tequila all that much anyway. A flapjack moved against the sky, and Ramon roused up on one elbow to watch it. It rippled its huge, flat, leathery body, sculling with its wing tips, seeking a thermal. Its ridiculous squeaky cry came clearly to him across the gulfs of air. They were almost level; it would be evaluating him now, deciding that he was much too big to eat. The flapjack tilted and slid away and down, as though riding a long, invisible slope of air, off to hunt squeakers and grasshoppers in the valley below. Ramon watched the flapjack until it dwindled to the size of a coin, glowing bronze in the failing light.

"Good hunting, *amigo*," he called after it, and then smiled. Good hunting for both of them, eh? Quickly, he ate his dinner—briefly missing the tequila after all—and then sat by the fire for a few moments while the night gathered completely around him and the alien stars came out in their chill, blazing armies. He named the strange constellations the people of São Paulo had drawn in the sky to replace the old constellations of Earth—the Mule, the Cactus Flower, the Sick Gringo—and wondered (he'd been told, but had forgotten) which of them had Earth's own sun twinkling in it as a star. Then he went to bed and to sleep, dreaming that he was a boy again in the cold stone streets of his hilltop pueblo, sitting on the roof of his father's house in the dark, a scratchy wool blanket wrapped around him, trying to ignore the loud, angry voices of his parents in the room below, searching for São Paulo's star in the winter sky.

In the morning, he ate a small breakfast of cold tortillas and beans, consulted the survey maps, and started up the southern slopes, looking for the collision line. He didn't expect it would be hard to locate; ocean floor rocks were unmistakable—a mangled, kneaded layer of pillow lava, basalt, and gabbo. He found it before the sun had reached its zenith, and surveyed it almost with regret; he'd been enjoying the climb for its own sake, pausing frequently to enjoy the view or to rest in the watery sunlight. Now he'd have to get to work

With a sigh, Ramon unslung his backpack. It took him only minutes to rig the small charge for the

coring sample. He had done it a thousand times before, it seemed. Still, he walked slowly, stringing out the det cord to a safe distance, finding a boulder that would shield him from the blast. He found himself, strangely, procrastinating about setting it off. It was so quiet here, so still, so peaceful! From up here, the forested slopes fell away in swaths of black and dead blue and orange, the trees rippling like a carpet of moss as the wind went across them—except for the white egg of his bubbletent on the mountain shoulder below, it was a scene that might not have changed since the beginning of time. For a moment, he was almost tempted to forget about prospecting and just relax and unwind this trip, but he shrugged the temptation away—he needed money, the van wouldn't hold together forever, and Eleana's scorn when he came back empty-handed again was something he wasn't anxious to face. Perhaps there will be no copper here anyway, he told himself reassuringly, and then wondered at the tenor of his thoughts. Surely it could not be a bad thing to be rich? His stomach was beginning to hurt again.

He rubbed his hand over the boulder in front of him, tracing the aquatic fossils, ancestors of the fatfins and butterflyfish that were the mainstay of the Nuevo Janeiro fishing industry, that were another indicator of the collision line; the fossils were grotesquely distorted, as though seen in a funhouse mirror—squeezed out of shape by the slow heat and pressure of the continental collision. How long had it taken for that to happen, for fish to turn to stone and be lifted from the bottom of the sea thousands of feet into the thinning air? The crash of stone and stone had taken an inconceivably vast time, pushing the mountains toward the sky at a rate of only a few inches per century, slowly enough so that the big river to the west had been able to saw its way through the range as it rose, keeping pace inch for inch. Millions of years. And what had taken millions of years to become as it was, *he* was about to change in an instant, and afterward, it could never be undone. The untouched vastness was about to be touched, altered irrevocably, by the hand of man. By *his* hand. There was regret in that, and a kind of melancholy—but also an oily sort of pride that swelled his heart even as it made his belly twinge.

He lit a cigaret and the det cord with the same match.

"All apologies, *mi amigo*," he said to the mountainside. "I'm just a man, not a hill, and I've got to eat somehow." Then he crouched behind the sheltering stone.

There was the expected blast; then the hillside shifted greasily under him, like a giant shrugging in uneasy sleep, and he heard the express-train rumble of sliding rock. He could tell from the sound alone that something had gone wrong. The coring blast shouldn't have set off a rockslide, let alone one that sounded that big ...

When silence returned, Ramon stood up and walked carefully through the swirling cloud of dust, testing each step before he trusted his weight to it, squinting at the blast site. He moved slowly up the trail of rubble and scree left by the slide. The whole rockface had slid away, revealing a wall. A metal wall.

Ramon stood unmoving as the arid mist of rock dust thinned. It was, of course, impossible. It had to be some bizarre natural formation. He stepped forward, and his own reflection—pale as the ghost of a ghost—moved toward him. When he reached out, his blurred twin reached out as well, pausing when he

paused. He stopped the motion before hand and ghostly hand could touch, noticing the stunned and bewildered expression on the face of his reflection in the metal, one no doubt matched by the expression on his own face. Then, gingerly, he touched the wall.

The metal was cool against his fingertips. The blast had not even scarred it. And though his mind rebelled at the thought, it was clearly unnatural. It was a *made* thing. Made by somebody and *hidden* by somebody, behind the rock of the mountain, though he couldn't imagine by whom.

It took a moment more for the full implication to register. Something was buried here under the hill, something big, perhaps a building of some sort, a bunker. Perhaps the whole mountain was hollow.

A warning bell began to sound in the back of Ramon's mind, and he looked uneasily around him. Another man might not have reacted to this strange discovery with suspicion, but Ramon's people had been persecuted for hundreds of years, and he himself well remembered living on the grudging sufferance of the *mejicanos*, never knowing when they would find some pretext to wipe out the village.

If this was hidden, it was because someone didn't want it to be *found*. And might not be happy that it *had* been.

He flattened his palm against the metal, matching hands with his reflection. The cool metal vibrated under his hand, and, even as he waited, a deeper vibration went through the wall, boom, *boom*, low and rhythmic, like the beating of some great hidden heart, like the heart of the mountain itself, vast and stony and old.

This was no ancient artifact or age-old ruin. Whatever it was, this installation was *alive*.

Suddenly, the sunlight seemed cold on his shoulders. Again, he looked nervously around him, feeling much too exposed on the bare mountain slope. Another flapjack called, away across the air, but now its cries sounded to him like the shrill and batlike wailing of the damned.

Move, *move*.

He couldn't *run* back to his camp—the terrain was too rough. But he scrambled down the mountainside as recklessly as he dared, sliding on his buttocks down bluffs in a cloud of dust and scree when he could, jumping from rock to rock, bulling his way through bushes and tangles of scrub *hierba*, scattering grasshoppers and paddlefoots before him.

He moved so quickly that he was over halfway to his camp before the mountain opened behind him and the alien came out.

A rushing sound made him turn in time to see an opening high on the ridgeline iris shut. Something was moving through the air—a grotesque goblin-shape larger than a man, on a device that looked for all the



world like a flying motorcycle. The thing spiraled up, gaining altitude.

Ramon threw himself flat and rolled under bushes, only vaguely aware of the thorns and twigs biting his flesh. High above, the thing had steadied and begun to fly in slow, concentric circles. He tried to estimate its distance and size. If he'd had his hunting rifle, Ramon thought, the thing would have been easily in range. But it was too far for his handgun. At a guess, the thing might have stood two full meters. If he had brought his binoculars from the camp ...

Sick dread squeezed his chest. His camp. The thing was clearly searching for something, and Ramon hadn't done anything to conceal the white dome of the bubbletent or the van beside it. There had been no reason to. The thing might not see him down in the underbrush, but it *would* see his camp. He had to get there—get back to the van and into the air—before the thing from the mountain discovered it.

He waited until the thing had its back to him, then burst out from the brush, pelting wildly down the slope without bothering with cover. Speed was more important now than invisibility. His mind was already racing ahead—would his van outpace the thing's cycle? Just let him get it in the air. He could fly it low, make it hard to spot or attack. He was a good pilot. He could dodge between treetops from here to Fiddler's Jump if he had to ...

He reached the meadow that contained his camp just as the alien appeared overhead. He hesitated, torn between dashing for the van and diving back into the brush. The thing swooped forward. *Perhaps it's friendly*, Ramon thought in numb despair. *Madre de Dios, it had better be friendly!*

The van exploded. A geyser of fire and smoke shot up out of the meadow with a waterfall roar, and tenfin birds rose screaming all along the mountain flank. The shockwave buffeted Ramon, splattering him with dirt and pebbles and shredded vegetation. He staggered, fighting to maintain his balance. Pieces of fused metal thumped down around him, burning holes in the moss of the meadow floor. Through the plume of smoke, Ramon saw the thing turn, flying fifteen feet above the ground and brandishing something that looked like a pair of eggbeaters twined together; obviously a weapon. In his shock, Ramon found himself entranced by the fluid way the thing moved—sure as a cat, jointless as a tentacle. It pointed the eggbeaters. The bubbletent went up in a ball of expanding gas, pieces of torn plastic tumbling and swooping like frightened white birds in the hot turbulence of the explosion.

Ramon caught only a glimpse of that. He was already in frantic motion, running, swerving, tearing through the brush. He could hear his own gasping breath, and his heart slammed against his ribs like a fist. Faster!

He felt the alien behind him more than he saw it. Some sixth sense made him turn, and there it was, bearing down on him with weapon leveled, a devil flying out of a hell of smoke and flame. Its eyes were bright orange. Ramon fumbled for his sidearm, confounded by the snap on the holster.

Something *hit* him—

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## Three

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Something nudged him, and Ramon returned from his vision or memory to the dark, empty infinite. A current moved against his skin; an invisible current in an invisible sea. He had the feeling of being turned in slow circles. Something solid bumped his shoulder and then rose up against his back, or else he sank down upon it. The syrupy liquid streamed past him, flowing past his face and his body. He thought of it as draining away, though he might as easily be being lifted up through it. The flow grew faster and more turbulent. A deep vibration shook him: *boom*. Then again, beating through flesh and bone: *boom, boom*. A blurred, watery light appeared above him, very dim and immensely far away. Like a star in a distant constellation. It grew brighter. The liquid in which he floated drained, the surface coming nearer, like he was rising from the bottom of a lake, until at last he breached it, and the last of the liquid was gone.

Air and light and sound hit him like a fist.

His body convulsed like a live fish on a frying pan, every muscle knotting. He arched up like an epileptic—head and heels bearing his weight, his spine bent like a bow. Something he couldn't see flipped him on his belly, and he felt a needle slide in at the base of his spine. He vomited with wrenching violence—thick amber syrup gouting from his mouth and nose. And then again, sick, racking spasms that expelled even more, as if his lungs had been filled with the stuff. Another long needle dug into his neck, and, with a terrible shudder, Ramon began to breathe.

The air he gulped cut like glass on the way in, and his quiescent heart came suddenly, violently to life. The world went red. Pain drove away all thought, all sense of self, and then slowly abated.

He was sprawled naked on the bottom of a metal tank not more than ten feet square. So much for his measureless midnight ocean! The walls were too high to see over, and the lights—blue-white and bitter—were too bright to see past and make out the ceiling beyond. He tried to sit up, but his muscles were putty. It was biting cold. He settled against the metal floor and shivered, feeling his teeth start to chatter. He tried lifting an arm, but the impulse was slow to reach his flesh, and the limb swayed drunkenly when it rose. Strong smells that he couldn't identify burned his nostrils.

He was alive now, certainly, if he'd ever been dead at all. This was no supernatural otherworld, no Limbo, no Land of Ghosts—this was *real*.

That in no way abated his terror. In fact, it increased it.

A thing like a long gray snake reared up above the rim of the tank. Ramon saw it hesitate, as if considering him, and then stretch down. Three long, thin tendrils split off where the head should have been. The gray snake brushed aside Ramon's clumsy parry and seized him by the shoulder. Ramon struggled weakly. But his strength was gone, and the snake's grip was as cold and pitiless as death. Another of the snakes stretched down and wrapped itself around his waist.

The snakes lifted him smoothly out of the tank. He tried to scream, but the sound came out more like a cough. He was high in the air now, above what seemed to be a vast, high-domed cavern full of noise and lights and motion and alien shapes. The cavern swarmed with activity that Ramon could not resolve into recognizable patterns, having no referents for it. His nose and mouth were filled with a biting, acrid odor, something like formaldehyde. The smell triggered a rush of raw hysterical horror, deep-buried xenophobic nightmares: *they'll cut me open, dissection, they'll chop me up, put me in bottles, CUT me*—He thrashed impotently, mad with terror, but was unable to break free.

The snake-tentacles set him down on a platform near one wall of the cavern. He collapsed as soon as they released him, his legs too weak to bear his weight. He waited on his hands and knees, staring into the terrible bright lights, panting like a trapped animal.

It was dimmer here, in the angle of the wall and the cavern floor. Inchoate shapes moved ponderously in the shadows; as they came forward, they were finished and fleshed by the light, but Ramon still could not discern them. His mind kept fighting to resolve them into the familiar aspects of humanity, and—terribly, terrifyingly—they would not resolve. They were too big, and shaped wrong, and their eyes were a bright glowing orange.

A needle slid out of the end of a hovering gray tentacle, thrust quickly into Ramon's arm, too quickly for him to move or protest. A prickly wave of heat went through him, and he suddenly felt much stronger. What kind of injection had it given him? Glucose? Vitamins? Perhaps there'd been a tranquilizer in it as well; his head was clear now, and he felt more alert, less frightened. He drew himself up to his knees, one hand instinctively covering his crotch.

The aliens had stopped a few feet away. There were three of them, one bigger than the others. Ramon could make them out more clearly now. His mind accepted them by treating them as frauds; he saw them now as men wearing grotesque monster costumes, and kept looking for some unconvincing detail that would betray the disguise.

Intellectually, he knew better, of course. They were not men in costume. They were not men at all.

They were humanoid bipeds, at least, not spiders or octopi or big-eyed blobs, although something about the articulation of the limbs was disturbingly odd. These three ranged in height from about six-and-a-half to seven feet tall, making even the shortest of them far taller than Ramon. Their torsos were columnar, seemingly of uniform breadth at hip and waist and shoulder, and surely they must weigh more than three hundred pounds apiece, although somehow the dominant impression they created was one of grace and suppleness. Their skins were glossy, shining, but each had its own distinctive coloration: one was a mottled blue and gold, the second a pale amber, while the largest one had yellowish flesh covered with strange, swirling patterns in silver and black.

All wore broad belts hung with unknown objects of metal and glass, and nondescript halters of some ash-gray and lusterless material. Their arms were disproportionately long, the hands huge, the fingers—three fingers, two thumbs—incongruously slender and delicate. Their heads were set low in a hollow between the shoulders and thrust a little forward on thick, stumpy necks, giving them a belligerent and aggressive look, like snapping turtles. Crests of hair or feathers slanted back from the tops of their heads at rakish angles. Quills protruded from their shoulders, the napes of their necks, and the top of their spinal ridges, forming a bristly ruff. Their heads were roughly triangular, flattened on top but bulging out at the base of the skull, the faces tapering sharply to a point. And the faces were faces out of nightmare: large rubbery black snouts streaked with blue and orange, trembling and sniffing, mouths like raw wet wounds, too wide and lipless, and small staring eyes set too low on either side of the snout. Orange eyes, hot and featureless as molten marbles.

Staring at him.

They were staring at him as though he were a bug, and that fanned a spark of anger inside him. He got to his feet and glared back at them, still shaky but determined not to show it. Ramon Espejo knelt to nobody! Especially not to ugly, unnatural monsters like these!

The biggest alien gestured: come with me. There was something studied about the motion, as though it had been learned by rote, as though its natural equivalent might be without meaning for men. The alien turned and began to walk toward the cavern wall. Reluctantly, Ramon followed. He glanced suspiciously at the two smaller aliens as he passed between them, but they neither moved nor looked his way.

Ahead was a door cut through the naked rock of the cavern wall, which the alien disappeared into. Ramon came slowly forward, looking warily all around him, wondering if he should try to run. Run to where, though? And some of the objects suspended from the alien's belt were almost certainly weapons. Shaking his head, grinning with fear and tension, Ramon followed the alien through the door.

Afterward, Ramon could not clearly remember that trip. He was led through tunnels barely wide and tall enough to allow the alien to pass. The tunnels slanted steeply up and down, and doubled back on themselves, seemingly at random. The rock was slightly phosphorescent, providing just enough light to let him see his footing. He refused to look behind at the following darkness, although his nerves were crawling like worms.

The silence was heavy here in the belly of the hill, although occasionally a far-away hooting could be heard through many thicknesses of rock, sounding to Ramon like the noise damned souls might make crying unheeded to a cold and distant God. Sometimes they passed through pockets of light and activity, rooms full of chattering noise and rich rotten smells, rooms drenched in glaring red or blue or green illumination, rooms dark as ink but for the faint silver line of the path they followed. Once they stood motionless for long moments in such a room, while Ramon's stomach dropped and he wondered if they could be in an elevator.

Back in the tunnel again, it was close and dark and silent. The alien's back gleamed pale and faint in the phosphorescent glow of the rock, like a fish in dark water, and, for a moment, it seemed to Ramon as if the markings on its flesh were moving, writhing and changing like living things. He stumbled, and instinctively clutched the alien's arm to keep from falling. Its skin was warm and dry, like snake skin. In the enclosed space of the tunnel, he could smell the alien; it had a heavy, musky odor, like olive oil, like cloves, strange rather than unpleasant. It neither looked behind nor paused nor made a sound. It continued to walk imperturbably on, at the same steady pace, and Ramon had no choice but to follow after it or be left alone in the chilly darkness of this black alien maze.

At last, the tunnel ended in another big, garishly lit chamber. To the human eye, there was something subtly wrong about the proportions and dimensions of the chamber: it was more a rhombus than a rectangle, the floor was slightly tilted, the ceiling tilted at another angle and not of uniform height, everything subliminally disorienting, everything *off*, making Ramon feel sick and dizzy. The light was too bright and too blue, and the chamber was filled with a whispering susurrus that hovered right at the threshold of hearing.

This place had not been made by human beings, nor was it meant for them. As he came forward into the chamber, he saw that the walls streamed with tiny, crawling pictures, as though a film of oil was continuously flowing down over them from ceiling to floor and carrying with it a thin scum of ever-changing images: swirls of vivid color, geometric shapes, mazy impressionistic designs, vast surrealistic landscapes. Occasionally, something representational and recognizable would stream by, trees, mountains, stars, tiny alien faces that would seem to stare malignly at Ramon out of the feverdream chaos as they swept down to be swallowed by the floor.

The alien stopped, but gestured him on. Gingerly, Ramon crossed the chamber, feeling uneasy and disconcerted, unconsciously leaning to one side to correct the tilt of the floor and putting his feet down cautiously, as though he expected the chamber to pitch or yaw.

In the center of the chamber was a deep circular pit, lined by metal, and down in the pit was another alien.

It was even taller than Ramon's guide, and thinner, and its crest and quills were much longer. Its skin was bone-white and completely free of markings. White with age? Dyed white as an indication of rank? Or was it of a different race? Impossible to say, but as the alien's eyes turned upward toward Ramon, he

was seized and shaken by the force behind its gaze, by the harsh authority it palpably exuded. He noticed, with another little shock, that the creature was physically connected to the pit—things that might have been wires or rods or cables emerged from its body and disappeared into the smooth metal walls, forming an intricate cat's cradle around it. Some of the cables were black and dull, some were luminescent, and some, glossy red and gray and brown, pulsed slowly and rhythmically, as if with an obscene life of their own. Ramon looked away.

"You will find him," said the thing in the pit.

Ramon turned back to stare at the alien, fighting to keep surprise from his face. It had spoken in Portuglish, the bastard lingua franca of the colony, and quite clearly, though its voice was disturbingly rusty and metallic, as though a machine had spoken. Ramon, who also spoke Spanish, English, Portuguese, and a smattering of Navaho and French, slyly and instinctively pretended not to understand, although even he was unsure what he hoped to gain by doing so. "¿Como?" he said.

The alien's cold opaque eyes fixed on him. "It is statistically unlikely that you speak only that language," it said.

The arrogance of its harsh, unused voice and the steady gaze of those orange, unblinking eyes made Ramon angry. In times of stress—when he had lost his first van in a drunken bet, when his wife had left him, when Eleana threatened to throw him out—Ramon's rage had never deserted him. Now it returned, flushing him with heat and certainty. "What *are* you, you creatures?" he said. "Where do you come from? From this planet? Somewhere else? What do you think you're doing, attacking me, keeping me here against my will? And what about my van, eh? Who's going to get me a new *van*?"

The alien stared at him wordlessly. It struck Ramon that this was likely the first conversation ever to take place between a human and an alien. And he was bitching about his van! He had to fight down the urge to laugh, trying to keep his anger hot and stoked.

"Those are sounds, not words," the alien said after a long pause. "Discordancies outside proper flow. You must not speak in meaningless sounds, or you will be corrected."

Ramon shivered and looked away; his rage had ebbed as quickly as it had flared, and now he felt tired, chilled by the alien's imperturbability. "What do you want?" he asked wearily.

"We do not 'want' anything," the alien said. "Again, you speak outside the way of reality. You have a function: therefore, you exist. You will exercise that function because it is your purpose to do so, your *tatecredue*. No 'wanting' is involved: all is inevitable flow."

"And if I do not function as you wish?"

The alien paused, as though briefly puzzled. "You live," it said finally. "Therefore, you exercise your

function. Nonfunctioning, you could not exist. To exist and yet not exist—you would be a contradiction, *aubre*, a disruption in the flow. *Aubre* cannot be tolerated. To restore balanced flow, it would be necessary to deny the illusion that you exist."

That at least was clear enough, Ramon thought, feeling gooseflesh sweep across his skin.

Ramon chose his words carefully when he spoke again. "And what function am I to fulfill?"

The cold orange eyes fixed on him again. "Take care," the alien warned. "That we must interpret your *tatecredue* for you is a sign that you incline toward *aubre*. But we will grant you a dispensation, as you are not a proper creature. Listen: a man has escaped from us. Three days ago he fled from us on foot, and we have not been able to find him. By this act, he has shown himself to be *aubre*, and so proved that he does not exist. The illusion of his existence must therefore be negated. The man must not be allowed to reach a human settlement, to tell other humans about us. Should he do so, that would interfere with our own *tatecredue*. Such interference is *gaesu*, prime contradiction. Therefore you will find him, negate him, in order to restore balanced flow."

"How am *I* supposed to find him if you could not?"

"You are men. You are the same. You will find him."

"He could be anywhere by now!" Ramon protested.

"Where you would go and where he would go—they are the same. You will go where he has gone, and you will find him."

Ramon chewed his lip and thought. He had no intention of playing Judas Goat for these monsters, but he was naked, alone, and in their power. If he pretended to agree, they would have to take him out—out to the world he knew. After that, he could slip away. It wouldn't do to give in too easily, though. Even things as strange as these might recognize that as subterfuge.

"If I do this thing for you, what do I get out of it?" he asked.

The alien stared at him for several long moments. "You are an improper and contradictory creature. *Aubre* may manifest in you. We will insure against such manifestations, by separating a part of ourselves to act as overseer. Maneck will sacrifice himself to maintain the flow."

The alien who had led him from the first chamber moved silently to Ramon's side. It was eerie—nothing so big should be so quiet.

"Maneck, eh?" Ramon said to the thing. "Your name's Maneck?"

Before Ramon could react, Maneck reached out and took him by the shoulders, lifted him like a doll, and held him immobile in the air. Ramon fought instinctively—nights at the bar and in the street coming back to his arms and legs in a rage. He might as well have punched the ocean. Maneck didn't budge.

Up from the pit rose a pale white snake.

Ramon watched in horrified fascination. It was obviously a cable of some sort—two bare wires protruded from the visible end—but its movements were so supple and lifelike that he could not help but think of it as a pale and sinister cobra. It reared almost to eye-level, swayed slowly from side to side, aimed its blind pallid head at Ramon. The head quivered slightly, as though the snake was testing the air in search of its prey. Then it stretched out toward him.

Again Ramon tried desperately to break free, but Maneck wrenched him effortlessly back into position. As the cable-snake came closer, he saw that it was pulsating rhythmically, as if it were truly alive, and that the two naked wires in its head were vibrating like a serpent's flickering tongue. His flesh crawled, and he felt his testicles retract. He felt his nakedness vividly now—he was unprotected, helpless, all of the soft vulnerable parts of his body exposed to the hostile air. The cable touched the hollow of his throat.

Ramon felt a sensation like the touch of dead lips, a double pinprick of pain, a flash of intense cold. An odd quivering shock ran up and down his body, as though someone were tracing his nervous system with feather fingers. His vision dimmed for a heartbeat, then came back. Maneck lowered him to the ground.

The cable was now embedded in his neck. Fighting nausea, he reached up and took hold of it, feeling it pulse in his hands. It was warm to the touch, like human flesh. He pulled at it tentatively, then tugged harder. He felt the flesh of his throat move when he tugged. To rip it free would obviously be as difficult as tearing off his own nose. The cable pulsed again, and Ramon realized that it was pulsing in time to the beating of his heart. As he watched, it seemed to darken slowly, as if it were filling up with blood.

The cable had somehow also linked itself to the alien that had held him, blending into its right wrist. Maneck. He was on a leash. A hunting dog for demons.

"The *sahael* will not injure you, but it will help to resolve your contradictions," the thing in the pit said as if sensing his distress but failing to understand it. "Should you manifest *aubre*, you will be corrected. Like this."

Ramon found himself on the floor, though he did not remember falling. Only now that the pain had passed could he look back at it, as a swimmer turns to look back at a wave that has passed over his head, and realize that it had been the worst pain he had ever experienced. He didn't remember screaming, but his throat was raw, and it almost seemed as if the echo of his shriek was still reverberating from the chamber walls; perhaps it would echo there forever. He caught his breath, and then retched. He knew



that he would do whatever was required to prevent that from happening again, anything at all, and for the first time since he woke in darkness, Ramon Espejo felt ashamed.

"School yourself," the pale alien said. "Correct *aubre*, and even such a flawed thing as yourself may achieve cohesion or even coordinate level."

It took Ramon some time to realize that this gibberish had been a dismissal: a stern but kindly admonition, hellfire threatened, the prospect of redemption dangled, and go forth *mi hijo* and sin no more. The sonofabitch was a missionary! Maneck lifted Ramon back to his feet and nudged him toward a tunnel. The fleshy leash—the *sahael*—shrank to match whatever distance was between them. Maneck made a sound that he couldn't interpret and apparently gave up gentle coaxing. The alien moved briskly forward, the *sahael* tugging now at Ramon's throat. He had no choice but to follow, like a dog trotting at its master's heel.

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Back through the tunnels they went, through cavern after cavern, through rhythmic noise, billowing shadow, and glaring blue light. Ramon walked leadenly, like an automaton, pulled along by Maneck, the tether in his neck feeling heavy and awkward. The chill air leached the heat from his body, and even the work of walking wasn't enough to keep him warm.

In the privacy of his mind, Ramon searched for hope. Eleana would notice he was missing. Maybe. Given enough time. Or she might think he'd gone off again, down to Neuvo Janiero without her, to file his reports and collect his fees. Or run off on a drunken spree with some other woman. He weighed the probabilities; she might call for help and start a search, or she might wait, getting angrier and angrier until she worked herself into a blind rage over his absence. No. Eleana couldn't be trusted to search for him. Maybe Old Sanchez would start an inquiry when he didn't bring the van back. Or that bastard Javier in Diegotown might notice that no one was staying in his rooms. Rent would come due in two weeks ...

There was no one. That was the truth. He had lived his life on his own terms—always on his own terms—and here was the price of it. He had no one to rescue him. He was on his own, hundreds of miles from

the nearest human settlement, captured and enslaved. So he would have to find his own way out. Escape. If only there was a way to avoid the pain that his slick, pulsing, fleshy leash could mete out.

Maneck tugged at the *sahael* and Ramon looked up, aware for the first time that they had stopped. The alien thing pushed a bundle into his arms. Clothes.

The clothes were a sleeveless one-piece garment, something like pajamas, a large cloak, and hard-soled slipper-boots, all made from a curious lusterless material. He pulled them on with fingers stiff from cold. The aliens were obviously not used to tailoring for humans; the clothes were clumsily-made and ill-fitting, but at least they afforded him some protection against the numbing cold. It wasn't until his nakedness was covered and warmth began to return to his limbs that his teeth began to chatter.

Maneck tugged him brusquely along into another high-ceilinged chamber. The place teemed with aliens, swarming over terraced layers of objects on the cavern floor. Equipment, perhaps, machines, computers, although most things here were so unfamiliar that they registered only as indecipherable blurs, weird amalgams of shape and shadow and winking light. Far across the cave, two giant aliens—similar to Maneck and the others, but fifteen or twenty feet tall—labored in gloom, lifting and stacking what looked like huge sections of honeycomb, moving with ponderous grace, as unreal and hallucinatorily beautiful as stop-motion dinosaurs in old horror movies. To one side, a smaller alien was herding a flow of spongy molasses down over a stairstep fall of boulders, touching the flowing mass occasionally with a long black rod, as if to urge it along.

On the other side of the room, up against the cavern wall, was a rank of the flying motorcycles. One had been fitted out with a sidecar. Ramon waited leadenly while Maneck examined the cycle, running its long slender fingers carefully over the controls. He could feel himself becoming dazed and passive, numbed by weariness and shock—he'd been through too much, too fast. And he was tired, more tired than he could remember being before; perhaps the shot they'd given him was wearing off. He was almost asleep on his feet when Maneck seized him, lifted him into the air as if he was a little child, and stuffed him into the sidecar. He struggled to sit up, but Maneck seized his arms, drew them behind his back, and bound them with a thin length of wire-like substance, then hobbled his legs, before turning and straddling the operator's saddle. Maneck touched a pushplate, and the cycle rose smoothly into the air.

Acceleration pushed Ramon's head against the rim of the sidecar, pinning it at an uncomfortable angle. In spite of the terror of his situation, he realized that he was not able to stay awake any longer. Even as they rose up toward the high-domed cavern roof, his eyes were squeezing shut, as though the mild g-forces that pulled with mossy inevitability on his bones were also drawing him inexorably into sleep.

Above them, the rock opened.

As Ramon's consciousness faded away, drowning him in hissing white snow, he saw, beyond the hole in the sky, a single pale and isolate star.

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A freezing wind lashed him awake. He struggled to sit up. The sidecar lurched, and he found himself looking straight down through an ocean of air at the tiny tops of the trees. The cycle canted over the other way, violently, and the darkening evening sky swirled around his head, momentarily turning the faint, newly emerged stars into tight little squiggles of light.

They leveled off. Maneck sat the cycle's saddle unshakably, firm and cold as a statue, quills rippling in the bitter wind. Banking again, falling at a slant through the air. He couldn't have been insensible for more than a minute or two, Ramon realized; that was the alien's mountain just behind them, the exit-hole now irised shut again, and that was the mountain slope where he'd been captured just below. Even as they coasted down toward it, the sky was growing significantly darker around them. The sun had gone behind the horizon some moments before, leaving only the thinnest sliver of glazed red along the junction line of land and air. The rest of the sky was the color of plum and eggplant and ash, dying rapidly to ink-dark blackness overhead and to the west. Armed and bristling with trees, the mountain slope rushed up to meet them. Too fast! Surely they would crash ...

They touched down lightly in the upland meadow where Ramon had made his camp, settling out of the sky as silently as the shadow of a feather. Maneck killed the cycle's engine. Blackness swallowed them, and they were surrounded by the sly and predatory noises of evening. In that darkness, Maneck seized Ramon, and, lifting him like a child's toy, dragged him from the cycle, carried him a few feet away, and dropped him to the ground.

Ramon groaned involuntarily, startled and ashamed by the loudness of his voice. His arms were still bound behind him, and to lay upon them was excruciatingly painful. He rolled over onto his stomach. The ground under him was so cold that it was comfortable, and even in his present sick and confused condition, Ramon realized that that was death. He thrashed and squirmed, and managed to roll himself up in the long cloak he'd been given; it was surprisingly warm. He would have fallen asleep then, in spite of his pain and discomfort, but light beat against his eyelids where there had been no light, and he opened his eyes.

The light seemed blinding at first, but it dimmed as his eyes adjusted. Maneck had brought something from the cycle, a small globe attached to a long metal rod, and jammed the sharp end of the rod into the soil; now the globe was alight, burning from within with a dim bluish light, sending off rhythmic waves of heat. As Ramon watched, Maneck walked around the globe—the *sahael* shortening visibly with each step—and came slowly toward him with seeming deliberation. Only then, watching Maneck prowl toward him, seeing the wet gleam in the corner of its orange eyes as it looked from side to side, seeing the way its nose crinkled and twitched, the way its head swiveled and swayed restlessly on the stubby neck, the shrugging of its shoulders at each step, hearing the iron rasp of its breath, smelling its thick

musky odor—only then did some last part of Ramon's mind fully accept the fact that Maneck was an alien, accept it all the way down at the most basic of gut levels. It was not an odd animal, a man in costume, a robot, a dream, an illusion, a trick: it was an intelligent alien being, and he was its captive, alone and at its mercy in the wilderness.

That simple knowledge hit Ramon with such force that he felt the blood begin to drain out of his face, and even as he was worming and scrambling backward in a futile attempt to get away from the monster, he was losing his grip on the world, losing consciousness, slipping down into darkness.

The alien stood over him, seen again through the hazy white snow of faintness, seeming to loom up endlessly into the sky like some horrid and impossible beanstalk, with eyes like blazing orange suns. That was the last thing Ramon saw. Then the snow piled up over his face and buried him, and everything was gone.

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Morning was a blaze of pain. He had fallen asleep on his back, and he could no longer feel his arms. The rest of his body ached as though it had been beaten with clubs. The alien was standing over him again—or perhaps it had never moved, perhaps it had stood there all night, looming and remote, terrible, tireless, and unsleeping. The first thing Ramon saw that morning, through a bloodshot haze of pain, was the alien's face; the long twitching black snout with its blue and orange markings, the quills stirring in the wind and moving like the feelers of some huge instinct.

*I will kill you*, Ramon thought. There was very little anger in it. Only a deep, animal certainty. *Somehow, I will kill you.*

Maneck hauled Ramon to his feet and set him loose, but his legs would not hold him, and he crashed back to the ground as soon as he was released. Again Maneck pulled him up, and again Ramon fell.

As Maneck reached for him the third time, Ramon screamed, "Kill me! Why don't you just kill me?" He wormed backward, away from Maneck's reaching hand. "You might as well just kill me now!"

Maneck stopped. Its head tilted to one side to regard Ramon curiously, in an oddly birdlike manner. The cool orange eyes peered at him closely, unblinking.

"I need food," Ramon went on in a more reasonable tone. "I need water. I need rest. I can't use my arms and legs if they're tied like this. I can't even stand, let alone walk!" He heard his voice rising again but couldn't stop it. "Listen, you monster, I need to *piss!* I'm a man, not a machine!" With a supreme effort, he heaved himself to his knees and knelt there in the dirt, swaying. "Is this *aubre?* Eh? Good! Kill me,

then! I can't go on like this!"

Man and alien stared at each other for a long, silent moment. Ramon, exhausted by his outburst, breathed in rattling gasps. Maneck studied him carefully, snout quivering. At last, it said, "You possess *retehue*?"

"How the shit would *I* know?" Ramon croaked, his voice rasping in his dry throat. "What the fuck is it?" He drew himself up as much as he could, and glared back at the alien.

"You possess *retehue*," the alien repeated, but it was not a question this time. It took a quick step forward, and Ramon flinched, afraid that the death he'd demanded was on its way. But instead, Maneck cut him free.

At first, he could feel nothing in his arms and legs; they were as dead as old wood. Then sensation came back into them, burning like ice, and they began to spasm convulsively. Ramon set his face stoically and said nothing, but Maneck must have noticed and correctly interpreted the sudden pallor of his skin, for it reached down and began to massage Ramon's arms and legs. Ramon shrunk away from its touch—again he was reminded of snakeskin, dry, firm, warm—but the alien's powerful fingers were surprisingly deft and gentle, loosening knotted muscles, and Ramon found that he didn't mind the contact as much as he would have thought that he would; it was making the pain go away, after all, which was what really counted.

"Your limbs have insufficient joints," Maneck commented. "That position would not be uncomfortable for me." It bent its arms backward and forward at impossible angles to demonstrate. With his eyes closed, it was almost possible for Ramon to believe that he was listening to a human being—Maneck's Portuguese was much more fluent than that of the alien in the pit, and its voice had less of the rusty timbre of the machine. But then Ramon would open his eyes and see that terrible alien face, ugly and bestial, only inches from his own, and his stomach would turn over, and he would have to adjust all over again to the fact that he was chatting with a monster.

"Stand up now," Maneck said. It helped Ramon up and supported him while he limped and stomped in a slow semicircle to work out cramps and restore circulation, looking as if he was performing some arthritic tribal dance. At last, he was able to stand unsupported, although his legs wobbled and quivered with the strain.

"We have lost time this morning," Maneck said. "This is all time we might have employed in exercising our functions." You could almost imagine that it sighed. "I have not previously performed this type of function. I did not realize that you possessed *retehue*, and therefore failed to take all factors into account. Now we must suffer delays accordingly."

Suddenly, Ramon understood what *retehue* must be. He was more baffled than outraged. "How could you not realize that I was sentient? You were there all the while I talked to the white thing in the pit!"

"We were present, but I had not integrated yet, " Maneck said simply. It did not elaborate further, and Ramon had to be content with that. "Now that I am, I will observe you closely. You are to demonstrate the limitations to the human flow. Once we are informed, the man's path is better predicted."

*That's not hard to guess, Ramon thought, but did not say. If there is some other poor bastard out here, knowing these monsters are after him, he's pushing like hell for Fiddler's Jump.*

"Speaking of flow," Ramon said. "I still have to piss."

"Elimination of waste will suffice as a starting point. I will observe."

"I don't think so," Ramon said. "You can stay here."

To his surprise, the alien did as it was told. Ramon walked unsteadily to the edge of the meadow, the leash in his neck hardly tugging him as he walked. He pissed into the scrub brush and tried to make sense of the alien's behavior. The limitations of human flow, it had said. For a being so fascinated by purpose, Maneck was strangely interested in Ramon's need to urinate, which ought to have struck it as irrelevant. It wasn't an activity that seemed important to hunting down the fugitive. It had not known that binding his arms behind him would discomfort him. Ramon stood for a long moment after his bladder was empty, considering. Perhaps the aliens needed him in order to understand what the habits of a man were. He was more than a hound. Merely by *being human*, he was a guide for them.

Ramon pulled his clothes back into place, disturbed for a moment by how rough the fabric felt against his skin. Maneck loomed by the cycle, still as a tree. Ramon shrugged and returned.

"You are complete?" Maneck asked.

"Sure," Ramon said. "Complete enough for the moment."

"You have other needs?"

"I should eat. Do you have any food?"

Maneck paused for a long moment, as if struggling to understand the question. Then its snout twitched.

"No," it said. "The *oekh* I have would not nourish you. How do you obtain food? I will allow you to procure it for yourself."

Every minute that Ramon stalled was a gift to the fugitive, whoever he was, wherever he was. If he could stall long enough for the man to escape, that might bring help. If the prey could escape the net, someone would come. The news would spread. Eleana and Sanchez would guess what had happened to

him. It was his best hope. Feeding off the land wasn't hard. The amino acids that had built up the biosphere of Sao Paolo were almost all identical to those on earth. A half-hour of gathering would have gotten him enough mianberry to make a small meal. Sug beetles would boil up in three minutes and tasted like lobster. This far north, you could pick them off the trees by the handful. But none of that would take long enough.

"We'll have to improvise some traps," Ramon said. "It could take a while."

"We will begin," Maneck said.

Ramon scouted the wreckage that had been his van and tent, gathering the lengths of wire, cloth, and rope he needed to set up snares. The animals this far north were naïve, unfamiliar with traps, never having been hunted by humans before, and so were easy to catch. He tied the ropes and bent the wire, surprised by how much the metal bit into the flesh of his hands. The syrup bath in which the aliens had soaked him must have melted away the calluses from his hands and feet, leaving his fingers ill-prepared for real work. Still, he placed the snares, Maneck watching him with what seemed sometimes like profound curiosity, sometimes like impatience, but was likely an emotion Ramon had never felt or heard named.

They waited as the sun rose higher in the perfect blue sky. Maneck ate some of his *oekh*, which turned out to be a brown paste the consistency of molasses with a thick vinegary scent. Ramon scratched at the place in his neck where the *sahael* anchored in his flesh and tried to ignore the emptiness of his belly. The hunger grew quickly, though, and, in spite of his good intentions about stalling as long as he could, it was less than two hours later when he rose and walked out to check his catch—two grasshoppers, and a gordita, the fuzzy round marsupials that the *paulistas* called "the little fat ones of the Virgin." The gordita had died badly, biting itself in its frenzy. Its spiky fur was already black with thick, tarry blood. Maneck looked on with interest as Ramon removed the animals from the snares.

"It is difficult to think of this as having anything to do with food," it said. "Why do the creatures strangle themselves for you? Is it their *tatecredue*?"

"No," Ramon said as he strung the bodies on the length of carrying twine. "It's not their *tatecredue*. It's just something that happened to them." He found himself staring at his hands as he worked, and, for some reason, his hands made him uneasy. He shrugged the feeling away. "Don't your people hunt for food?"

"The hunt is not for food," Maneck said flatly. "Food is *ae euth'eloi*—a made thing. The hunt is wasted on creatures such as these. How can they appreciate it? Their brains are much too small."

"My stomach is also too small, but it will appreciate *them*." He stood up, swinging the dead animals over his shoulder.

"Do you swallow the creatures now?" Maneck asked.

"First they must be cooked."

"Cooked?"

"Burned, over a fire."

"Fire," Maneck repeated. "Uncontrolled combustion. Proper food does not require such preparation. You are a primitive creature. These steps waste time, time which might be better used to fulfill your *tatecredue*. *Ae euth'eloi* does not interfere with the flow."

Ramon shrugged. "I cannot eat your food, monster, and I cannot eat these raw." He held the carcasses up for inspection. "If we are to get on with me exercising my function, I need to make a fire. Help me gather sticks."

Back at the clearing, Ramon started a small cookfire. When the flames were crackling well, the alien turned to look at Ramon. "Combustion is proceeding," it said. "What will you do now? I wish to observe this function *cooking*."

Was that an edge of distaste in the alien's voice? He suddenly had a flash of how odd the process must seem to Maneck: catching and killing an animal, cutting its pelt off and pulling out its internal organs, dismembering it, toasting the dead carcass over a fire, and then eating it. For a moment, it seemed a grotesque and ghoulish thing to do, and it had never seemed like that before. He stared down at the gordita in his hand, and then at his hand itself, sticky with dark blood, and the subtle feeling of wrongness he'd been fighting off all morning intensified once again. "First I must skin them," he said resolutely, pushing down the uneasiness, "before I can cook them."

"They have skin already, do they not?" Maneck said.

Ramon surprised himself by smiling. "I must take their skin off. And their fur. Cut it off, with a knife, you see? Way out here, I'll just throw the pelts away, eh? Waste of money, but then grasshopper pelts aren't worth much anyway."

Maneck's snout twitched, and it prodded at the grasshoppers with a foot. "This seems inefficient. Does it not waste a large portion of the food, cutting it off and throwing it away? All of the rind."

"I don't eat fur."

"Ah," Maneck said. It moved up close behind Ramon and sank to the ground, its legs bending backwards grotesquely. "It will be interesting to observe this function. Proceed."



"I need a knife," Ramon said.

Wordlessly, the alien plucked a cylinder from its belt and handed it to Ramon. When Ramon turned it over in bafflement, Maneck reached across and did something to the cylinder, and a six-inch silver wire sprang out stiffly. Ramon took the strange knife and began gutting the gordita. The wire slid easily through the flesh. Perhaps it was the hunger that focused Ramon so intently on his task, because it wasn't until he had set the gordita on a spit over the fire and begun on the first grasshopper that he realized what the alien had done. *It had handed him a weapon.*

He fought the sudden rush of adrenaline, struggling to keep the blade from wobbling in his hands, to keep his hands from shaking. Bent over the careful task of digging out the grasshopper's rear gills, he glanced at Maneck. The alien seemed to have noticed nothing. The problem was, where to strike it? Stabbing it in the body was too great a risk; he didn't know where the vital organs were, and he couldn't be sure of striking a killing blow. Maneck was larger and stronger than he was. In a protracted fight, Ramon knew, he would lose. It had to be done swiftly. The throat, he decided, with a rush of exhilaration that was almost like flying. He would slash the knife as deep across the alien's throat as he could. The thing had a mouth and it breathed, after all, so there had to be an air passage in the neck somewhere. If he could sever that, it would only be a matter of remaining alive long enough for the alien to choke to death on its own blood. It was a thin chance, but he would take it.

"Look here," he said, picking up the body of the grasshopper. With its legs and scales cut away, its flesh was soft and pink as raw tuna. Maneck leaned closer, as Ramon had hoped, its eyes trained on the dead flesh in his left hand, ignoring the blade in his right. The heady elation of violence filled him, as if he was in the street outside a bar in Diegotown. The monsters didn't know that this thing they'd captured knew how to be a monster too! He waited until Maneck turned its head a little to the side to better squint at the grasshopper, exposing the mottled black-and-yellow flesh of its throat, and then he struck—

Abruptly, he was laying on his back on the ground, staring up into the tall violet sky. His stomach muscles were knotted, and he was breathing in harsh little gasps. The pain had hit him like a stone giant's fist, crumpled him and thrown him aside. It had been over in an eyeblink, too quick to be remembered, but his body still ached and twitched with the shock. His throat was raw, and he wondered if he had screamed. He had dropped the knife.

*You fool*, he thought.

Maneck moved into his field of vision and stood looking down at him. "That was unwise of you," it said, placidly. "It is not possible to take me by surprise. It cannot be done. Do you understand this?"

"You can ... you can read my mind?"

"The *sahael* drinks from the flow of your body. I am tied to your neural pathways as an overseer. The intention to act precedes the action, and begins cascading flows. All flows relate and interact, and so you

cannot act before I am aware of the action you are taking. You are a primitive being not to know this."

Maneck lifted him easily and set him on his feet. To Ramon's shame and humiliation, the alien gently placed the wire knife back in his hand.

"Continue the function," Maneck said. "You were flaying the corpse of the small animal."

Ramon turned the silver cylinder slowly, shaking his head. He was unmanned. He could no more defeat this thing than an infant child could best his father. He was not even a threat to it.

"You are ... distressed," Maneck said. "Why?"

"Because you are still alive!" Ramon spat.

The alien seemed to consider this.

"You attempted to function, and failed in your task. The distress you feel is an awareness of *aubre*, and shows promise for you, but you have not understood your *tatecredue*. These outbursts are *part* of your proper functioning. The uncontrolled violence, the tiny bladder and inefficient means of expelling nitrogenous waste, the aversion to eating the rind of another creature ... all these things inform our behavior and lead us to the better fulfillment of our purpose. If you do not embody the weaknesses of the man as well as the strengths, we cannot prevent him from reaching others of his kind."

"My strengths are meaningless," Ramon said bitterly. "Another man might not have tried to kill you. Or he might have found some better way to do it. You have nothing to learn from me."

"He would have done as you have," Maneck said. "He could not do otherwise, anymore than a single flow can move against itself. Turbulence can only come of *aubre* or else from without."

Something shifted in the back of Ramon's mind. The roughness of the alien cloth against his skin, the calluses gone from his fingertips. He had not been breathing in that tank. His heart had not been beating. He dropped the knife, the wire scooping up a tiny spray of dirt where it landed. Slowly, he pulled back his sleeve. The scar he'd gotten in the machete fight with Chulo Lopez at the bar outside Little Dog, the trails of puckered white flesh that Eleana's fingertips opened and re-opened when they tore at each other during half-crazed sex, were gone. There were no cigaret stains on his fingers. None of the small nicks and discolorations and calluses that were the legacy of a lifetime working with your hands. Over the years, his arms had been burnt almost black by the sun, but now his skin was smooth and unblemished and pale brown as an eggshell. An awareness half-buried rose up in him, and he went cold.

"What have you done?" he said.

The alien stood still, observing him.

"What have you *done!*" Ramon screamed.

"I have performed many functions," Maneck said slowly, like a teacher speaking to a very dim child. "Which of these distresses you?"

"My body! My skin! What did you *do* to me?"

"Ah! Interesting. You are capable of *khetanae*. This may not be good. I doubt the man is able to integrate, and even if he did, it would not cause this disorientation. You may be diverging from him."

"What are you talking about, monster!"

"Your distress," Maneck said, simply. "You are becoming aware of who you are."

"I am Ramon Espejo!"

"No," Maneck said. "You are not that person."

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Five

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Ramon—if he was Ramon—sank slowly to the ground. Maneck, looming beside him, explained in its strange passionless voice. The human Ramon Espejo had discovered the refuge three days before. That alone had been contradiction, and in order to correct the illusion that he existed, he had been attacked. He escaped, but not uninjured. An appendage—a finger—had been torn from him in the attack. That flesh had acted as the seed for the creation of a made thing—*ae euth'eloi*—that had participated in the original being's flow. Maneck had to explain twice before Ramon truly understood that it meant him.

"As you express that flow, you collapse into the forms from which you came. There was some loss of fidelity, so those forms that were of controlling function were emphasized—the brain and nerve column—while the skin complications were sacrificed. You will continue to develop across time."

"I am Ramon Espejo," Ramon said. "And you are a filthy whore with breath like a Russian's asshole."

"Both of these things are incorrect," Maneck said patiently.

"You're lying!"

"The language you use is not a proper thing. The function of communication is to transmit knowledge. To lie would fail to transmit knowledge. That is not possible."

Ramon's face went hot, then cold. "You're lying," he whispered.

"Your flesh is seared," Maneck said, and it was a long moment before Ramon understood. The gordita hadn't been turning on its spit. The meat was starting to burn. He sat up and shifted it, exposing the raw pink flesh that had been on the top to the heat of the flame. It was something concrete, physical, immediate. The scent of roasting meat woke a hunger in him that was more powerful even than horror or despair.

*The body keeps on living*, he thought bitterly, *even when we do not wish it to.*

"I know about cloning," Ramon said when he had composed himself. "What you say you've done isn't possible. A clone wouldn't have my memories. It would have my genes, yes, but it would be just a little baby. It wouldn't know anything about the life I've lived."

"You know nothing of what we can and cannot do," Maneck chided, "and yet you assert otherwise. This was not reproduction. You are a product of recapitulation." Maneck paused. "The thought fits poorly in your language, but if you were to gain enough *atakka* to understand it fully, you would diverge further from the model. It interferes with our *tatecredue*. Show me how the man would consume this seared flesh."

Because it was already what he had intended, Ramon did as he was bidden and ate, carving strips off the gordita with the wire knife. He felt Maneck's eyes upon him as he stuffed food greedily into his mouth, relishing the peppery taste of the meat, the grease he licked from his fingers. And as he chewed, he thought. If it was true—if he were not who he knew himself to be—then that other Ramon would not bring help. Even if he reached Fiddler's Jump, he had no way to know that his twin existed. And he might not care if he did. The other Ramon would likely think of him as a monster. An abomination.

He *was* an abomination. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, his armpits, the back of his knees. He was coming to believe what Maneck had said: he was not the real Ramon Espejo, he was some monster born in a vat, an unnatural thing only three days old. Everything he remembered was false, had happened to some other man, not to him. *He'd* never been out of the mountain before, never broken heads in a bar fight, never made love to a woman. This meat he was eating now was the first meal he'd ever had in his life.

The thought was vertiginous, almost unthinkable, and deliberately, with an effort, he put it aside. To think deeply about it would lead to madness. Instead, he concentrated on carving a slender leg from the gordita and using his teeth to strip the greasy meat from the bone. *If this is the first meal of my life, at least it's a good one.* Whoever or whatever he was, he was alive, out in the world, reacting to it with animal intensity. The food tasted as good as his false memories said that it should, or perhaps better; the wind felt as cool and refreshing as it swept across the meadow; the immense vista of the Sierra Hueso, sun flashing off the snowcaps on the highest peaks, was as beautiful as it ever was. None of that had changed, regardless of his origin. He *was* Ramon Espejo, no matter what the monster said, no matter what his hands looked like. He had to be, because there was no one else to *be*. What difference did it make if there was another man out there that also thought that he was him? Or a hundred such? He was alive, right here and now, in this instant, whether he was three days old or thirty, and that was what mattered. He was alive—and he intended to stay that way.

And what Maneck had revealed changed everything. There was no advantage to stalling anymore. Maybe if he could actually *find* that other Ramon, together they could somehow turn the tables on the alien. But how to proceed wasn't immediately clear. Certainly the other would head for Fiddler's Jump. Nothing else was even close. And likely he would go by the Rio Embudo. The big river came out of the mountains a hundred and twenty-three kilometers from his ruined camp and eventually passed through Fiddler's Jump itself. It was where *he* would have gone had he been frightened, wounded, and alone. First, he would have gone south, through the foothills, to bypass the rapids and the falls, and then he would have turned west, to find the river. He would have built a raft and headed down the Rio Embudo, traveling much faster than he possibly could on foot through the thick, tangled forest. And he was sure that the other would do the same. The aliens had been smart to use him as their hunting dog after all—he *did* know what the other would do, where he would go. He *could* find him..

But he also knew what he himself would have done if he knew he were being hunted. *He* would have found a way to kill his hunters. And that now was Ramon's only chance. If he could alert the other that he was being pursued and trust him to take the right action, together they might destroy the alien thing that held his leash. For a moment, he hoped deeply that what Maneck had said was the truth, that there was another mind like his own out free in the wilderness. He felt an odd surge of pride in that other Ramon—in spite of these monsters and all the powers at their command, he had gotten away from them, fooled them, showed them what a *man* could do.

The last grasshopper consumed, Ramon drowned the fire and covered it over with dirt while Maneck watched. It was approaching midday. Three days, Maneck said, the other had been running. Three and a half now. He guessed that he could cover thirty kilometers in a day, especially with all the demons of Hell on his heels. That put his twin almost to the river by day's end. Unless his wounds had slowed him. Unless he had become septic and died alone in the forest, far from help. Ramon shuddered at the thought, but then dispelled it, grinning. That was *Ramon Espejo* out there. A tough-ass bastard like that wasn't going to die easy!

Maneck listened as he poured out his theory, or most of it. Satisfied, the alien straddled the cycle and

gestured to the sidecar with a careful, studied motion. Ramon obeyed. The seat had not been fashioned for a human anatomy, but Maneck didn't bind him this time, and it was not too uncomfortable. They lifted, tilted, and angled into the sky, away from the upland plain in the shadow of the alien mountain. Ramon craned his head around for one last look. Soon the scorched mark where his van and tent had been was little more than a black thumbprint on the landscape. How he wished he had never come here, never set that fateful charge! And then he remembered that he had *not* done any of those things. It had been *the other* who had done them. All of the past belonged to the other. He had nothing but the present, nothing but Maneck and the cycle, the cold wind in his face, the clouds scuttling through an ominous indigo sky.

The cycle flew south and west. Behind them to the north were the tall peaks of the Sierra Hueso, their upper slopes now obscured by wet, churning gray cloud—it was snowing back there, behind, above. South, the world widened and flattened into forested lowland, then tilted down toward the southern horizon, steaming and slopping like a soup plate, puddled with marshes on the edge of sight. As they passed over the barren black jumble of the foothills, Ramon heard a thin chittering squeak from below them. He peered over the rim of the sidecar. A flapjack, trilling in alarm, was diving away from them. He wondered if it might be the same one he'd seen days ago, and smiled to encounter an old friend again. And then remembered, with a chill, that *he* hadn't been the one who'd seen it. It was a stranger after all. As was all the rest of the world.

After a long, cold, silent time, Maneck staring wordlessly ahead as they flew, Ramon lost in his troubled thoughts, he realized that they must be nearing the river. Below them was a thick forest of iceroot, tall, gaunt trees with translucent blue-white needles like a million tiny icicles. And then it came into sight, from up here only a thin silver ribbon in the world of green and blue and orange trees and black stone—the Rio Embudo, the main channel of the great river system that drained the Sierra Hueso and all the north lands. Hundreds of kilometers to the southwest, Fiddler's Jump sat high on its rocky, red-veined bluffs above the same river, its ramshackle wooden hotels and houses full of miners and trappers and lumberjacks, its docks crowded with ore barges and vast log floats soon to be launched downstream to Swan's Neck. It was there, to the safety and lights and raucous humanity of Fiddler's Jump, that the other was almost surely headed.

Which meant that he might be somewhere below them now.

Ramon shifted his weight and leaned nearer the alien, shouting to him over the rush of the wind.

"Move down! We can't see him from so high up! Go lower!"

"But proximity would create a greater opportunity to alert the man to our presence. He must be near."

That was exactly what Ramon had been thinking, but now he scowled and made an impatient gesture toward the wide landscape below them.

"We can be seen from anywhere if we're all the way up here," Ramon said, and then embellished with a small lie. "Human beings are very attuned to the skies. We look up all the time. Get low, and we won't be visible from so many places. Besides, I sure as shit can't see him through the trees. Can you?"

Maneck seemed to consider this, and, in answer, the cycle slowed and dropped until they were skimming lightly over the top branches of the trees like a fly over the surface of a pond. And somewhere beneath those shifting leaves was the other. His twin. His best hope of freedom.

See us, Ramon thought, as if by pushing with his mind he might reach through space and leaf-green obscurity. *See us, you stupid pendejo! See us!*

The river was wide—what had been a thin ribbon seen from afar had stretched into a clear expanse of glacier-cold water. Trees pressed up to the banks, exposed roots trailing into the flow like thick fingers. Maneck swept along the river, traveling south until they found a clearing at the water's edge where an old sandbar had been abandoned by a shift in the river. There they set down. To judge from the angle of the sun, it was nearing the middle afternoon. Another two or three hours still before nightfall. Maneck, ignoring him, pulled a series of spheres and rods from the compartments of the cycle. Tools, but for what purpose Ramon couldn't guess.

"What are you doing?" Ramon asked.

"Preparing. The man is within the forest. We will find him there."

Images passed through Ramon's mind—the spheres shifting through the air, sniffing out the other man, the other him. He kept the dread from his voice when he spoke.

"That's stupid. The forest is huge. We know he will pass by on the river. We're far more south than he could possibly have gotten on foot in this time, so he's still above us somewhere. If you go poking through the trees, he can slip by. Wait here, and let him come to us. Instead of looking through the whole *terreno*, you only need to look from here"—Ramon pointed across the wide swath of slow water to the distant bank—"to there."

And we will be in one place, where *he* can find *us*, Ramon thought but did not say. Maneck shifted, his sinuous arms shifting for a moment like a sea creature in an unseen current.

"If the man has come further south than you think he could, he may have already passed us," Maneck said.

"So fly down the river at night. You can go faster than he can. He'll only have a raft."

Again, the seemingly boneless arms shifted, and then fell.

"This is not the way proper flow dictates, but if it is as the man would behave, we will do as you suggest."

"Good," Ramon said. "In the meantime, I'll show you how to fish. The man, he'll need to eat. You may as well see how."

"He will not set snares? As you did earlier?"

"He will," Ramon said. "But he'll set them in the water. Here. I'll show you."

Once the alien understood what Ramon needed, it cooperated. They rigged a crude fishing pole from a thin, dry limb snapped off a nearby iceroot pine and a length of pale, soft, infinitely malleable alien wire. A different sort of wire was shaped into a hook, and Ramon stamped along the shore turning over rocks until he found a fat orange gret beetle to use for bait. Maneck's snout twitched with sudden interest as Ramon impaled the insect.

Ramon led the alien to a likely looking spot and dropped the line. The Rio Embudo was cold to be near, and the alien clothing wasn't as thick as his own had been, but Ramon didn't complain. His thoughts were on cooking the catch, once he had it. With a bit of green wood, he could build a fire that smoked badly. Something to act as a guide for the other ...

The first bite brought up something Ramon had never seen. That wasn't odd—there were new creatures caught in the nets at Diegotown and Swan's Neck every week, so little yet was known about Sao Paolo. This was a bloated, gray bottom dweller whose scales were dotted by white, vaguely pustulent nodules. It hissed at him as he pulled the hook free, and, with a sense of disgust, he threw it back into the water. It vanished with a plop.

"Why did you throw the food away?" Maneck asked.

"It was monstrous," Ramon said. "Like you."

He found another beetle, and they resumed their watch on the river as night slowly gathered around them. The sky above the canopy shifted toward the startling violet of the São Paulo sunset. Auroras danced green and blue and gold. Watching them, Ramon felt for an instant the profound peace that the open wilderness always gave him. Even captive and enslaved, even with his flesh pierced by the *sahael*, even though he was an abomination himself, the immense, dancing sky was beautiful and a thing of comfort.

Maneck chirruped and shifted, uneasily, staring up as if searching for something in the darkening sky. Ramon glanced at it. Its eyes had shifted again to the hot orange he had first seen, and its crest had risen and bristled like a animal sensing threat.



"What?" Ramon demanded.

"You have seen something. The *sahael* detects a change in your flow. And yet I find nothing to trigger this effect. You will tell me what you have seen!"

"The sky," Ramon said.

"Ah! Yes. And the man is very attuned to the sky. I recall this."

The alien shifted back to its motionless waiting, as if satisfied. Another hour or so later, Ramon finally caught a fat, white bladfisch with vivid scarlet fins. It was too dark by then for fire smoke to be of use, so Ramon simply built a large cookfire and roasted the fish gently. The flesh was warm and succulent, and when he had eaten his fill, he leaned back against the cycle and yawned. He felt very full and oddly contented despite his perilous situation and inhuman companion.

"Now, if we only had something to drink, eh?" he said expansively. "And a smoke. Ah! I would enjoy a good smoke." He thought wistfully of the cigaret he'd used to light the fuse all that time ago. Or that the other had used. The cigaret he had smoked with other lungs, in another lifetime.

The alien sat a few feet away, taking its own nourishment. The *sahael* stretched between them.

"There is river water to drink," Maneck pointed out. "Your biology requires that you drink. But what is a 'smoke'?"

Ramon tried to describe a cigaret to the creature. Maneck's snout began to twitch in revulsion before he had half-finished.

"I do not comprehend the function of *smoking*," Maneck said. "The function of the lungs is to oxygenate the body. Does not filling the lungs with the fumes of burning plants and the waste products of their incomplete combustion interfere with this function? What is the purpose of smoking?"

"Smoking gives us cancer," he said, and tossed a stone side-arm into the Rio Embudo. The alien seemed so solemn, and puzzled, that he could not resist the impulse to have a little fun with it.

"Ah! And what is *cancer*?"

Ramon explained.

"That is *aubre!*" Maneck said, its voice harsh and grating in its alarm. "Your function is to find the man, and you will not be permitted to interfere with this purpose. Do not attempt to thwart me by contracting cancer!"

Ramon chuckled, then laughed. One wave of hilarity seemed to overrush the next, and soon he was holding his side and coughing with the strength of the laughter shaking him. Maneck moved nearer, its crest rising and falling in a way that made Ramon think it was questioning—like a child who has to ask her parents what she has said to amuse them.

"You are having a seizure," Maneck said. "And yet the *sahael* suggests it is pleasurable ..."

It was too much. Ramon howled and kicked his feet, pointing at the alien in derision. He couldn't speak. The absurdity of his situation and the powerful strain his mind had been under amplified the humor of Maneck's confusion until he was helpless before it. The alien moved forward and then back, agitated and uncertain. Slowly, the fit faded, and Ramon found himself spent, lying on the ground, the stars of São Paulo impassive above him.

"You are unwell?" Maneck asked.

"I'm fine, monster," Ramon said. "I'm fine. You, though, are very funny."

"I do not understand."

"No. No, you don't! That's what makes you funny."

Maneck stared solemnly at him. "You are fortunate that I am not in cohesion," it said. "If I were, we would destroy you at once and start again with another duplicate, as such fits indicate that you are a defective organism. Why did you undergo this seizure? Is it a symptom of cancer?"

"Stupid monster," Ramon said. "I was laughing."

"Explain *laughing*. I do not comprehend this function."

He groped for an explanation the monster would understand. "Laughter is a good thing," he said, weakly. "Pleasurable. A man who cannot laugh is nothing. It is part of our function."

"This is not so," Maneck replied. "Laughing halts the flow. It interferes with proper function."

"Laughing makes me feel good," Ramon said. "When I feel good, I function better. It's like food, you see."

"That is an incorrect statement. Food provides energy for your body. Laughing does not."

"A different kind of energy. When something is funny, I laugh."

"Explain *funny*."

He thought for a minute, then recalled a joke he had heard the last time he was in Little Dog. Eloy Chavez had told it to him when they went drinking together. "Listen, then, monster," he said, "and I will tell you a funny story."

The telling did not go very well. Maneck kept interrupting with questions, asking for definitions and explanations, until Ramon finally said irritably, "Son of a whore, the story will not be funny if you do not shut and let me tell it to you. You are ruining it with all these questions!"

"Why does this make the incident less funny?" Maneck asked.

"Never mind!" Ramon snapped. "Just listen."

The alien said nothing more, and this time he told it straight through without interruption, but when he was finished, Maneck twitched its snout and stared at him from expressionless orange eyes.

"Now you are supposed to laugh," Ramon told it. "That was a very funny story."

"Why is this incident *funny*?" it said. "The man you spoke of was instructed to mate with a female of its species and kill a large carnivore. If this was his *tatecredue*, he did not fulfill it. Why did he mate with the carnivore instead? Was he *aubre*? The creature injured him, and might have killed him. Did he not understand that this might be the result of his actions? He behaved in a contradictory manner."

That's *why* the story is funny! Don't you understand? He raped the *bear*."

"Yes, I comprehend that," said Maneck. "Would the story not be more 'funny' if the man had performed his function properly?"

"No, no, *no!* It would not be funny at *all* then!" He glanced sidelong at the alien, sitting there like a great solemn lump, its face grave, and couldn't help but start to laugh again.

And then the pain came—world-rending, humiliating, abasing. It lasted longer than he had remembered; hellish and total and complex as nausea. When at last it ended, Ramon found himself curled tight in a ball, his fingers scrabbling at the *sahael*, which pulsed with his own heartbeat. To his shame, he was weeping, betrayed as a dog kicked without cause. Maneck stood over him, silent and implacable, and, in that moment, to Ramon, a figure of perfect evil.

"Why?" Ramon shouted, ashamed to hear the break in his voice. "*Why?* I did nothing to you!"

"You threaten to contract cancer to avoid our purpose. You engage in a seizure that impairs your

functioning. You take pleasure in contradictions. You take pleasure in the failure to integrate. This is *aubre*. Any sign of *aubre* will be punished thus."

"I laughed," Ramon said. "I only laughed!"

"Any laughter will be punished thus."

In the darkness, Ramon felt something like vertigo. He had forgotten. He had forgotten again that this thing on the far end of his tether was not a strangely shaped man. The mind behind the opaque orange eyes was not a human mind. It had been easy to forget. And it had been dangerous.

If he was to live—if he was to escape this and return to the company of human beings—he had to remember that this thing was not like him. He was a man, however he had been created. And Maneck was a monster. He had been a fool to treat him otherwise.

"I will not laugh again," Ramon said.

Maneck said nothing more, but sat down to watch the river. Silence stretched between them, a gulf as strange and dark as the void between stars. Many times Ramon had felt estranged from the people he was forced to deal with—norteamericanos, Brazilians, or even the full-blooded *mejicanos* to whom he was related by courtesy of rape; they thought differently, those strangers, felt things differently, could not wholly be trusted because they could not wholly be understood. Often women, even Eleana, made him feel that way too. Perhaps that was why he had spent so much of his life by himself, why he was more at home alone in the wilderness than he had ever been with his others of his kind. But all of them had more to do with him than Maneck ever could. He was separated from a *norteamericano* by history, culture, and language—but even a gringo knew how to laugh. No such common ground untied Ramon and Maneck; between them lay light-years, and a million centuries of evolution. He could take nothing for granted about the thing at the other end of the *sahael*. The thought made him colder than the breeze from the river.

"I need to sleep," Ramon said at last.

"That is well," Maneck replied. "I will watch the river."

Ramon spread his cloak on the ground and rolled himself in it as well as he could with the *sahael* in the way. Before long, he found himself beginning to drift. In his torpor, he realized that the *alien* had been the one learning all this time—how a man ate, how he pissed, how he slept. *Ramon* had learned nothing. For all his strategy and subterfuge, he knew hardly more about the monster than when he'd first woken in darkness.

He would learn. If he had been created as the thing said, then in a way Ramon was part alien himself—the product of an alien technology. He was a new man. He could learn new ways. He would come to

understand the aliens, what they believed, how they thought. He would leave no tool unused.

Sleep stole into him, taking him gently down below consciousness, his determination to *know* still locked in his mind like a rat in a pit terrier's teeth. Ramon Espejo felt the dreams lapping at his mind like water at the bank of a river, and at last let them come. They were strange, dreams such as Ramon Espejo had never dreamed before.

But after all, he was not Ramon Espejo.

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Six

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In his dream, he was within the river. He had no need to breathe, and moving through the water was as simple as thinking. Weightless, he inhabited the currents like a fish, like the water itself. His consciousness shifted throughout the river as if it were his body. He could feel the stones of the riverbed where the water smoothed them and the shift, far ahead, where the banks turned the flow one way and then another. And farther, past that to the sea.

The sea. Vast as a night sky, but *full*. The flow shifting throughout, alive and aware. Ramon floated down through the waters until he came near the dappled bottom and it swam away, the back of a leviathan larger than a city and still insignificant in the living abyss.

And then he was also the abyss.

Ramon dreamed of flow. Meaningless syllables took on significance and passed back into nonsense. Insights profound as love and sleep moved through him and left him filled with a terrible awe. The sky was an ocean, and the flow filled the space between stars. He followed the flow for hundreds or thousands of years, swimming between the stars, his belly heavy with generations yet unborn, searching for refuge, for someplace *safe*, away from pursuit, where he could hide and fulfill his destiny. His mind was a river, and he fed into the sea and sky. The part of his dream that was human knew that if he had

the courage, he would see the face of God in the waters.

And then, still dreaming, something caught him. An eddy powerful as violence threw him in a direction he could not name, and there in the current floated the bodies of the dead—alien forms but familiar as lovers. The great pale beast in the pit who had counseled him before this desperate hunt began. The small, bluish forms of *kait* eggs, now never to hatch. Yellow-fringed *mahadya* and half-grown *ataruae* still bent at the spine. (These were not words that Ramon knew, and yet he knew them.) All of them beyond redemption. He was Maneck, *athanai* of his cohort, and these dead that touched him, that polluted the flow, were his failing. His *tatecredue* was unfulfilled, and each of these beautiful things had fallen into illusion because he had failed to bear the weight of truth.

With a sorrow as profound as any Ramon had ever felt—more than the loss of his mother and his Yaqui father, more than the heartbreak of first love—he began to eat the dead, and with every corpse that he took into himself, he became less real, more lost in *aubre* and sin, more fully damned, until he reached out for the last floating, lost, illusory form and woke with a shriek.

Maneck stood beside him, its long arms lifting him with something between tenderness and anger. In the east, a paleness had snuffed out stars—the dawn coming up.

"What have you done?" the alien cried, and, as it did, seemed somehow less alien, lost and frightened and alone.

"*Gaesu*," Ramon said. "Prime contradiction. This is what it means? That all of you kill yourselves?"

"You should not have been able to use the *sahael* this way," Maneck said. "You should not have been able to drink of *my* flow. You are diverging from the man. It threatens our function. You will not do this again, or I will punish you!"

"Why?" Ramon asked, and the alien knew as well as he did that he was not asking why he would be punished. Maneck blinked its strange orange eyes and seemed to settle back, subtly defeated.

"To be observed *cannot happen*," Maneck said. "The illusion that it *has* happened is prime contradiction, the negation of reality. We escaped from our enemies and came here, we have hidden here for generations of recycling, waiting until the time was right to fulfill the *tatecredue* of our kind. If we were to be seen, we would not be what we are, we would *never have been* what we are. That which cannot be found cannot *be* found. This is contradiction. It must be resolved."

"You would all die rather than be discovered?"

"It must be resolved," the alien repeated.

"That doesn't make sense. The one, the man"—he couldn't bring himself to call him Ramon—"he's

already seen you."

"He is still within illusion. If he is prevented from reaching his kind, the information cannot diffuse. He will have been corrected. The illusion of his existence will have been denied. If *he* is real, however, *we* cannot be."

"*Dios mio*," Ramon said. "You are ... sick. You are sick, sick creatures."

"It is not illness. It is the dictate of proper flow. Your mind is twisted and alien," Maneck said. "And that is as it *should* be. You will cease to diverge from the man. We will wait here and hunt him. If he does not reach his hive, there will be no *gaesu*."

The alien turned its back to him, its attention once again on the river. Ramon lay back, listening to the rush and murmur of the river, staring at the sky as dawn slowly turned the black to blue, the light cool and bright as the foreign sun rose. In the distance, there came the odd booming cry of a *descamisado*, returning to its lair in the trees after a long night of hunting. When he went to the edge of the forest to relieve himself, the distinctive cinnamon scent of the iceroots strong in his nostrils, the *sahael* stretched to accommodate him, but Maneck took no notice. When he gathered a double handful of berries for his breakfast, the alien showed no interest. Ramon might almost have been alone and bound by his flexible leash to a tree stump. As the hours passed, the memory of the dream faded, the sadness becoming not an emotion, but the memory of one. The conviction he had felt that *any* price would be justified if it turned aside the horror of *gaesu* faded but did not vanish. It was the thought of the monsters, and he knew it.

When he stretched out on the greymoss at the water's edge at midday, his skin warmed by the sun, Maneck made no movement, but the nap he had intended would not come. He wondered if the *sahael* was preventing it.

Tenfin birds and whirlygigs flew through the trees, shouting out at one another and fighting over places for their nests, food for themselves, mates to bear their children. The same petty struggles of all life, everywhere. Larger beasts, hoppers and fatheads, came to the river's edge, glanced incuriously at them, and drank from the water. Fish leaped and fell back. The knot of tension in his belly loosened as he watched it all, able to forget for a moment what he was, what his forced mission was, and how bleak his hopes.

He was still half-lost in his reverie when the other Ramon found them.

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Seven

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The shout had no words to it—only a long, drawn-out sound, unmistakably from a human throat. Ramon's heart was racing even before the sound was gone, and Maneck was already moving to the cycle. The *sahael* tugged viciously, pulling Ramon almost faster than he could rise and walk.

"That noise was the man," Maneck said, its voice as calm and steady as if the fate of its people didn't hang in the balance. "You will come."

Ramon didn't bother protesting. He could tell from the color of its flesh and the restless movement of its arms that the alien was agitated. He seemed, after his dream, to know much more about Maneck, but the knowledge did him no good. The other was out there in the trees, and nothing he could do or say would keep the alien from finding him. Ramon took his place on the sidecar, and, in an instant, with a dizzying lurch, they were airborne.

The search was brief, and the story it told was all too clear. In a small clearing that almost overlooked the river, a tree limb had broken high up, the pale wood standing out from the darkness of the bark like a fresh wound. And there, near where the limb had fallen, a twisted, motionless form—the shirt and trousers Ramon remembered having worn in another life, the workboots angled awkwardly out. The shape of the body hardly made sense. The other Ramon had climbed the tree to survey the land, and the branch supporting him had snapped. He was shattered now, and certainly dead. Maneck landed the cycle ten yards from the fallen man.

"You will remain here," it said, sternly.

Ramon only nodded, his heart heavy as lead. This was the end of his hopes for freedom. The aliens would take him back to their strange, terrible caverns. Perhaps he would be allowed to remain as he was—a man with the memories and spirit of a man, trapped among aliens for the rest of his life. Perhaps they would destroy him as a tool that had outlasted its function. Which would be worse?

Maneck lumbered across the high grass to where the corpse lay. Perhaps, Ramon thought, if he could find a way to start the cycle ... it was a desperate idea, and pointless. Even if he could have figured out how to fly it, the thing in his neck would no more have allowed him to escape than gravity would let him flap his arms and fly. Maneck reached the body, leaning over it and prodding with its long, slender hands.

Ramon heard a creak in the silence and realized what was happening even before the deadfall dropped from high in the canopy—a log of copperwood twice a man's thickness and at least a hundred kilos in weight, screaming down through leaves and twig-thin branches. Maneck looked up just as the log struck



him and bore him to the ground. The pain hit Ramon instantly—it was not so intense as it had been, but it was disorienting and nauseating. He stumbled from the sidecar and tried to walk forward, but the earth seemed to shift and tip. He fell to his knees, aware distantly of a shrieking human voice and a thick, naked form, more like a chimpanzee than a man, that howled in victory as it ran forward. The sharp, dry report of a pistol sounded again and again.

"Help me!" Ramon cried, scrabbling at the *sahael*. "For the love of God, cut this *pinche* thing off of me!"

Through the pain and the haze of tears, Ramon saw the naked man—the other Ramon—shift away from his attack on the fallen alien, then run toward him. He cringed away, expecting assault as much as assistance. But the other knelt, trapping the *sahael* under his knees, and began sawing at it vigorously with his bush knife. Ramon felt the damage as if the fleshy leash were a part of him, but he gritted his teeth until his jaw creaked and forced himself to breathe through the pain.

And then, like turning off a light, it was gone. Ramon lay back, gulping air. His body trembled like he'd just run a fast mile. The severed end of the *sahael* shifted in the flesh of his neck, withdrawing and then falling the few inches to the ground with a sound like a cooing pigeon. It skittered away like a live thing until the other speared it with the point of his knife.

"Do I know you?" the other said through labored breaths. "Who the fuck are you?"

Ramon looked at him directly for the first time. He was filthy and unkempt—the light stubble that often darkened his chin was already a moth-eaten beard. Distrust shone in his black eyes. His left hand was wrapped in bloody cloth, and Ramon realized, with a profound sense of vertigo, that in that mess of soiled bandages, a finger was missing. A finger from which he had been born.

But the other Ramon also looked *wrong* somehow. He had expected it to be like looking into a mirror, but it was not. The face he was accustomed to seeing reflected back was different than this. Perhaps, he thought, his features were not so symmetrical as he'd liked to believe. Also the voice was higher than his own, with more of a whine in it. The voice he heard and hated when he heard himself recorded. The other Ramon's bearded chin jutted aggressively.

"I know you can talk," he said. "Who are you? What's your name?"

There was no recognition in the other's eyes. Ramon floundered, searching for a plausible lie. Maneck was the only name he could think of besides his own. He shook his head, forcing his mind to work. If he told the other the truth, he would be killed. He knew this for a certainty, because it was what he would have done himself.

"Manuel," he said. "Manuel Tenorio. I was working survey for the bank out of Fiddler's Jump. The thing over there. It caught me. It was taking me back to its hive."

"Which bank?"

"Sanchez-Perdida," Ramon said, pulling the first name that came to mind. He wasn't certain that S-P had a branch in Fiddler's Jump. But if he didn't know, neither would the other. The other narrowed his eyes, evaluating, and then slowly nodded.

"I must have seen you at the bars there. You drink at El Pinto Negro?"

"All the time."

"I must have seen you there. Well. You're lucky I found you," he said. "I was prospecting up Tierra Hueso. They blew up my van."

"The thing," Ramon said, gesturing toward Maneck. "Is it dead?"

"It better be," the other said. "I'm out of bullets." They walked over together. The other kept his bush knife at the ready in his right hand, his empty pistol still clutched in the left. Maneck lay unmoving under the deadfall, the whole lower part of its body crushed to a bloody, pulpy paste. The swirling patterns of its skin had stilled, and the hot orange eyes had faded to sightless gray. Bullet wounds made little mouths in the still flesh. No blood flowed from them. The other spat on the corpse of Maneck, *athanai* of his cohort and the last hope of his people, before turning to strip the bloodied clothing from the pile of stones and branches that had imitated a broken body, baiting the trap. Ramon lingered a moment, staring down at Maneck.

*Better thee than me, monster*, he thought. But still he didn't spit. In a odd way that surprised and disquieted him, he almost missed Maneck, now that it was over, now that he was free.

After all, Maneck was the only one he'd ever met in his life, except for the thing in the pit. And now the other.

"We have to get back to Fiddler's Jump," the other said as he pulled on his soiled, bloody shirt. "Do you have anything? A gun? A sat finder?"

"No," Ramon said. "The thing took everything I had. It made me wear this. I haven't got anything."

"Well," the other said, "let's see what *it* had."

They ransacked the cycle of strange artifacts—thin tangles of something like wire. The spheres and rods. A pink translucent cube. The strange twined eggbeater weapon that had destroyed the van and the bubbletent. But nothing worked, nothing functioned, no matter how they poked and prodded at it. Ramon couldn't even make the sharp wire end come out of the cylindrical knife. Perhaps it had all died

with Maneck.

"What about this?" the other asked, holding out a length of light metal that curved at the edges like a drying leaf.

"I don't know," he said, again.

"Didn't you see the thing use *any* of this?"

"The tube there. It called it *oekh*. It was what it ate."

The other snatched up the tube and threw it hard against a tree.

"I don't care about its food! I need weapons! Or a way to make this thing fly! Why are you making noise if you've got nothing to say?" the other demanded, thrusting his face aggressively much too close, almost nose to nose. Ramon could see the frustration in him, the anger, the desire to strike out and make himself feel better by hurting someone, and felt its twin in his own breast.

"I was a prisoner, not a *chingada* exchange student," he said, stopping just short of calling the other *cabron* or *pendejo* or asshole or any of the other thousand epithets that would have edged them over into a fight. The other's face puckered. Was this what Chulo Lopez had seen that night in Little Dog? It looked less impressive than it felt. This close, he could *smell* the other man, a rank, musky, unwashed reek that he found amazingly unpleasant. His breath huffed into Ramon's face like a blast of foul air, stinking of dead meat. With an effort, Ramon kept his own face still, and refused to rise to the bait.

"Fine," the other said, turning away. "At least help me build a raft. We got to get back to the world before those things find us again."

They worked through the afternoon. The other had already gathered supplies, slowed though he was by his wounds. Together, they braced the wood, bound it with long flexible strips of bark and ice grass and lengths of the alien wire. As they worked, the other told how he had rigged the deadfall, alerted by the plume of smoke from Ramon's cook fire. How he had planted the bait, how he had killed Maneck. Ramon listened as he boasted, fascinated not by the story, but by the man who told it. The delight the other took in his own cleverness was annoying. If Ramon didn't nod or make appreciative noises at the right moment, he would glare at him.

"Killed that fucking thing *dead*," the other said with an air of satisfaction. Ramon made a grunting noise, assent without comment. They finished lashing the last of the planks. The raft was rickety, but it would hold together. "So, how long you been in Fiddler's Jump?"

"Eight years," Ramon said, making up the number on the spot.

"Long time."

"Almost since the beginning," Ramon agreed. "You want me to get some food?"

"I can get my own food," the other said. "I'm not a fucking baby. I came five days on foot, catching meals. I don't need some *pinche* Fiddler's Jump banker doing my work for me!

Ramon frowned, but nodded passively. The other would like nothing better than goading him into a fight, he knew—but he wasn't going to oblige.

"Sorry," he said.

After dinner—sug beetles boiled in riverwater—the other Ramon smoked a cigarette that he didn't offer to share and fell asleep by the glowing embers of the fire, his hand still on his knife. In the morning, they would set out, floating their raft back to civilization. And the aliens would die, victims of *gaesu*.

And what, he wondered, would happen to *him*? When they reached Fiddler's Jump, it wouldn't be possible to pretend that he was really a native of the town. Eight years? He should have said he'd just arrived. Or said he was from some backwater like Los Cuates. And when other people saw them together, it wouldn't be possible to hide their resemblance.

Ramon looked out over the shining face of the water. He was a monstrosity—a made thing. *Ae euth'eloi*. He touched the place on his throat where the *sahael* had entered him—a disk of numb flesh the size of a New Peso. It had all seemed easy when he had been a prisoner. Now that he was free, he understood the depth of his troubles. He had no place in the world. He was Ramon Espejo, and he was not. He imagined Maneck's metal-and-gravel voice. *To be Ramon and not to be Ramon is aubre. It will be punished.* He chuckled.

"What?" the other said, petulant and half-asleep.

"It's nothing," Ramon said, wrapping the alien cloth closer about him and settling down for sleep himself. "Just remembering something a friend of mine used to say."

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Eight

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Ramon cast his wire into the flowing icy waters that surrounded them. The raft rode high on the river, bouyed-up by the corklike iceroot logs. Far above, a flapjack—perhaps the same one, perhaps another—folded itself and dove after some hidden prey. The other was more clearly feverish this morning, and weaker. The chill coming off the water was doing him no good. Ramon had left him at the back of the raft to sleep, and most of the morning had passed that way. By this point in its long journey to the sea, the river was deep and steady—not at all swift as big rivers go, but they had still covered much more ground in these last hours than either man could possibly have on foot, even in their best condition. Fiddler's Jump drew nearer. And then ... And then he didn't know what. Something had to happen before that did.

"What are you doing?" the other demanded.

"Fishing," Ramon answered.

The other made a derisive grunting sound.

"What does a banker know about fishing?"

"Enough to catch fish."

The other lapsed back into silence. Ramon pulled the wire slowly back to the raft, then cast it out again, letting the rhythm of the movements lull him and the sun warm his back. When he looked around, the other had fallen asleep again, his head resting on his uninjured hand. He looked ill. Part of it was the exhaustion and the fear and the fever, but there was more than that. Ramon could see the sorrow ground in at the corners of the mouth and eyes. He could see the desperation in the shoulders. And he knew them, he recognized them. This is what he was. Smart, resourceful, tough as old leather, but wound tight around his fears and ready to blame everyone but himself. This was what he had always been. Only it took becoming an alien monstrosity to see it. The other's eyes slitted open.

"What are you looking at?"

"I thought I heard something back there," Ramon lied. "It was probably just a bird."

He turned back to the fishing, keeping his face turned away from the other, knowing that sooner or later the penny would have to drop, and the less time they spent facing each other, the better the chances of postponing the recognition. But the other didn't return to his sleep.

"You're a funny kind of man," the other said. "How long did those things have you?"

"A couple days, I guess," Ramon said. He could have easily said my whole life, or they never really had me. I was never one of them. Any more than I was one of the *colonistas in* Neuvo Janeiro. "It wasn't that bad."

"That thing they put in your neck. That looked pretty bad."

"Yeah. Maybe it was."

"They crippled me," the other said, and there was something almost like gloating in his voice. "but they didn't catch me. Too smart for them! What do you think they are anyway? What're they up to? Did you find anything out about them?"

"I don't know anything for sure. I got the impression that they aren't from this planet, that they came here long ago and have been hiding in that mountain for hundreds of years. Waiting—but waiting for what, I'm not sure. It's hard to figure out. They ... they don't think like we do."

"We're going to be famous, you know," the other said; he hadn't really been listening. "The first men to see aliens! We'll be rich!"

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"Well. Maybe this was the big one after all," Ramon said, trying to keep the acid from his voice.

"What?"

"Nothing," Ramon said. "I was talking to the fish."

For a long moment, they were silent. Ramon shifted, wondering if his repulsive twin had drifted back to sleep, but not wanting to turn and see. Instead, he drew in the fishing wire and cast it out again. Something on his arm caught his attention. A thin white line, jagged and half-formed. The machete scar slowly welling up. What had Maneck said? *You will continue to develop across time*. He touched the thin line of knotting flesh with his fingertips, caressing it as gently as Eleana ever had. His beard was also thickening, his hands becoming rougher. He was becoming more and more like the man who lay behind him. He closed his eyes, torn between relief at seeing his own flesh coming back again and anxiety about what would come—no one would mistake them for different men. No one would even think they were twins—they were too close for that. By the time they reached another human being, they would have the same scars, the same calluses, the same faces and bodies and hair.

The thought was alarming in a way that went deeper than the simple fear of discovery. Some echo stirred in his mind of being the river of the vast and living sea. He had diverged. Maneck had feared it,

and it had been right.

"You got a woman?" the other asked.

"Sorry? What?"

"I said, you got a woman?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"You guess? You don't *know*?"

"I guess I don't," Ramon said. "She's ... she's a good woman, I think. We're a good match at least. But I make her a little crazy sometimes. And she ..."

"She's got you whipped, *mi amigo*," the other sneered. "I can hear it in your voice."

"What about you?" Ramon asked, not looking back over his shoulder.

"I got someone I sleep with," the other said. "She's got a mouth on her sometimes, but she's okay. I don't mind fucking her. She's pretty good in bed."

"You love her?"

"What's it to you?"

"I don't think you do."

"And what do *you* know about it?" There was an angry buzz in the other's voice now. Ramon shook his head at it. He didn't have any patience for this sorry bastard. He knew him too well.

"Forget it," he said. "I'm tired and I don't feel like talking anymore."

"Who gives a shit what you want?" the other demanded. It was like they were in a bar. Ramon could feel the rage in his breast, clean and hard and deep. It was why he always fought. It was why he hated people. This greasy, self-centered, puffed-up son of a whore at the other end of the raft was what he hated most in the world. Some new, observing part of his mind made a note of the fact.

"I said I don't want to talk," Ramon said.

"You don't get to say that kind of crap about me and then act like you're so high and mighty you can

decide when I can talk and not talk! You think because you got a job in an office somewhere, you're *better* than me? You think that? What do *you* know?"

"I know enough," Ramon said. "I know about how Eleana makes you crazy, nagging all the time. I know about how you asked that chica at Garcia's to dance with you and whether she'd take you in if you left Eleana. Nothing ever came of that, but you *did* ask. Asking means you were thinking about it, and I don't think you'd have done that if you loved her. I think you need her. I think you need her because, without her, you aren't part of anything or anyone. You're just some *pendejo* with a third-class van and some prospecting tools."

It wasn't how he'd thought it would come out, but it would do. It was too late now to go back, and Ramon found that he actually felt good. He'd said it. He'd said it out loud, and he saw now that he'd been thinking it for months. From before the aliens, from before the vat. From before the time when there had been two of them, he'd had this hatred within him. And now it was out. And now he knew who it was for. Whatever was going to happen, let it happen now.

"The thing is, you don't understand flow," Ramon said. "You don't understand what it is to be part of something bigger. And, Ramon, you poor bastard, you aren't ever going to know."

"What the fuck *are* you?"

The words were strangled. Coughed out of a panic-tight throat. Ramon dropped the fishing wire, letting the river take it, and turned. The other was gray beneath his sun-browned skin. His eyes were open so far that Ramon could see the whites all the way around. He had backed to the edge of the raft, backed away until there was no place further to go. Next, Ramon knew, he would attack. And he did still have the knife.

"Jesus Christ," the other whispered. "You're *me!*" He stared in horror for a frozen moment, then fumbled at his belt and pulled out the bush knife.

The silence wasn't total. The river clinked and chuckled around them. Birds or things near enough like them to take the name called from the tops of the trees, flew overhead, skimmed down across the river for a drink. But Ramon and his twin might have been statues, carved of wood and set upon the raft like icons in some old pagan temple. The wounded, debased, frightened little man at the back, his knife shining where the sunlight caught the blade. And at the front, himself, whatever he was. A thing of human flesh created by aliens. Man and not-man, both at the same time, and if this was *aubre*, so be it. He was more than he had been, and he knew it now. He saw it.

And if he was not Ramon Espejo, still there was enough of the mean old bastard in him that he wouldn't go down without a fight.

Perhaps his resolve showed in his face, because as he thought it, the other shrieked and leaped forward.



Ramon jumped, not away, not to the side, but forward, stepping into the blow. He brought up his balled fist, sinking his knuckles deep in the other's belly, then butted his forehead into the bridge of his older twin's nose. But the other had danced back, anticipating the attack. The blade danced.

"You're one of them," the other spat. "You're a monster!"

"Yes. Yes, I am. And I am *still* a better man than you."

Again, the other moved forward, sweeping the air with the blade, forcing Ramon to move back, back, until the raft shifted under the weight of their struggle, and cold water touched his heels.

"You're a thing. You're an abomination and you will die!"

He had been an idiot, letting the other incite him like this. Even fevered, even weak, the other was a fighter, a killer, and he had the weapon. Ramon felt anger growing in his belly, anger at himself and at the other, at the world and at the blind idiot God that had brought him this far, had made this absurdity of his life, and now, it seemed, was prepared to let him die at the hand of his worse self. The other grinned like a wolf, seeing Ramon's defeat before him.

And, for a moment, it was as if Maneck was within him, calm and stolid and phlegmatic. *You are not that person*, its strange grating voice said. The other shouted out again, leaping forward. The knife was ready—if Ramon did what his nature told him, if he jumped into the fight as if they were in an alley outside some midnight bar, he would be gutted like a fish. It was what the other expected him to do. Ramon crouched, but didn't move.

The knife moved slowly as a car wreck; Ramon shifted away to the right, but still pain bloomed in his side. He brought his arm down, pinned the other's hand against him. It drove the knife deeper into his own flesh, but it also trapped his twin against him.

"Come with me, *mi hermano*," Ramon said. "There's something I want to show you."

And he stepped off the edge of the raft.

The water was numbing cold, the glacier still in its blood. Ramon gasped despite himself and earned a throatful of river water. The other thrashed and twisted, and then they were apart, floating. Floating in a bright, flowing river. Ramon noticed the red bloom that came from his side, his blood mixing with the water, becoming a part of it. He was becoming the river.

It would have been easy to let it happen. The living sea called to him, and part of him wanted very much to join it, to become the river completely. But the part of him that was alien remembered the threatened sorrow of *gaesu* and the human part of him refused to be beaten, and together the two parts of himself forced him on. He shifted back, finding the dark form of the raft above him, and kicked against the flow

with all his strength. He pulled off the alien cloth and swam naked, the heat and blood pouring out of him.

His hand broke the surface. He clawed at the raw wood, almost too weak to grip it. Each time he pulled himself farther up out of the water, he felt fainter, but he gritted his teeth and tugged until he had a leg up, and then, with one last pull, he was free of the river. He fought to draw air, and then vomited, each spasm shooting pain like a fresh wound through the slit in his side.

The raft rocked as the other also found it. Ramon saw the wounded hand, bandages washed away, scrabbling for purchase. He saw the familiar face, its lips blued already with the fierce cold, struggling to stay above the surface. Ramon moved to the edge of the raft.

"Help me!" the other cried. "*Madre de Dios*, help me!"

Ramon took the other's hand, feeling the fingers weak already with fever and with cold trying to grip his wrist.

"I don't want to die!" the other said. "Please Jesus, I don't want to die!"

"No one does," Ramon said, and pushed as hard as he could. The other yelped and went under again, lost for a long moment beneath the raft. When he emerged on the other side, Ramon could still see him moving, struggling to the last, trying to swim against the flow, beating weakly at the river.

"I'll remember you," he called to his dying twin. "When I'm drinking your beer and sleeping with your woman, I'll remember you. You stupid prick."

The other thrashed the water frantically, and then went still. His head sank beneath the surface of the river. It didn't come back up.

Was there the faintest of tugs as the other died, as whatever bond was between them broke? Or was it just his imagination? It was impossible to say.

Exhausted, panting, Ramon lay back on the raft. He recognized the sluggishness of hypothermia coming on, but he had nothing to cover himself with. He could only hope that the heat of the sun would be enough to sustain him. Blood still flowed, staining his side and his legs, and he had nothing to staunch it with; he'd just have to hope the wound was shallow enough for it to eventually stop on its own. There were still days to travel between here and Fiddler's Jump, and, sprawled there alone on the makeshift raft, Ramon guessed his chances of surviving that long at even money. Maybe a bit worse. But at least the monsters would live. The fetid, crook-spined *ataruae*, the yellow-fringed *mahadya*. The *kait* would all hatch and sleep warm in their creche. If he died here, if he joined his brother in the river's ice-cold flow, he would at least die Ramon Espejo, hero to monstrosities. He needed to sit up. He would gather his strength and sit up. He only needed to rest here for a moment first. Just a moment.

Consciousness faded.

He was surprised, some time later, to find himself weeping. It was dark around him, and he could not entirely recall who or what he was weeping for. It seemed that someone he loved had died, and that he was responsible, but he could not remember who it was or how he carried that burden. Then the world faded again and he found himself floating in darkness. Time passed, punctuated by strange dreams and spikes of fear and panic and shivering. Nothing carried the weight of reality. It might have been minutes or hours or years passing in the sick non-time of fever. He found himself floating in darkness, aware that he was awake, but not of what had awakened him. He tried to move, but something resisted him, pressing him gently back into place. A hand. A woman's hand against his naked breast.

"Who are you?" she asked again, and he realized that, whoever she was, she had been asking him this for some time.

He moved his lips, swallowed painfully, and in a hoarse voice he muttered, "My name is Ramon Espejo. And, *perdoneme, mi amiga*, but that's all I can recall."

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Nine

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It was summer again before he could really say all was well. He'd broken things off with Eleana as soon as he was strong enough to speak, still in the hospital with his food coming through a white plastic tube straight into his vein like the ghost of the *sahael*. She hadn't believed him at first, thinking, he supposed, that it was just another fight like any of the others. It wasn't until the doctors released him and he went to his own room instead of hers that it sunk in.

She had been like a thunderstorm after that. For weeks, she had left angry notes pinned to his door with knives, screamed at him when they met. After she'd screwed her way through all of his friends and half of his enemies, she seemed to accept it that he was gone. Now she only spat on the ground when they chanced to see each other in the street.

The São Paulo colony was a bad place to be poor, though. The bills from his hospital stay were more than he'd make in a year, even if he'd had a working van and his prospecting tools intact. Starting from

scratch would have been easier, but Ramon did what he had to do. When the infection had cleared from his mangled side, he worked his strength back and took day-labor jobs in the spaceport or with fishing boats on the warmer coasts. It was easier saving money now that he'd stopped going to bars at night. And in high summer, he took what he had scraped together to Old Sanchez at the outfitter's station.

"Ramon, *mi amigo*, this — this is pigshit."

"You try saving up money hauling fish and retarring asphalt," Ramon said. "You got it easy sitting here with your iced tea and a bunch of desperate assholes needing whatever it is you got. I'll trade jobs with you for a week, and I'll have enough money to buy a new van outright."

"Not if I'm the one selling it to you," Old Sanchez said, but he smiled when he said it. "I want to help out. I really do, but this isn't enough for a down payment on the cheapest thing I got."

"What about renting it, then? I'll give you this much, and you let me rent one of the old vans and some equipment for two weeks. If I get a site that pays out, we can talk about maybe buying then."

"And what happens if you don't find anything?" Old Sanchez asked, which wasn't a no.

"I go haul some more fish until I can rent it again."

Old Sanchez sipped his tea and wiped his hand across his mouth. His eyes shifted, calculating. Ramon sat forward.

"What the fuck happened to you out there, *mi amigo*?" Old Sanchez asked. "You show up naked and half dead, no van, no equipment, and a hole in your side that someone could put a fist in. And now you're all of a sudden sober? You find God out there or something?"

"You really want to know?"

Old Sanchez considered him, and Ramon could see the unease in the old man's expression.

"No," he said. "I get enough evangelical crap already."

"Go forth, *mi hijo*, and sin no more," Ramon said.

"Yeah, okay," Old Sanchez said at last. "You can rent it. But if you wreck it like you did that last one, I'm taking half your wages for the rest of your life."

"Don't worry. Won't happen."

They drew up the agreement—Old Sanchez wasn't stupid; all the legal forms would be followed in case something did go wrong—and Ramon signed away his meager savings with something like euphoria.

"You really want to get back out there, don't you?"

"Yeah," Ramon said. "This being around people so much. I don't like it."

"Not even that girl down at Llano's?"

"Maria? She's all right. But she's not ..." Ramon made a gesture that encompassed sky and land and ocean. *She is not the world.*

"All right. Here's the keys. You can have the red van over there. There's already gear loaded. But you get it back in two weeks. And this time, you better have some clothes on."

"Yeah. Don't worry. This is going to be the big one."

It was a warm day in the second month of June, and the van hummed beneath him as the miles flowed away below him. Greenglass country glittering, the flocks of wool-elk and bigheads scattering as he passed overhead. The *Océano Tétrico*. The handful of weathered wooden ships that were the fishing fleet of Fiddler's Jump, and then north, along the thin silver-white band that was the Rio Embudo, where he had almost died twice. Somewhere in that flow—eaten by fish, his bones washed out to sea—the other Ramon had by now become part of the world in a way that could never be undone. Ramon touched his brow in a sign of respect for the dead.

"Better thee than me, *cabron*," he said.

The clearing was easy to find. The months of deep winter or else the aliens had scoured away all trace of his first landing there. He eased the van down, shut off the lift tubes and lit a cigaret. The scheme was simple. He'd left notes about what had happened—Maneck, the other Ramon dead somewhere in the river, and, most importantly, the exact location of the refuge—hidden in his things. The aliens might not understand the idea of *insurance*, but he was willing to teach them. And then he could make his deal.

The aliens would tell him where they didn't want humanity exploring, any other refuges that might exist, and he would file claims in Diegotown that made the sites look worthless and dead. In return, they would tell him where two or three really *good* sites were—places where mines could be built with every nugget of ore leaving a few coins in Ramon's pocket. And then let the monsters do what they wanted to do. It didn't matter to him. Let them hide inside their hill until the end of time, if that's what they wanted. Or perhaps eventually, in time, he could talk them into coming *out*, eh? Convince them, from his unique perspective that straddled both worlds, that being discovered didn't mean that they would all have to die. Wouldn't that be something? If he could do *that*, he wouldn't even need the *pinche* mines to be famous and rich. And it would be a good thing for the aliens too, for whom he'd gradually come to feel a strange

kind of sympathy; no one, not even alien monsters, should have to hide inside in the dark all the time when there was a world like this one to be out and around in.

He took in a deep lungful of smoke, remembering Maneck's fear of cancer preventing them from fulfilling their *tatecredue*. It was a risk, of course. Maybe a big one. There was no knowing what these bastards would think or do. Stranger than a *norteamericano*, or even the Japanese. Maybe they'd just kill him, not caring or not understanding about the insurance. Who could know? But life was a risk. That was how you knew you were living.

The cliff face was back exactly as it had been. He couldn't be certain, but he thought that even the individual stones had been set back in place. Here was the boulder he'd hidden behind. And there, in the place that made the most sense, was the site he'd placed the coring blast.

"Hai!" he shouted, his hands cupped around his mouth. "Monsters! Hai! Come out! Another monster wants to talk with you! Or do I need to blow this wall down again?"

Ramon stepped back. High above and to the south, two flapjacks rippled in the high atmosphere, circling each other. The sun overhead was warm as blankets. For a long moment, Ramon felt something like dread in his belly. What if they'd decided that his escape had constituted *gaesu* after all? What if inside the mountain there was nothing but the dead?

And then, far above, the mountainside irised open, and a thing flew out, straddling a device that was for all the world like a flying cycle. The pain in his belly eased. Ramon raised his hands and waved them over his head, drawing the monster's attention, calling it down. It circled once, as if uncertain.

Ramon took another drag of his cigaret, oddly reassured by the alien's hesitance, and waited for it to descend.

The End