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Book Information:

Genre: Sci-fi/Fantasy

Author: Matthew Woodring Stover

Name: Blade of Tyshalle

Series: Caine Series

This book is dedicated to the memories of some of the best friends any man could ask for. I only wish you could have lived to read it.

Blade of Tyshalle

Matthew Woodring Stover

For Evangeline, Aleister, and Friedrich; for Lev, John, Clive, and Terence;

for Roger and Fritz and both Bobs (Robert A. and Robert E.).

Even today, some still listen.

But we have soothed ourselves into imagining sudden change as some-thing that happens outside the normal order of things. An accident, like a car crash. Or beyond our control, like a fatal illness. We do not conceive of sudden, irrational change as built into the very fabric of existence. Yet it is. And chaos theory teaches us ... that straight linearity, which we have come to take for granted in everything from physics to fiction, simply does not exist... .

Life is actually a series of encounters in which one event may change those that follow in a wholly unpredictable, even devastating way... .

That's a deep truth about the structure of our universe. But, for some reason, we insist on behaving as if it were not true.

- "Ian Malcom" Michael Crichton

Jurassic Park

Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.

-Aleister Crowley

The Book of the Law

A tale is told of twin boys born to different mothers.

One is dark by nature, the other light. One is rich, the other poor. One is harsh, the other gentle. One is forever youthful, the other old before his time.

One is mortal.

They share no bond of blood or sympathy, but they are twins nonetheless.

They each live without ever knowing that they are brothers. They each die fighting the blind god.

ZERO

The only way I can explain why you'll never see me again is to tell you about Hari.

This is how I visualize the conversation that ended up pushing me into Hari Michaelson's life. I wasn't there-I don't know the details-but the images in my head are vivid as a slap on the mouth; to be a good thaumaturge, your imagination must be powerful and detailed-and I'm the best the Conservatory has ever produced.

This is how I see it:

"It's all here in the telemetry," says Administrator Wilson Chandra, Chairman of the Studio Conservatory. He wipes the sweat from his palms on the hem of his Costanti chlamys and blinks through

a stinging cloud of cigar smoke. He licks his lips-they're thick, and always dry-as he looks down at the rows of trainee magicians who meditate with furious concentration below. I'm not in thatclass, by the way; these are beginners.

Chandra goes on: "He's doing very well on the academics, you know, he has a fine grasp of Westerling and is coming along very well in First Continent cultural mores, but as you can see, he can barely maintain alpha, let alone moving to the beta consciousness required for effective spellcasting, and we, we're working only with Distraction Level Two, approximately what he will find in, say, a private room in a metropolitan inn, and under these circumstances I simply don't believe-"

"Shut up, will you?" says the other man on the techdeck. "Christ, you make me tired."

"I, ahm ..." Administrator Chandra runs a hand through his thinning hair, sweat-slick despite the climate control. "Yes, Businessman."

Businessman Marc Vilo, the Patron of the student in question, rolls the thick stinking cigar around his mouth as he stumps forward to get a better view through the glass panel.

Businessman Vilo is, a short, skinny, bowlegged man with the manners of a dockhand and the jittery energy of a fighting cock. I've seen him in the netfeatures plenty of times; he's an unimpressive figure in his conservative jumpsuit and cloak, until you remember that he'd been born into a Tradesman family; he'd taken over the family business, a three-truck transport firm, and had built it into the Business powerhouse Vilo Intercontinental. Still only in his mid-forties, he had purchased his family's contract from their Business Patron, bought his way into the Business caste, and was now one of the wealthiest men-outside the Leisure Families-in the Western Hemisphere. Netfeatures call him the Happy Billionaire.

This is why Administrator Chandra is here right now; normally the Administrator has much more important duties than entertaining visiting Patrons. But Vilo's protégé-the very first he has ever sponsored into the Conservatory-is failing miserably and is about to wash out, and the Administrator wants to soothe the sting, and perhaps retain a certain degree of goodwill, in hopes that Vilo will sponsor further students in the future. This is a business he's running here, after all. Sponsoring an Actor can be extremely lucrative, if the Actor becomes successful just ask my father. The Administrator wants to make Vilo see that this is only a single failed investment, and is no reason to believe that further investments of this nature will also fail. "There is also, ehm, a, well, a certain history of disciplinary problems-"

"Thought I told you to shut up!" Vilo continues to stare down at his protégé, a slightly built boy named Hari Michaelson, nineteen years old, a Laborer from San Francisco .

The boy kneels on his meter-square mat of scuffed plastic, hands curled in Three Finger technique. Of the thirty students in the room, only he has his eyes closed. The monitors on his temples that feed data into the Conservatory computer tell the whole story: Despite the slow three-per-minute rhythm of his breath, his heart rate has surged over eighty, his adrenal production is 78 percent over optimal, and his EEG spikes like broken glass.

Vilo pulls the butt from his mouth. "Why in-hell did you put him in the magick program anyway?"

"Businessman, we went over this when he was admitted. His memory and spatial-visualization test out in the low genius range. There is no question that he has the intellectual equipment to be a fine adept. However, he is emotionally unstable, prone to irrational rages, and is, ah, uncontrollably aggressive. There is a history of mental illness in his family, you know; his father was downcasted from Professional due to a succession of breakdowns?"

"Yeah?" Vilo said. "So what? *I know* this kid; he worked for me two years. Sure, he's got a temper. Who doesn't? He's smart, and he's tough as my goddamn boot heel." He smiles, showing his teeth, predatory. "Kind of like me at his age."

"You understand, Businessman, that we take these steps only to protect you from the expense of sponsoring a boy who will almost certainly perish on his first transfer."

"So? That's his problem, not mine. The money is-" He spits a shred of tobacco onto the carpet. "-not an issue!"

"He will simply never become an effective spellcaster. I'm sorry, but there are certain restrictions imposed by the Studio. The examinations administered by the Graduation Board are very stringent."

Chandra makes a gesture as though to take the Businessman's arm and lead him away. "Perhaps I can show you our newest pilot program, the priesthood school. This particular spellcasting variant has the advantage that the practitioner need enter the casting trance only under very controlled conditions-that is, under the guise of religious ritual-"

"Cut the crap!" Vilo stuffs his cigar back into his mouth. "I got a shitload of money in that kid out there. A *shitload*. I don't give a rat's ass about the Studio's restrictions, or the goddamn examinations. That kid is going to graduate from this toilet, and then he's going to Overworld."

"I'm afraid that's simply impossible-"

"You gonna make a liar out of me?" Vilo's eyes seem to retreat into his face, becoming small and dangerous. He hammers the next word. "*Administrator?*"

"Please, Businessman, you, you must understand, he's been in the magick program fourteen months; we must either, either, ah, graduate him or wash him out in only ten more, and his, and his *progress*-"

Vilo goes back to the window; he's more interested in the cherry on the end of his cigar than in Chandra's stammer. "Your parents live in, what, Chicago, right? That nice old frame house on Fullerton, west of Clark."

Chandra stands very still. Ice water trickles down his spine. "Yes, Businessman ..."

"You gotta understand that I don't make bad investments. You follow? Hari gets his shot."

"Businessman, I-" Chandra says desperately, then with a massive exercise of will steadies his voice. "There are other options that can be explored .."

"I'm listening."

"Please, Businessman, perhaps I was too hasty in suggesting that Michaelson cannot succeed. He is, after all, in Battle Magick, which is the most difficult school, but it is the one place where his, erm, aggressive nature may work to his advantage. My idea-with your permission-is to provide him with a tutor!"

"He doesn't have tutors? What the hell am I *paying* for?"

"Tutors, yes, of course, staff tutors. Michaelson doesn't respond well to directed instruction. He, ah-" Chandra decides not to tell him of the brutal beating Michaelson had inflicted on Instructor Pullman. I knew about it, so did most of the students at the Conservatory; it was the best gossip we'd had all year. Chandra believes that issue is settled; and, really, the man had gotten no worse than he deserved. In Chandra's mind, to make advances on a boy with Michaelson's psychosexual dysfunctions had been irresponsible to the point of criminality. Speaking for the students-well, Pullman's a nasty little groper; a lot of us wished we'd done what Michaelson did.

"I'm thinking more in terms of another student, someone who'd have no authority over him, who could, well-he doesn't respond well to authority figures, as you might know-someone who could, well, be his friend."

"What, he doesn't have friends enough already?"

"Businessman," Chandra says with a nervous laugh, "he doesn't have any friends at all."

And that's when he decided to send for me.

2

Overworld.

When the Winston Transfer first opened the gate from Earth to Overworld, the Studio had been lurking in the background, waiting to step through. Overworld is a land of dragons and demons, of hippogryphs and mermaids, of hedge wizards and thieves, master enchanters and noble knights.

It is a billion dreams come true.

I burn for it. I lust for Overworld the way a martyr dreams of the arms of God.

My father took me to first-hand one of Raymond Story's early Adventures when I was seven years old, and when Story spoke a Word of Power and the Hammer of Dal'kannith smote an evil ogre and splashed the brains from its leering ten-gallon head, I felt the soaring echo of his joy of battle and the surge of puffing magick and well, you know: there really aren't any words.

For my tenth birthday, my father bought me the cube of Story's epic three-day battle with the mad dragon Sha-Rikldntaer. The very first of the thousand or so times I played it, I knew.

I had to do it. I had to be there.

Ten years intervening have only sharpened my lust.

Everything in my life was perfect. I was at the top of my class, had the highest psych rating the Conservatory had ever measured, my elving surgeries were going perfectly, and I was absolutely on top of the world until Chandra called me into his office and took it all away.

When I went in there and took his offered seat, I had no idea of the preceding imaginary conversation. I expected another stroke-up over my spectacular progress, and so it came as a rude shock to be told that I was to be this antisocial, ill-tempered Laborer's new tutor.

I played it off, though; we of Business are trained to take bad news coolly. "Sorry, Administrator," I told

him, tapping my face guard. "I don't think I'll have time. I graduate in four months, and I have six more surgeries."

Chandra had flinched visibly when I called him *Administrator*, he hates to be reminded that I'm upcaste of him. I slip the word in from time to time, when he needs to be reminded of his manners.

But now he shook his head. "You don't understand, Kris. This is not a request. This boy needs a tutor. He needs the *best* tutor, and you are the top magick student. You will take him in hand, and you will teach him what he needs to know to pass the Battle Magick exams. Period?"

"I'm not interested, *Administrator*." What does it take to get through to this lump of meat? "Ask someone else."

He rose, and came around the corner of his big rosewood desk. He leaned on it and clasped his hands together. "The independence of the Graduation Board is sacrosanct I cannot influence them to pass an unqualified student, but I can certainly prevent any student from ever coming before them, if I choose. Without my signature, they'll never see you."

He stared at me as though trying to see the inside of my skull-and there was something in his eyes, something dark and frightening: an eerily impersonal hunger that made my stomach knot.

It looked *familiar*, somehow; but I couldn't guess where I'd seen it before.

"Do you understand, now?" he said. "If Michaelson doesn't graduate, neither do you?"

The universe tilted beneath me, and I clutched at the arms of my chair to keep from falling off the Earth and tumbling into interstellar space.

Not *graduate*? Never go to Overworld? Far more than a sentence of death-this was the whisper of the headsman's axe. The room darkened around me; when I could speak again, my first instinct was to bluster. "You can't do that! If you even think about washing me out, my father-" "Would thank me, and you know it."

That stopped me short; I did know it. "But *me*? Come on, Ad-Chairman. I mean-Jesus, I was supposed to graduate last term, but I stuck it out for my elving-if you wash me out, I'll be stuck with this face for the rest of my life! It's one thing, if I'm an Actor, but-"

Chandra's head wobbled on his scrawny neck; he looked very old and weak, but still capable of a dangerous vindictiveness, like a senile king. "This Michaelson boy," he said. "His Patron is Marc Vilo."

"The gangster?" I asked, startled. My father talked about him once in a while, about how he disgraces our entire caste.

"He was, erm, here today. He's-he's very interested to see Michaelson go on. *Very* interested. He, ah, he-" Chandra looked away, and coughed to cover the crack in his voice. "-he asked about *my family*."

"Uh." I understood now. He'd decided to handle his problem by making it my problem. Foolish-my father would have laughed at him and made some rude comment about the whole of the Administration caste, with its penchant for asscovering and buckpassing.

I couldn't laugh. I remembered overhearing a couple of my father's Laborers once, when one of them

supported the other as he staggered out from a correction box: "I guess the best you can hope for is not to be noticed?"

I'd been noticed; and the simple fact that he was downcaste from me meant nothing at all. This weak buckpassing bitshuffler held the entire rest of my life in his palsied hands, and all I could do was grin and take it like a Businessman.

"All right, Chairman," I said with as much of a front of confidence as I could muster. "Let me look at his file."

3

I leaned against the fluted door-column at the arch that separated the weight room from the main hall of the gym, looking in. I rubbed at the flexible white face guard that protected my most recent surgery; enough sensation leaked through the neural blocks that I had a permanent bone-deep itch. Someday, on Overworld, this surgery would enable me to impersonate one of the First Folk, the elflike aborigines of the northwest continent. They were the greatest magicians of Overworld; I might never match them-but I have a couple talents of my own.

Behind me, the hall was filled with Sorbathane-armored Combat students thwacking each other with swords of weighted rattan.

Michaelson stood out in the crowded weight room. Magick students avoid the weights until the late afternoon, when the Combat neanderthals would be in class or outside on the tourney fields. Michaelson was the only guy in the room under a hundred kilos; even the few women present each had at least ten or eleven kilos on him. He lay on his back under the bench press bar, face contorted with strain.

One of the neanderthals elbowed another in the ribs as I threaded *my way* across the room. "Lookie." The neanderthal got up and blocked my path, rippling his hypertrophied pectorals. He topped my height by maybe a third of a meter. "What's doing, magick girl? Aren't you supposed to be on your knees somewhere?"

I grinned behind my mask as I sidestepped him. "Nah, you just wish I was a- girl. Give you a choice of three holes, 'stead of the two your pal's stuck with." I moved on past while the frowning Combat student tried to figure out what kind of an insult that worked out to be.

Michaelson stared blindly at the ceiling while he labored under the bar, veins standing out on his forehead. I was kind of curious about him, I admit; reading his file, I'd discovered that his father was Duncan Michaelson the anthropologist, the same Duncan Michaelson whose book on Westerling was the Conservatory's standard text on the language.

Duncan Michaelson had already been a big part of my life; I'd read his *Tales of the First Folk*-an oral history of the northwest primals-dozens of times. *Tales of the First Folk* had been what drew me toward the elves in the first place.

I couldn't mention that to Hari, though; I'd also read in his file that he never spoke about his father.

Hari was almost a decimeter taller than I am, but wouldn't outweigh me by much. Dark eyes and swarthy skin, black hair, muscles like knotted rope. He grunted as he powered the bench press bar up through another stroke; his lips twisted into a snarl fringed by a ragged growth of black beard.

I glanced at the bench press readout 80 keys. I grunted out loud, impressed in spite of myself; I knew from his file that Michaelson weighed in around sixty-five. Then I looked at the repcounter. As Michaelson slowly straightened his arms, the counter clicked over to 15.

Chandra had said Michaelson spent a lot of time in the gym; I wondered if even the Chairman knew just how much.

We'd gone over a hasty plan to get Michaelson's confidence; based on his psych eval, we'd decided that honesty wasn't the best policy. A direct offer of tutoring would meet with, at best, sullen rejection; the plan involved a gradual building of a relationship-becoming friends first, maybe occasional advice on meditative strategies for Michaelson's upcoming Virtual Acting seminar, then a casual offer to help him with his studies. No pressure.

But now, as I watched Michaelson pump the repcounter up toward 20, each slowing stroke pushing four or five explosive, gasping breaths through his clenched teeth, I flashed on him.

For that bare, eye-flick instant, I was Hari Michaelson, straining under the bar. I became a nineteen-year-old Laborer, with a visceral memory of countless upcaste spurns and the helpless humiliation of knowing that any payback was forever beyond my reach-with a nuclear kiln of permanent rage lodged behind my breastbone, fueled by the searing knowledge that I was failing.

This is one of my talents, the flashing. It's not an ESP thing, more like that powerful and detailed imagination working overtime, but it serves me well enough. In that instant, I threw out Chandra's plan. I had a better one.

As Hari's arms hit their limit, half extended and trembling, his face gone purple and his eyes barely open, I stepped beside him, put both hands on the bar, and lifted it with him. It didn't take much strength; I probably could have done it with a finger, lifting only the kilo or two that was beyond Hari's capacity. When his arms reached their full extension, Hari snarled, "End!" The bar froze in place.

I said, smiling, "Shouldn't press without a spotter, y'know."

Michaelson sat up slowly. I felt his stare like heat from an open fire. "Nobody asked your opinion, asswipe," he said evenly. "Or your help."

"If I'd waited for you to ask, I said through a smile, "I'd have been standing here till the next Ice Age!"

"Yeah, funny!" He squinted at my mask. "What're you supposed to be, Boris Karloff?"

"Boris who? My name's Kris-"

"Hansen. Yeah, I know. Everybody in Shitschool knows who you are, we hear about you all day long. What do you want?"

Shitschool: the derisive nickname Combat students give to the College of Battle Magick, from its initials. "A couple minutes of your time," I said with a shrug. "I want to ask for your help."

Michaelson turned away, toward the weight machine's control pad. "Piss off."

"Hey, ladies." One of the Combat neanderthals came up beside us. "You need some help with this machine? You want *aman to show you how it's done?*"

Michaelson didn't even turn his head. "Take a fucking hike, Ballinger."

"Uh-huh, right. Excuse me, ma'am?" He casually elbowed Michaelson off the bench and lay down under the bar. Michaelson got up slowly and stood with his back to the machine, very still, except for a muscle that jumped at the corner of his jaw.

The neanderthal-Ballinger--gripped the bar and said, "Weight up. Two-zero-zero. Begin." When the readout had scaled up to 200 kilograms he started pumping the bar smoothly up and down, and said, "See? That's your problem, not enough weight."

"Come on, Hari, let's get out of here," I said. "I really want to talk with you."

"You got nothing to say that I need to hear."

I took a deep breath, held it, then took the plunge. "Typical Labor attitude," I sneered. For an instant I felt like my father.

Michaelson turned like he was mounted on a millstone. "What?"

"You downcasters are all alike. `Fuck off, Jack. It's not my job." It's born into you. That's why you Labor scum never get out of the ghetto?"

Michaelson took one deliberate step toward me. His eyes burned. "You are just *begging me* to kick your fucking ass."

"Yes, in fact, I am," I told him. "That's exactly right."

He blinked. "Come again?"

"Which part don't you understand?"

He stared at me while his mouth stretched into a slow predatory grin: all teeth and no humor. "I'm into it."

"Fine, then. Let's get a hand-to-hand room."

"Yeah, sure. One thing first, though?"

He turned back to the weight machine, where Ballinger's heavy arms, trembling now, forced the bar up through the fourteenth rep. When they reached full extension, Michaelson leaned over him and rapped the insides of both elbows with the edges of his hands. Ballinger's arms gave way, and the bar slammed down into his chest. Eyes bulging, Ballinger tried to gasp "*End! End!*" but he hadn't enough breath for the machine to register his voice.

Michaelson patted his cheek and said, "Shouldn't press without a spotter, y'know." He grinned at me. "After you, ma'am."

I grinned back. "Why, thank you, miss?"

The line was good, but I felt a chill. I began to comprehend how dangerous Hari Michaelson might be,

and I knew I'd better be bloody damn careful.

4

The hand-to-hand rooms are a level higher and directly over the gym. They vary in size and conformation, but they all have floors and walls of three-centimeter Sorbathane to minimize impact injuries. On one wall the Sorbathane's transparent and laid over a mirror, so you can watch yourself shadowbox or whatever.

Michaelson and I met in one. I was already in the required half-armor: a centimeter of Sorbathane protecting elbows, knees, vitals, head, and neck. Michaelson wore that sweaty cotton shirt and baggy black pants, and nothing else.

"You're not wearing armor," I said.

He sneered at me. "Brilliant, Businessboy. What was your first clue?"

To hold on to my temper, I conjured a vivid image of the night sky of Overworld, a dragon silhouetted against the full moon. If I didn't make this work, that mental image was the closest I'd ever get to seeing it.

I said, "Hey, c'mon, armor's required-" but before I could finish the thought he hit me from twelve directions at once.

It was like being caught in a threshing machine-he slammed his knees into my unprotected thighs, his fists and elbows against my ribs, and his forehead into the pit of my stomach and before I really knew what was happening he had my face guard mashed into the floor and my arms and legs pinned somehow and my whole body *hurt*.

"Tell me again about Labor scum, will you?" His voice in my ear sounded flat and metallic, and I suddenly, stunningly, arrived at the realization that *I could die here*.

If he wanted to, he could kill me. Easily.

And get away with it: an unfortunate training accident, and he goes right on with his life, while mine is snuffed in an instant.

And he sounded like he wanted to.

It's a funny feeling: your bowels turn to water and all the strength goes out of your arms and legs, tears well up in your eyes-it's a baby thing, I guess, a reflex to appear weak and helpless in hopes that you can trigger an answering parental reflex. But somehow I didn't think Michaelson had that particular reflex.

I sneered into the floor. "Aaah, lucky punch."

An instant of stunned silence; then he had to let me up because he was laughing too hard to hold me. I managed a little chuckle, too, as I rolled over, sat up, and tried to make sure all my joints still worked.

"Jesus. I didn't think anyone could do that; not so easily, anyway. You know I'm near the top of my class in hand-to-hand?"

Michaelson gave a derisive snort. "Yeah. You're near the top of your class in everything. Doesn't mean you know shit about it."

"I know, Hari. That's why I came looking for you."

He sat up and laced his fingers around his knees. "I'm listening," he said, but in his eyes swam naked suspicion, the permanent shifty *what do you want from me?* of the downcaster.

"I hear you're barely passing hand-to-hand," I said. "And I hear that the only reason you're not failing is that you-like you Labor guys say-can whip shit on every student in the class. I go to Overworld in four months, and I think there's some things you can teach me that I'm not going to learn from Tallman."

"Tallman's a moron," Michaelson said. "He's more interested in making you do *this way* than in teaching you something that'll keep you alive."

"That's the part I want to learn. That part about staying alive." "What's in it for me?"

I shrugged. "The chance to beat the snot out of a Business brat every day for four months."

He measured me with his eyes, coldly, for a long time. I fought the urge to fidget. Finally he uncoiled himself, rising with a smooth motion into a natural stance. "Get up"

"Aren't you going to get armor?"

"You think I need it?"

. I sighed. "Never mind." I got up and matched his stance. I knew he wasn't going to give me the *Ready* . . . *Fight!* of classroom sparring, so I was ready when his gaze flickered down to my groin. I dropped my hands to crossblock the kick and he cracked a left hook into my ear that made my head ring.

"Lesson one. That's an *eye-fake*, Hansen. Every time I see you looking at my eyes, you're gonna get a whack."

I shook the ringing out of my ears and got my hands back up. Michaelson tapped himself on the sternum.

"Look here. Always look here. You can see my whole body-the eyes lie, Hansen, but the chest is always honest. And you don't block a groin kick with your hands, you take it on the thigh. Every time you drop your hands, you're gonna get a whack. You understand?"

"Yes, I'm starting to-"

He whacked me with a right uppercut below the heart that left me gasping.

"Lesson two. Best time to hit someone is when he's off guard. Best time to catch someone off guard is when he's talking. When you talk, you're thinking about what to say next, not-"

I hit him, a good stiff jab right in the teeth. My knuckles stung like a bastard. He took a couple steps back and touched his lips; his hand came away painted crimson, and he grinned at me.

"Y'know," he said, "there's just the faintest chance I could start to like you."

This is going to work, I thought. I'm on my way to Overworld.

5

A week later, I was sitting in Chandra's office, so much of my body mottled with green and yellow and purple healing bruises that I looked like somebody'd spiked my shower with a carton of expired skin dye.

"I want permission to use the VA suite?"

The Chairman looked at me like I was some new species of cockroach. "Vilo screened this morning. He would like to know what progress Michaelson is making. I lied to him. I said everything is going well?"

"Ten days from now," I said patiently, "Hari starts Virtual Acting 102. You want him to pass, don't you? I'd think you'd be a little cooperative, here?"

"The clock is running on you, Hansen. I do not think that allowing your student to beat you senseless every day is teaching him very much."

"Allowing? Administrator, you've never seen him fight."

"His College is Battle Magick, as is yours. Have you even *begun* work on his visualization deficiencies? Have you begun work on his trancing? You are accomplishing *nothing*?"

"Administrator, I've been meeting with him for at least an hour or two every day-"

"And doing nothing of value to either of you. Did you think I was not serious, when I told you what was at stake?"

My temper flared. "Then find somebody else! I didn't ask for this job, you forced me into it! *I'm doing the bloody best I can!*" My face burned. A true Businessman never loses his temper in front of a downcaster. My father would never have done it. Maybe after spending so much time with Hari, his attitudes had begun to color mine.

"No, no?" Chandra shook his head. "You're the top student in Battle Magick. If I have less than the best, Vilo will think I *want* Michaelson to fail?"

He squinted at me, and I flashed on him.

I'm Administrator Wilson Chandra; I've spent my entire sixty-odd years of life in service, the last fifteen as Chairman of the Studio Conservatory—a position of great responsibility but very little power. I've had to kiss the crack of every Leisureman, Investor, and Businessman to ever walk through the front doors; I've had to coddle their whining protégés, handjob the Studio's Board of Governors, soothe the swollen egos of the emotionally crippled ex-Actors who make up the faculty, and somehow in the midst of all this turn out Actors who will not only survive on Overworld but provide the Studio with the income that justifies my existence.

I've done a damned good job of it for a decade and a half, and what do I get? A murderous little gangster telling me who I can and can't graduate, telling me *how to do my job*, and a snotty Business brat whining about having to do something his pampered little butt wasn't *in the mood* for.

I leaned back in my chair, blinking behind the face guard. I understood now. *Hedid* want Hari to fail: because it would sting Vilo. He wanted to fail *me*, because I was born into Business. It would be a double slap at upcasters, one he thought he could get away with. Petty and vindictive, it was exactly the kind of underhanded knife his caste had always pointed at those above it. Whatever threat Vilo might have made against his family, he didn't take too seriously, and Hari was only a pawn, a counter in his game.

I, too, was no more than a pawn. His malice wasn't personal at all. I remembered that glimpse I'd gotten of eerie, impersonal hunger behind his eyes: he didn't care about me one way or the other. I just had the bad luck to be conveniently placed for his little psychodrama of undercaste revenge.

Outside the Conservatory, things would be different. On the outside, I was Business, and he only Administration. If he so much as sniffed at me I could denounce him to the Social Police for caste violation-but none of that mattered, here. He had his grip upon me, and I could do nothing to loosen his fingers.

I started to understand from where Hari got his rage.

For a moment, I felt Hari behind me, at my shoulder, whispering in my ear the precise angle for the edge of my hand to slice at his throat and shatter his larynx; I shook my head to drive it away, and took a deep breath.

"I want permission to use the VA units," I said again.

"This, I think is too much. Unsupervised use of the VA suite is dangerous, and Instructor Hammett-

"Y'know," I said casually, fighting down a queasy twinge in the pit of my stomach, "my father contracts with Vilo Intercontinental." This kind of sleazy Business-club innuendo left a bad taste in my mouth, but I desperately needed some leverage-and Hari's fetch still lurked at my shoulder, whispering violence.

Chandra looked blank, but he knew what I meant.

"You can authorize it. I'll take full responsibility," I said more insistently, because I understood the rules of this game. Chandra had to look like he was doing everything in his power to help me help Hari, so that he can shake his head and purse his lips in virtuous regret when he washes us out.

Reluctantly, he nodded. "All right." He drew a card out of a slot on his desk and swiveled his deskscreen toward me. "This is my duplicate access card. Thumbprint the screen here, and also thumbprint the liability release at the bottom of the screen. Any injury to either one of you is wholly your responsibility."

I nodded. "You won't regret this."

He didn't answer. He looked profoundly skeptical.

6

Hari faced me over the angled tip of his *bokken*-a wooden practice sword weighted to three-fourths the mass of an Overworld broadsword. He wore the required minimum armor now, as did I; *bokken* are real weapons, and can kill.

Without warning he lunged at me, forcing down my blade with his; when we came into the corps-a-corps an elbow I didn't even see coming slammed into my face guard and lifted me off my feet. I went down sprawling and my *bokken* spun away. He stood over me, wooden sword against my chest.

"You lose?"

I slapped the blade away and climbed angrily to my feet. "Goddammit, Hari! You're not supposed to hit me in the face! You could rip my sutures, and you know it. And we're supposed to be working on *swords?*'

He shrugged and tossed his *bokken* aside. "Supposed, supposed. You're supposed to be a pretty good swordsman, for a Shitschooler. Then why do you always lose?"

"Because you always cheat?"

To a Businessman, those are fighting words. Hari only shook his head. "Listen, there's no such thing as cheating when you're fighting for your life. A very bright guy once said, 'Winning's not the most important thing. It's the *only* thing.' "

He came up to me, an oddly gentle expression on his face. "Kris, you're pretty good, y'know? You're fast and you learn quick and everything. You're better with a sword than I am. If I play by the rules you're gonna beat me. But on Overworld, you play by the rules, you're gonna get killed."

I thought, *Don't talk down to me, you low-rent Labor prick*, but I said, "Yeah, all right." I went after my *bokken*, picked it up. "Let's go again."

"You never quit, do you?" He looked kind of disgusted, and kind of uncomfortable. "I'll hand it to you, you sure can take a beating. But I don't think this is doing you much good. And I think I'm going to need my free period to work on trancing for a while."

That was almost good news-he'd finally recognized that he'd have to put in extra magickal practice if he wanted to graduate. But practice alone doesn't make perfect you only get perfect through perfect practice. And I knew exactly what he needed. The only way either of us'd ever get to Overworld was if I could convince him to let me help him.

"You're quitting? Just when I'm starting to catch up?"

"Kris, man, I'm sorry. You don't have it, you know?" He started stripping off his armor, every *zzzip* of parting Velcro driving a needle into my chest.

"What do you mean, I don't have it? Who made *you* the expert? I took the same classes you did-I may not be as good at it, but *I know* as much about it as you do."

His penetrating black eyes took on an empty gaze, like he looked through my head to the wall at my back, and his mouth twisted into the kind of half smile you get when you suck on a sore tooth. "You'll never know as much about it. You're too old. And you don't love it."

"Don't give me that crap, Hari. I know-"

"You don't know shit."

I thought about what I'd read in his file, about his father's insanity and downcast slide from Professional-a professor of social anthropology-to a Temp in San Francisco's Labor slums, and about the physical abuse he'd almost certainly suffered at his father's hands, and for a moment I thought I knew him. "Hey, so you had a rough childhood-

He laughed in my face, an ugly grunting sound that had no humor in it. "I had a great childhood. Where do you think I learned how to fight? By the time I was eight, I knew: Every fight is a fight to the death. That's what makes it *fun*. You still don't get it, and you probably won't. You won't live long enough. And I'm sorry about that, because I kind of started to like you."

"All right, fine." I felt the singing surge of my temper as I stripped off my armor. "You've a fine taste for melodrama, Hari. It's a pity you're so full of shit."

"Eh?"

"This I'm-so-worldly-wise-and-you're-just-a-babe-in-the-woods act. Give me a break. I've seen it done better; my father has it down to a science."

"Yeah, whatever." He gathered up the pieces of his armor and bundled them together. "Been all right working out with you, Hansen, but now I gotta go."

"Why don't you try coming over to play in *my* yard?" I put a sneering edge of contempt in my voice that stopped him in his tracks. Maybe I didn't understand him completely, but I knew there was no way he'd take that tone from some upcaste boy of questionable masculinity. He looked at me over his shoulder.

"Your yard?"

My heart pounded, and I fought to keep the tremors out of my voice. "Yeah, tough guy." I flipped Chandra's access card between my fingers like a stage magician. "You're so damn tough in your specialty, come try *mine*."

"What's that you've got there?"

"It's an access card that'll get me into the Virtual Acting suite after hours."

A flame of interest kindled within his eyes. "Y'know, I start Virtual Acting a week from Friday ..."

I shrugged. "Here's the difference between us. This Conservatory is loaded with Combat students who can stomp you without raising a sweat-

"You think so?"

I ignored him and went on. "-but there is no one, *no one*, who can beat me in a VA suit. I'm the best there is. Check the records, if you want: I'm the best there has ever been. You dish it easily enough, Michaelson. Can you take it?"

Hari, I hoped, was that one kid in every neighborhood who'll take any dare, no matter how dangerous, the one who never runs from a fight, especially when the odds are against him. And I really thought that with my coaching, he might pace through Virtual Acting with high enough marks to push him over the top for graduation. I gave him a grin that lied: it said I didn't really care one way or the other. It was a grin that dared him to take me up on it, and it was a grin that dared him to back down. It was a grin that kept

him from noticing I was holding my breath.

My future teetered on his answer.

He squinted at me like he could read my mind. Then he said, "After hours, huh? Like when would that be?"

"Say, 2200?"

"I'll be there?"

He walked out of the hand-to-hand room without a backward glance, so he didn't see me fall to my knees and thank the gods for my deliverance.

7

I rubbed my stinging eyes as I threaded through the departing Combat students toward the VA suite. I'd been pushing a ragged edge of exhaustion; in addition to healing from my surgeries, recovering from the workouts I'd had with Hari, and constant worry over my future, I had course work of my own to complete. My extra term consisted of studies in the history and culture of the First Folk, not to mention their hideously elliptical, metaphoric, and inflected language. To make it worse, they had no written histories, since all First Folk have flawless eidetic memories and no Actor had successfully infiltrated their society; all I had to study from was second- and thirdhand accounts full of cultural references that I didn't understand and couldn't look up. Like the Actors who had gone before me, I'd be playing an elf who has-for one reason or another-chosen to move through the human world, but still it frustrated me until my head spun.

So I was in no mood for neanderthal crap. The departing Combat students laughed and joked among themselves as they lumbered along the hall like elephants, but less gracefully; I did my best to dodge between the swinging elbows of these two-meter behemoths.

*They*were all heading for their dorms, or for the venerable rathskeller-except for one, an enormous one with shoulders like wrecking balls. His back was to me, and he seemed to be shaking his fist at someone I couldn't see around his titanic chest. A sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach told me it was probably Hari.

The enmity between the Conservatory's Combat and Magick students is, I think, part of a long historical tradition, stretching all the way back to at least the nineteenth century's rivalry between student athletes and student scholars. They see us as effeminate bookworms, and we regard them as meatheaded apes who think with their pectorals. The situation here is a bit different, though. Most of what we study here prepares us, in one way or another, to kill people.

This colors your thinking-to put it mildly-and raises the stakes in any confrontation far beyond a little humiliation. From time to time, people get hurt-usually, the Magick students. We trainee adepts are mostly helpless without the differing laws of physics on the far side of the Winston Transfer. The Combat students train here in skills that work exactly the same on Earth as on Overworld.

And they're *allhuge*.

So my heart stuttered a little as I approached. The crowd had thinned to emptiness, and the last of their voices faded down the hallway. Now I could hear what the neanderthal said.

It was that guy from the weight room, Ballinger. He hulked over Hari and jabbed at him with a finger the size of a sausage. "We'll see how funny you are, you little bastard. One of these days, when I catch you on the grounds. We'll see."

A strange, manic light shone in Hari's eyes that looked nothing like fear. "Fuck off, Ballinger. I'm busy. I'll kill you later."

Ballinger's ham-sized fist tangled itself in Hari's shirt and pinned him to the wall. "You want to say that again?"

I've seen this kind of confrontation before; a Magick student gets tired of the constant harassment and finally decides to fight back. This is the one where he gets hurt. Other times, I've hung back, to help the poor guy to the infirmary. Or if I saw the chance, sometimes I'd step between and try to defuse the situation. But this time

I caught Hari's eye and tipped him a wink ... then I got down on my hands and knees right behind Ballinger's ankles.

I don't know. Maybe it was from spending a week with Hari, fighting with him, breathing his air. Maybe he had infected me, somehow; maybe I was coming down with a bad case of Michaelson.

Hari got the biggest, most honestly happy grin I'd ever seen on his face. "What's the best season for a vacation, Ballinger?"

"Huh?"

"Fall, I think. Have a nice trip."

He rapped the inside of Ballinger's elbow to bend his arm, then pushed off from the wall. Ballinger went down over my back with the slow majesty of a toppling redwood. He hit whack-on his upper spine with a thunderous crash that shook the floor, and he lay there, stunned. Before I could get up, Hari skipped around me and kicked him with shocking force in the side of his head; Ballinger groaned and tried to cover, rolling weakly into a fetal position.

I got to Hari and shoved him off balance as he chambered for a kick at the back of Ballinger's neck. "Stop it, Hari! You'll kill him!"

He batted me aside. "Fucking*right* I will-

Professional Hammet-the Virtual Acting instructor-came limping out the door on his mechanized legs just then and saved Ballinger's life. All he did was put himself in Hari's way until Hari got control of himself again; not even Hari would risk the consequences of striking an instructor.

Hammet was a retired Actor, an ex-swordsman who was far too bitter and generally crusty to tolerate any bullshit from anybody, especially not Ballinger when he tried to whine about Hari beating him up. Any Combat student who couldn't handle a couple Magick pussies wasn't worth his time. He wasn't interested in writing us up for fighting-too much goddamn trouble, filling out reports-but he also wasn't about to allow any crap to go on in the vicinity of his VA suite. He sent Ballinger one way and us the other. Ballinger stumbled off, muttering under his breath and giving us murderous looks over his shoulder. I, on the other hand, flashed Chandra's access card.

Hammet didn't like the idea of letting anyone into the VA suite unsupervised, but he couldn't argue with Chandra. A quick screencall to the Chairman confirmed that I hadn't stolen the card, and Hammet reluctantly let us in. We slipped inside, and I closed the door behind us.

"Jesus, Hari" I said, leaning against the door. "That was too close. That was too scary. You could have *killed* him! Hari, your temper-that was frightening, seeing you that angry?"

Hari sighed; his shoulders slumped and he sank into a cross-legged tailor's seat on the floor. "What makes you think I was angry?" "Well, Jesus-"

"You should have let me kill him. It was my best chance. Next time I won't be able to catch him alone."

I stared, openmouthed.

He shrugged at me. "This thing between Ballinger and me, it's been building for a while."

"You provoked it," I said breathlessly. "You *wanted* that fight"

"Kris, it's him or me. If it'd been me on that floor, we wouldn't be having this little talk. Or any talk?"

"Drop the melodrama, Hari. So you've bumped chests with the guy once or twice, so what?"

He made a chopping motion with his hand. "You're Business, Kris. This is a Labor thing." He curled his fingers into a fist and stared at his knuckles like they were an unpaid invoice he couldn't cover. "Ballinger, he's from Philly's inner city. Him and me, we understand each other."

"I don't accept that. I can't accept that." But even as I said it, I found myself staring at his knuckles, too, which were mostly just knots of scar tissue like wads of old chewing gum.

"You don't have to. You're from a whole different world, Kris. That's why, once we get out of this toilet, I'm gonna be a famous Actor, and you're gonna be an elf-looking corpse."

He pushed himself to his feet. "I thought you were going to show me how you can whip shit on me in a VA suit."

8

I spent a few minutes in the claustrophobic cubicle with Hari, helping him calibrate the inducers. The feedback suit is simple enough; it's mostly mechanical-it squeezes and pokes and shakes you or whatever. But the induction helmet takes some getting used to.

This is based on the same technology that allows first-handers in the Studio Adventure Rooms to share an Actor's sense/experience in real time. Calibration is really a pretty simple process, a matter of tuning the helmet to make a black dot coalesce on a white field, then stretch to a line, and spread into a well-focused version of the Studio logo; an analogous process takes white noise down to a pure tone, et cetera. It's easier in the VA suite than in the Studio, in fact the inducers here don't have to deal with scent, and the touch/pain data and kinesthesia is all handled by the feedback suit.

This kind of calibration is easy once you've done it a few times; it's practically second nature for anyone of a reasonable level of birth, but Hari was a Laborer, and so of course he'd never been inside a Studio

and had never in his life adjusted an induction helmet. It made him edgy and snappish; he ended by slapping blindly at my hands-the induction helmets have eye shields to prevent actual vision from interfering with the neural stimulation-and telling me to get the fuck off him.

After I left his cubicle I went to the instructor's station, three broad curving banks of keys stacked like a steam organ. Four screens loomed over my head, where the VA computer would display multiple points of view for the benefit of the rows of empty seats in the Aud behind me.

I sank onto the bench, lowered my head onto arms folded across the lowest bank of keys, and gave myself over entirely to shaking.

I read once, somewhere, that the way you know you've grown up is when your future death becomes a stone in your shoe: when you feel it with every step. I kept seeing the corridor ceiling, as though I had lain where Ballinger did; I couldn't stop thinking about how easily, almost carelessly, Hari could have taken his life. I saw myself on Overworld, walking along a city street: in the vision a man stepped out of an alley and drove a knife into my throat without a word-no demand for money, no snarl of threat, no chance to prepare myself.

No chance.

I've heard that your heels kick, that you convulse and shit on yourself when you die by violence. *Ifelt* it, again and again, feeling my own heels kick helplessly, far deeper than imagination, feeling it with the astonishing vividness of my flashes.

When I first started working with Hari, I'd felt like a lion tamer working with new cats. If I showed no fear, did nothing to trigger those predatory reflexes, I'd be safe. I'd felt even moderately heroic, kind of proud of myself, because I thought that by sheer force of character I could shove my life into shape. I could help Hari, I could beat Chandra, and I would sally forth into my vague and misty though certainly glorious Acting career.

But I sat there shaking because *there is no safety*.

Someday, you say the wrong thing to some random Hari Michaelson and an instant later you're on the floor choking out the last of your breath.

And it wasn't Hari that frightened me, even now; it was the world he lived in, the way I'd begun to see my life through his eyes. It was his intimate understanding of the fragility of my life, of his life, of anyone's and that he just didn't care.

And he wasn't unique; he wasn't even rare. Our Labor undercastes spawn endless Hari Michaelsons. Now, I began to understand what Hari meant when he said I "don't have it."

But did it matter? Without Overworld, did I *want* to live?

I keyed the default setting, then entered my own cubicle and quickly dressed. I needed no calibration; the computer recognized my neural field as soon as I keyed my helmet, and it automatically loaded my file.

The Meadow took shape around me, gently rolling grassy waves that stretched to the horizon in all directions. The sky above was cloudless and startlingly blue, and the sun hung motionless. This is the most basic level, often used for "duels" and magickal practice of all sorts. I had spent a lot of hours in this

meadow. The soft ground is forgiving to knees bent in meditation, and no cloud ever passes before the sun.

The generic-featured manikin that represented Hari stood about four meters away. He stepped toward me, then stopped and looked around; suddenly he knelt and ran his fingers through the grass. "Wow."

"Yes, I know. Impressive, huh?"

"Wild. Hard-core wild." His planar features showed no expression, but I could hear the *grin* in his voice. "You look kind of faggy."

I shrugged with a sigh. I'd programmed my file to bring up features that looked more or less the way I would after my surgeries were completed: thick, close-cropped hair of platinum, elegantly delicate bone structure around large golden eyes, extravagantly pointed ears like a lynx. Maybe I'd overdone it a little.

He came closer. "You know, I've never seen you without that white mask on. Is this what you look like?"

"I might, eventually," I told him. "I'm not sure. I won't find out for another ten weeks."

He nodded. Suddenly I wished I could see his expression. "All right," he said. "What now?"

I took a deep breath. I'd been working for a solid week to bring him to this point; now that we were here, I had butterflies, a twinge of ... I don't know. Stage fright, maybe.

Maybe I was afraid he could beat me at this, too.

"No spells for this one," I said. "I'm going to take *iteasy* on you. I should be able to whip you just fine using only Flow. Bring yourself to mindview. The computer will sense the pattern in your neural field and start to show you simulated Flow currents. You should also see my Shell."

His manikin closed its eyes, and its thumbs and first two fingers of each hand came together. I, of course, no longer needed the Three Finger technique to shift to mindview-breath control and a simple act of will tuned my consciousness to the proper level. It worried me that Hari, ten days from his VA seminar, still needed physical cues.

The worry vanished in mindview; while working magick, it's impossible to worry. The function of the advanced meditative techniques taught at the Conservatory is to focus the whole mind, even beyond the surface of consciousness, fully and without distraction upon the desired magickal effect. After two years of practice I could tune my mind like a surgical laser.

I've heard it said that every mage sees the Flow in terms of his or her own personal metaphor: as streams of light or a ghostly river, as long glowing strings coiling and uncoiling as they twist through the air, as floating globes of energy like ball lightning; I won't find out what mine will look like until I get to Overworld. The VA suite simulates Flow as shimmering lattices of force, over which scroll pulses of greater brightness or differing colors in the direction of the current.

His Shell looked pretty standard: an auralike netting of lines. It pulsed subtly in time with his heart and flickered like heat lightning around his hands and feet. I watched the Flow, waiting for him to start pulling.

His eyes opened, and he murmured reverentially, "I see it."

I let out a slow, whistling breath that I hadn't realized I'd been holding. "All right. I know this is new to you. I'll give you ten seconds to pull enough current to defend yourself."

He stretched out his hand, upward toward the thickest part of the current, and his Shell extended a slow-moving pseudopod that touched the shimmering net and opened itself to power. The Flow swirled toward him, its stream deepening as it whirlpooled energy into Hari's Shell. His gesture indicated a future problem: an adept who needs his hands to pull is easily disabled-but this could be ignored today.

I counted a slow ten to myself, then another five, while I watched Hari's Shell spin up into ever-higher levels, brighter and brighter and scaling up the spectrum toward violet. He'd feed energy into his Shell until he could hold no more, then lash out at me with undifferentiated power. This is the crudest and least dangerous form of magickal combat, rather like fencing with foam-rubber paddles, but it's a pretty good place to start.

I didn't trouble to pull; he couldn't hurt me.

I said, "Begin whenever you're-"

He fired on me, as I'd known he would. More than ready for his clumsy stream of power, my Shell not only deflected it but spun it swirling around my chest to slingshot back at him. What had approached me as a ragged head-sized stream returned as a focused javelin that punched through his Shell into the pit of his stomach and doubled him over.

"You'll have to do better than that." I hadn't even moved.

He tried again, and again, with similar results, but with each attempt he closed the gap between our virtual selves by a step or two. From this perspective, in the detached calm of mindview, his intentions were transparent. He intended to step outside the rules once again: these clumsy Flow bolts were only cover, to get him close enough to rush me.

I opened my Shell and pulled.

Hari had tapped into a Flow current, diverted some of it for his use; *I created* Flow currents-those shining lattices of force swirled into my Shell like the funnel of a tornado reaching down from a thunderhead. From where I stood to the visible horizon, all Flow drained toward me. My skin sang with power.

When Hari leaped at me, I let him have it.

Flow doesn't interact directly with the material world until it is patterned by the mind of a spellcaster; in its basic state, it only affects the Shell, altering the matrices of energy that surround material objects, especially living ones. About the worst you can do with raw Flow is give somebody a bad charley horse. I gave Hari seven of them.

His arms and legs, his chest and belly and back all cramped convulsively in midleap. He gave out a strangled croak and collapsed at my feet.

I stepped a prudent distance away from him before I let him up.

"That was too easy," I told him. "I'm a better fighter than you are a spellcaster. First off, if you ever want

to be good at this, you'll have to improve your reach. Right now, your Shell stops at your hands and feet. But your Shell can have any size and shape that you wish, if you properly visualize it. Start by reaching for Flow without using your hands."

Hari's manikin still sat in the soft virtual grass, arms wrapping knees. He looked up at me, and I wished I could read an expression on those blank features. "This's been fun, Kris. I've been a good sport, and I let you whip me Now I gotta go." He stood up and his hands went to his head, feeling for the cutoff.

"Letme?" I sneered. "Like you could have stopped me."

He sounded tired. "Yeah, you're right. I'm not good at this. But I will be." "I'd say so. Shit, Hari, with my help, you could be great."

He stopped. His head swiveled toward me, and he neither moved nor spoke for a long time. I began to sweat inside the VA suit, wondering what was going on inside his head.

Finally, he spoke. "You think I'm a fucking idiot, don't you?" My mouth worked, speechless. I forced out, "Hari, I-

"You think that because you're Business, and I'm Labor, you can think rings around me, you can manipulate me and push me around and I'll never even know it?"

Suddenly I became acutely glad that Hari's real, physical body was two doors away in the VA suite. "That's not true-

"Drop it. I've bought too much of your shit already." His manikin stepped up to mine. "I don't much mind you thinking you're smarter than me. It might even be true?"

It's unquestionably true, I thought.

"What bothers me," he went on, "is that you think you're smarter than me *because* you're upcaste. Like, if I had any brains at all, I would have known enough to be born into a better family."

"It's all about caste to you, isn't it?" I said, turning to the attack. You couldn't deal with Hari by going defensive; it brought out his killer instinct like a guard dog that smells fear. "That's your answer to everything?"

"I don't need answers," he said, rising and turning as if to leave. "I don't need to know why you've been all over me this past week or two; I don't care if it's some upcaste liberal befriend-the-Labor-punk project, or an anthro experiment, or you've developed a taste for my asshole. It doesn't matter. You're trying to con me, and I'm tired of it. Shit, mostly I'm tired of you thinking you're getting away with it."

"Y'know," I said slowly, "your street-butch act goes only so far." "Hah?"

"Why are you still here? No matter how good your exit line is, it only works if you actually exit."

"Yeah," he said, reaching up for the cutoff switch on his sleeve, but I was ready for him: the instant I finished speaking I drew the slow, controlled breath and summoned mindview, and I gave him a cramp in that arm that would stun a horse.

He grunted.

"I'm not ready for you to go, yet," I said.

He dropped his hand and fixed his manikin's blank stare on me, and I could imagine all too well the homicidal gleam that would be in his black eyes right now. "Don't jump in this shitpool, Hansen. You don't swim well enough?"

"Cut it out, will you? I'm not Ballinger-you don't have to intimidate me to prove you're a man."

"Don't pretend you understand."

"I'll tell you what I understand. I understand that *you are going to fail*. Do you understand that? You're going to fail. You will never see Overworld. You will never be an Actor. You will be some meaningless shit-shoveling Laborer for the rest of your life. You will always have to suckass the upcasters-and *everybody is upcaste of you, Hari?*"

He shrugged and looked away; he knew, or at least suspected, that I was telling the truth, and he couldn't face it. "Why do you care? What's it to you if I live or die?"

"Nothing. I don't give a rat's ass what happens to you," I said. "What I care about is getting there myself. You get it? Yeah, you're a project. Chandra assigned me here. I've got the word of Chandra himself that if you don't graduate, I'll never even get to take the examinations!"

"Then I guess you got a problem; he said, and flicked his cutoff switch before I could react.

His manikin vanished; I was left alone in the virtual world, staring at the vacancy where my hope had been.

9

I don't remember much of that night.

Lurking somewhere in the back of my brain are vague recollections of coming back to myself again and again out of daydreams of Overworld, sitting at my desk in my dorm room or wandering vaguely on the darkened campus lawns, through tangled native scrub the color of corpse flesh in the moonlight.

I couldn't get a handle on what had happened, not really; whenever I wasn't actively reminding myself that my life was over, I stopped believing it. I couldn't make myself understand that I'd really blown it this time, that some fundamental incapacity in my nature had thrown a wall into my path and I'd dashed out my brains against it.

It was as though I'd spent so many dreaming hours on visions of Overworld that my mind automatically turned to them, despite the cold fact that I'd never see those skies, never breathe that air, never come closer to the surge of true magick through my nerves than the pale tingle of a VA suit's tawdry replication.

And every time I did remember, each time I forced that knowledge back through the muddy strata of my rebellious mind, I had to wade through each level of muck again, one at a time: cursing Chandra, cursing Hari, cursing my father, the Conservatory, the Studio itself, until I finally slogged through to the truth.

It was my fault.

It's crushing, when you've made it through twenty years or so of your life, when you first find yourself against a wall you can't climb. Gifted in caste as well as genetics, I had wealth and status and looks and brains and athleticism, and I could always find a way to get what I wanted: grades, girls, friends, whatever. Until I found the one thing I couldn't live without.

It was a hell of a time for my first failure.

I'd made a fatal error with Hari, and the worst of it was, I still couldn't figure out what I should have done to make things work out any better. I mean, sure, thousands of plans and ideas poured into my mind that night, limitless and swirling, funneled from the stars by a quiet maelstrom of the chill Aegean air, all equally futile-I should have done *this*, I could have tried *that*, why didn't I think of this-until finally it was morning and I hadn't slept at all. I stopped by my room just long enough to dry-swallow a couple of caffeine pills, then I stumbled off to class, to spend the next few hours, the next few days, pretending that my life wasn't over.

At least I didn't have any trouble staying awake. I couldn't have slept if you hit me with a rock.

Sometime during that hopeless blur of days, Chandra called me into his office again. I don't remember what he said or what I replied; I think, at that point, all I could do was bluff. With my father's voice whispering advice and scorn alternately in my ear, I sneered at my executioner. *Show no weakness to the undercastes*, I thought. *Fuck him. If he had any brains at all, he'd have known enough to be born into a better family.* That phrase kept ringing inside my head, again and again.

On top of everything else, I had to live with the knowledge that Hari despised me.

In some strange and inexplicable way, that hurt nearly as much as the rest put together. His harsh judgment gnawed at me like a hungry dog worrying a bone. Maybe it was because I was accustomed to the affection of my peers and the respect of those below me; maybe I was appalled that a Labor thug would presume to judge me at all.

Maybe it was because I felt like he was more *real* than I was.

Something about his Labor life, his street life, gave him what looked to me like a mystic connection to some level of existence at which I could only peer from the outside, through streaked and darkened glass. He was right: I'd never understand, not really. I wasn't sure I wanted to.

I was sure that I wanted his respect more than I'd ever wanted *any* thing, short of a Transfer ticket to Overworld.

A few days passed in this fog of mingled self-pity and self loathing. I checked my messages obsessively, hoping for any word that he'd relented; all I got were nagging whines from girls who wondered why I hadn't called them back. I didn't try to call him, or catch up with him at any of his classes; that would have been too pathetic, even for me.

One morning I woke with something resembling my old resolve, and without even stopping for breakfast or a shower I jogged across campus to the gym, foggily wondering if I might find Hari there.

I had no idea what I would say to him if I found him. I suppose I was half planning to fall to my knees and hope the pathetic blankness of my postsurgical mask might soften his clockwork Labor heart.

It was a stupid thing to do; if I'd been thinking clearly, I wouldn't have come within a klick of the gym in

the morning. Before noon, that's where the neanderthals gather to flex their muscles and sniff each other's assholes.

Hari wasn't there, of course. He was too wise for this, too experienced to be caught out like a young rabbit upwind of a wolf pack. I strolled into the weight room like I belonged there, and it wasn't until I met Ballinger's eyes, small and red and hungry like a bear's, that I understood how stupid I had been.

Then I made my second mistake of the morning: I turned and tried to walk out of there coolly, with a show of calm confidence. Even though my heart roared in my ears, I would not show fear before these hyperthyroid pinheads. Hari would have been smarter; he would have understood how much trouble he was in.

He would have bolted like a scalded cat, and got away.

I made it through the fluted arch, and past the door from the gym's main hall, and was congratulating myself on my narrow escape when a huge hand grabbed my hair and slammed me against the wall.

The corridor spun around me; grey patches floated raggedly through my vision. Ballinger towered over me like a giant, like a dinosaur, incomprehensibly powerful. Half his face was still swollen and purplish yellow from Hari's kick, and there was nothing human in his eyes.

I sagged against the wall, trying to catch my breath, and Ballinger's mouth split in what he probably thought looked like a smile. "Hey, aren't you Kris Hansen?" he said, his voice rough with mock awe. "Pleased to meet you, you littlefaggot."

Then he hit me, casually, a kind of paternal slap, just to establish our relationship. His open palm struck the side of my neck and dubbed me spinning to the floor. I skidded a little ways, and I curled up into a ball and lay there, gasping at the shower of stars inside my head.

"Have a nice trip," he said. "Bet you thought that was pretty funny, didn't you? I know *I* did. Shit, I'm *still* laughing."

He tangled his fist in the front of my tunic and hauled me up dangling above the floor. He set my back against the wall and leaned on his fist to pin me there, driving the breath from my guts. He put his other hand up under my chin and started to force my head back, and up, against the slicing pressure of my collar at the back of my neck, the numbing yoke of the tunic tearing down on my shoulders. I pulled at his arm, which felt like stone under my useless fingers, and I punched weakly at his face, with nothing but the meager strength of my scrawny arm behind it, and all I could think of was that Tallman's hand-to-hand combat classes, and Hari's training, and my wit and good humor and brains and my record as the top Battle Magick student in the history of the Conservatory, everything I am, everything I will ever be, all came down to the tensile strength of my cervical ligaments. Nothing in the universe was as important right now as whether or not my neck was stronger than Ballinger's arms—and I knew it wasn't. I could hear the creaking and popping of my neck giving way. Stretching wires of pain sang all the way down into my toes.

And I was wrong about his eyes: they weren't hungry like a bear's. What I could see from point-blank was an *impersonal* hunger, an abstract and dispassionate lust.

They were hungry like Chandra's.

This wasn't about *me* at all; it was about him. He was going to kill me just to make a point. To prove

something to Hari, and to himself.

I'd done one foolish thing-one thoughtless, fatal act. When I'd dropped to my knees behind him, I'd mixed into a situation I didn't understand. Now I was going to die for it. I couldn't even plead for my life; the pressure of his hand held my jaw shut and cut off my wind.

Then suddenly, blessedly, the pressure slacked and I could breathe again, and I found myself staggering under my own weight as he let me go. It took a few seconds for me to understand what had happened. There were people around us, and an instructor-I think it was Tallman, but I don't remember for sure-and Ballinger was laughing and joking with them and cheerfully pretending that he and I had just been horsing around. The instructor and his group of students must have come into sight in the corridor just in time to save my life.

Somebody asked me if I was all right, and I choked out some kind of lie. "Yeah, yeah, Ballinger just plays kind of rough, that's all."

I could have filed a complaint against him, sure, but the corridors don't have the same kind of security camera coverage that the rooms do; we were in a blind spot, and probably the worst trouble I could have gotten him in was a reprimand and a few days of push-ups and extra laps.

As they moved past us toward the gym, Baffinger leaned over to me and spoke softly. "I'm gonna find you, Hansen. Nobody does me like you did, you hear me? And you tell that faggot Michaelson that I'm gonna find him, too. And then I'm gonna show both you pussies how we do shit over here in Combat School."

And that's what gave me the idea, right there; it came like a sudden rent in a storm cloud, a shaft of brilliant sunlight straight into my brain, and I thought, *All right why not?*

"Sure, I'll tell him," I said, grinning behind my mask, the surge of adrenaline making me forget how scared I was. "I'll tell him all you really want is a chance to suck his cock."

And in the half second while what I'd said percolated through twelve layers of solid bone to reach his walnut-sized brain, I kicked him in the balls.

His eyes bulged out, and his mouth twisted open to release a strangled hiss. He reached for me as he doubled over, but I ducked under his hand and ran like hell. He might have come after me for a few steps, but I'm quick and he was hurt. He didn't have a chance.

From behind me as I ran, I clearly heard derisive laughter from the other Combat students. Even through his pain, I'm sure Ballinger heard it, too.

10

I didn't make the mistake of assuming Ballinger was stupid just because he was big. I didn't know whether or not he was popular with the other Combat students; I assumed he was. I assumed that any Combat student who spotted me anywhere on campus would take the news back to him.

Only five students in the Conservatory were undergoing elving surgeries that term; it wasn't like I could wear a disguise. For nearly a week I was extremely careful about where I went and when I went there: I cut some classes, stayed late at others, kept my movements meticulously erratic, and kept in sight of crowds whenever possible.

Another mistake I didn't make was to try dealing with Ballinger rationally, to tell him I thought he was overreacting to what was, essentially, nothing but a schoolboy prank. I understood that the next time he caught me alone, he was going to kill me. I understood that no amount of logical argument, or threat of legal reprisal, would change this fact.

Besides, I didn't think he *was* overreacting. Hari and I, we'd challenged his manhood. A Labor kid like Ballinger, manhood was all he had. He'd defend it to the death.

Even his own.

I didn't need to wonder from where this understanding came; I knew it clearly. I was starting to think like Hari.

I left messages for Hari every day of that week, but he was still ducking me. The few times I spotted him around campus, he'd go the other way, heading places I didn't dare to follow—lonely places, like the windswept crags above the beaches. I had to get to him, though; I needed a place I could corner him, and I needed a way to convince him to listen.

On the morning of his first Virtual Acting seminar, I was waiting outside the door of the VA suite when Hari came walking up. He walked in the midst of a steady stream of Battle Magick students, but as usual, the tangled darkness of his demeanor made him look like he was alone. He stopped when he saw me down the hall, but I knew he'd chew off his own arm before he'd skip VA. He shook his head disgustedly and came toward me.

I could read his walk well enough to know that he was planning to brush past me without a word, counting on the other Battle Magick students to keep us apart. I stepped out to meet him and stiff-armed him in the middle of his chest.

He looked down at my hand as though he could wither it with a

glance, then he met my eyes. "You don't want to be touching me, Hansen." I matched his tone as best I could. "I have news for you, Hari." "Fuck your news. Move your hand or I'll break your arm."

The last of the BM students filed into the VA suite; we were alone now in the corridor.

"Hari, just listen for one second, will you?"

"You're the one who's not lis—"

I popped him across the mouth, a good smooth right hook with my open palm, not too hard but with my hip behind it to drive the follow-through, just the way Tallman teaches it. He staggered across the corridor, off balance, and caught himself on the wall.

He bared his teeth. "Do you have any idea how dead you are?"

He delivered the line pretty well, but I knew his heart wasn't really in it; if he'd meant it, we wouldn't be talking.

"You want to kill me?" I said with a shrug. "Get in line."

"Yeah, I heard about you and Ballinger." He spat on the floor, then scowled at the pink trace of blood in his saliva. "That 'enemy of my enemy' shit doesn't fly with me, so don't bother. It was a stupid thing to do."

"No, it wasn't," I told him. "It was the smartest thing I've done so far. It's so smart it's going to get us both graduated with honors, and on our way to Overworld."

"Yeah, swell. I'm late for class."

"Can't have that," I said. "Hammet's going to call you for the first solo simulation."

Now I finally had his full attention. His gaze sharpened. "Bullshit." I just smiled.

He stepped closer to me. "How do you know?"

"I bribed him for it." I chuckled right into his astonished face. "What's the point of being rich, if you don't use money to get what you want?"

He took another step, now close enough that I could smell coffee on his breath. His eyes glittered like the edge of a knife. "Why?"

"It's because of this idea I have. To solve our problem."

Faintly, though the door at my back, I heard Hammet launch into his classic Risk Lecture: *"You, as Actors, have a precisely defined role, irrespective of whether you swing a blade or throw a lightning bolt, joust or heal the sick. It is purely and simply this: Your function in society is to risk your life in interesting ways."*

Hari heard it, too, and he glanced past my shoulder with thinly veiled longing. I didn't need to flash on him to know that he was wondering if he'd ever get the chance to do exactly that.

"All right," he said grimly. "All right, I'm listening."

"No time to explain right now. When he calls you, he'll put you into the Waterfront. I've been through this sim, and it's a tough one. Don't use any magick."

No surprise, no incomprehension showed on his face; he watched me with transcendent concentration. "Why not?"

"Because you're not good enough, Hari. Hammet will make you look like a fool. He's a sadist; humiliating his students is the only real pleasure he takes in life."

"But if I don't use magick-"

"Just don't, you hear me? Magick is exactly what they're *expecting*. You're a shitty thaumaturge. Stick with what you know."

I studied him, trying to see if I was making any impression, but he was as blank as stone. I shook my head. "Get in there. Hammet will be calling you any second."

"Kris-"

"No time, Hari. You want to talk about it, I'll be at my usual table over lunch. Now go."

II

I sat in the back of the Aud, behind the other BM students, and watched Hari on three of the four big screens in front of the banked keyboards of the instructor's station. The three views showed him from behind, before, and above; the fourth didn't show him, but instead was Hari's POV.

He moved with some assurance through the Waterfront; he, like the other students, had had two dry runs the week before, to become accustomed to moving in the feedback suits and to get the feel of pulling the simulated Flow. On the screen, he looked again the generic-featured manikin I'd fought in the Meadow, dressed in loose, nondescript tunic and pants.

The Waterfront was another standardized encounter environment, modeled on the Terana docks on the west coast of the Ankhanan Empire. A tangled maze of clapboard shops, taverns, and brothels crowded what once were broad rights-of-way between massive stone-built warehouses. The streets teemed with people of all descriptions as well as a liberal sprinkling of the subhuman races of Overworld, but these were only for atmosphere. Hari could actually interact only with Hammet's TM, five retired Actors who waited in feedback suits of their own, in other cubicles of the VA suite. They would take on the roles of the other characters in this encounter.

The first Waterfront encounter is pretty simple. As he's walking along, the student hears feminine screams from a nearby alley; when he investigates-which he will, as avoiding the encounter is not an option if he wants to pass VA-he sees a man using a stout stick to beat a woman. The student has three spells to call upon: a Minor Shield, a fairly powerful Telekinesis, and, of course, the basic Flow bolt that any spellcaster can use.

What most students do-what I did, in fact-is self-righteously order the man to lay off, and when he refuses, to enforce the order with magick, either Shielding the woman or attacking the man with the TK or a Flow bolt.

This is where your average student gets stomped, because there isn't just one man, there are four: one behind him, and two more lying low on the one-story rooftops to either side of the alley. As soon as the student enters the trancelike state of mindview, all three of them jump him.

Now, don't get me wrong: You *can* fight them. The street and alleyway are even designed with a number of features that can be improvised into weapons by a resourceful student, like some broken jugs and splintered timbers, loose cobblestones as big as your fist that can be thrown by TK, and a couple of nooks you can back into and seal with a Shield.

In the end, though, they'll get you. Even if you manage to fight off all four-which, as far as I know, no one has ever done successfully, except me-the woman herself is part of the plan, and she'll knife you at her first opportunity. That's where I lost.

The whole purpose of this encounter, it seems to me, is to humiliate the student who goes through it-and to impress upon all the BM kids how vulnerable they are when they enter mindview. You can't win the fight; what Hammet does, afterward, is talk about how you could have made losing more entertaining.

Hammet's first clue that Hari's encounter wasn't going to go entirely according to plan probably came when Hari peered around the corner of the alley and saw the man beating the woman with the stick. His

manikin's face was, of course, expressionless, but Hari's distinctive mutter came over the Aud's PA rich with scorn.

"Oh, that's original," he snorted. "Give me a break."

He shook his head and shuffled his feet a little; I thought he was searching for a balanced stance to enter mindview, and my heart sank. But he had other things on his mind: his shuffling feet had found one of those loose cobbles, and he bent and picked it up.

This is where the student steps forward and utters some fatuous variation on the time-honored "*Stop, you fiend! Unhand that woman!*" but Hari

just stood there for a moment and watched him beat her, holding the cobblestone thoughtfully.

Hammet keyed his mike. "Michaelson, what are you doing?"

"I'm intervening," came Hari's muttered reply. "That's what I'm supposed to do, right?"

'Get on with it, then.'

"All right."

He took one step forward and fired the cobble overhand. As the stone left his hand he shouted, "*Hey, asshole!*" The man with the stick turned to look, just in time to catch about half a kilo of stone full in the mouth. The impact lifted him off his feet and dumped him to the ground like he'd been hit with a bat.

Every student of Battle Magick in the Aud gasped like an affronted Leisurewoman.

"All right, I've intervened," Hari said to the air, sounding bored. "Now what?"

Some of the gasps gave way to snickers.

Hammet snarled something unintelligible, and the two men who had waited atop the single-story buildings leaped down toward Hari as though they wanted to land on him. Somehow, he'd been expecting this; he darted toward and past one of them, his arm extended *to hook* the falling man's legs out from under him. The poor guy tumbled in the air and landed hard on the back of his neck.

The other rolled with the fall and came up with a knife in his hand, but Hari had kept moving to the alley wall, where the pile of timbers stood. By the time the knife guy rolled to his feet, all he had a chance to see was a long section of two-by-four swinging down at his head. He got his arm up in time to take the blow, but it drove him back down to his knees, and Hari kicked him in the face.

By the time the fourth TA arrived, sword in hand, three men were down. Hari faced the fourth with his two-by-four angled before him like a bastard sword at garde. He hesitated, and through Hari's POV I clearly saw his gaze shift over Hari's shoulder; on the front view I saw the woman lunge toward Hari's back.

But again he was somehow ready for this; with uncanny, almost prescient assurance he slipped to one side and backhanded the two-by-four across her chest. It stopped her cold, and in that one second of stunned stillness, he dropped the board, took the knife from her opening fingers, and yanked her around in front of him as a shield, the knife against her throat.

"Drop the sword or she dies," he rasped, and I don't know if the TA believed him or not, but I did.

There was a moment of shocked silence in the Aud, then a scattering of applause, which turned to shouts of useless warning as the man Hari had felled with the rock rose up behind him and clubbed him across the back of the head.

Even then, Hari didn't fall immediately. Half stunned, he still managed to slash the woman's throat and cast her aside to turn on his attacker, but now the man he'd kicked *in* the face had risen as well, and the one who'd fallen on his head, and they all waded in on him with knives and clubs. He fought with desperate ferocity, but he couldn't handle them all at once.

They beat the crap out of him.

The feedback suits in the VA suite are loaded with failsafes; they can't do much worse than raise a welt or give you a minor bruise and a lump or two. On the other hand, the simulation programs were supposed to shut down a feedback suit when its sim takes what should be a killing or incapacitating blow.

From his keyboard at the instructor's station, Hammet had altered the simulation's parameters, to let his TM get up after they should have been eliminated—even the woman whose throat was supposed to be cut.

They spent longer than they really needed to take Hari out, battering him from one side of the virtual alley to the other and back again. They punished him as much as the feedback suit would allow, and he never made a sound. When his manikin lay stretched out and bleeding on the cobbles, Hammet ended the simulation.

He rose and keyed his throat mike. "Michaelson? You want to tell me what that was supposed to be about?"

Hari's response, muffled perhaps by the simulated unconsciousness of his manikin, sounded like something like, "*Cheating bastard ...*"

And a faint rustle of assent came from the BM kids in the seats of the Aud.

Hammet's tone went icy, and I could see the man was livid, as though he'd received a deadly insult. "Are you some kind of a joker, Michaelson? Why didn't you use any magick?"

Hari's reply was an open sneer. "What for?"

"Because that's what you *do*, you dumb shit. You're supposed to be a thaumaturge, aren't you?"

"What I am," Hari said, "is an Actor. What *Ido*, is risk my life in interesting ways, right?"

"Don't mock me, you Temp sack of shit. How do you expect to graduate from the College of Battle Magick if you can't throw a fuckingspell?"

I rose quietly in the back of the Aud; I had a feeling this argument was going to escalate in an unpleasant way, and I had already seen everything I needed to see.

This was going to work.

12

I sat alone in the dining hall. For self-protection, I chose to be in public view as much as possible, so I'd begun a habit of lingering there at mealtimes.

My friends often sat with me; I was still as popular as ever, and it was considered something of a coup in Shitschool to be seen eating at my table. None of them really understood what was happening; they all thought I was very brave, for the way I'd faced down Ballinger, and they all joked and laughed and told each other, *See? Those Combat jerks aren't as tough as they think they are. Most of them are only Labor trash, after all. Hollow men, they said smugly, congratulating themselves for their superior breeding, covered in muscle but empty inside.*

I could have told them how tough those Combat jerks are. I could have told these scions of European Business houses, these social-climbing Professionals and self-conscious Tradesmen, that those hollow Labor men are filled with a terrifying solidity.

But what's the point? *They* wouldn't believe me, not really; I had no way to bring them to the understanding that Hari had given me. They'd only think I was putting on airs, that I was being melodramatic, the same way I'd thought Hari was. I ached to find a way to lock each of these smug creeps that I used to think were my friends in a room alone with Ballinger for ten minutes.

Let them look into the eyes of that hollow man as he looms over them like a thunderhead. It'd change their fucking lives.

That noontide, after Hari's VA debut, these creeps and hangers-on had left early, and I sat alone at my table, going over Hardanger's *Primal Culture*, barely seeing the words on the screen, wondering if Hari was going to find me here.

I was slogging through the third of Hardanger's five alternate translations of the heroic epic *Dannellarii T'ffar* when Hari came through the door. Two weeks ago, maybe, I would have kept reading, to pretend to be cool and nonchalant; I had neither time nor patience for that now. I flipped the screen closed and waited for Hari to reach my table.

He had a couple lumps coming up on his face, and he approached me cautiously. "All right," he said, eyeing me with a kind of animal wariness. "I'm listening."

"Sit?" I waved an offering hand to the chair opposite, and waited while he thought it over.

Slowly, watching me, he slid into the chair. "So. What was that about? Hammet hates my guts, now"

I shrugged. "Hammet hates everybody. Don't worry about it." "They beat the shit out of me."

"Only because Hammet reset the sim parameters, and everybody in that room knew it. The story will be all over campus by tonight. Nobody beats that encounter. Nobody. Not even me. You're going to be a legend in the College of Battle Magick, Hari."

"Like you? Big fucking deal. Am I supposed to thank you for it?"

"It'll make your career; I told him. "It'll get you graduated with honors and off to Overworld."

"How am I gonna graduate when I can barely throw a fucking spell?"

"Hari, Hari, Hari," I said, shaking my head in mock pity. "I think you're the only guy who was in the Aud today who didn't get it. You don't *need* magick, Hari. Leave the spells to upcaste pussies like me, huh? You're going to graduate from the College of *Combat*."

Give him credit as a flexible thinker: he didn't scoff. He leaned back in his chair and stared through me with narrowed eyes, thinking hard. I went on, "Did you get a recording? You proved today that you can fight and win-even when you're completely overmatched. Hari, that was *five to one!* You weren't even *armed*. I've never seen anything like it, and neither has anybody else around here."

He shook his head, and his eyes went cold; I could see him talk himself out of it. "Proves nothing. That's why they call it *asimulation*, Kris."

"Yeah, I know. Chandra won't even consider it-unless we force him to."

"How do you plan to do that?"

I took a deep breath and sighed it out; for a moment I had a fleeting fancy of being on Overworld, of summoning mindview and slipping a Suggestion into Hari's unconscious mind. It was a pleasant fancy, and it gave me a warm little smile.

"The whole thing revolves around proving that you, Hari Michaelson, skinny little Labor trash Shitschool student, can take on a highly trained warrior three times your size in the real world, straight up, no rules," I began. I would have gone on, but Hari was right with me.

"You're talking about Ballinger."

I nodded. "You can bump chests with him all you want, but me?" I spread my hands. "I need this settled before he kills me. I have it worked out so we can tie the whole thing up with a ribbon, and everybody's happy."

"How do you figure?"

I held up my hand. "First, you tell me: What do you think?"

"Going over to Combat? Shit, Kris, it'll never happen. Even the *girls* over there outmass me by ten kilos. You ever been hit by somebody who is, like, double your mass?"

"Just once," I said grimly. "I didn't care for it. But we're talking about you. Forget whether you think it's possible. Do you *want* to?"

He sat there and stared through me, and didn't answer.

I leaned forward. "*I know*," I told him. "I know why you're in Battle Magick. Why you want to be an Actor. It's because, deep down, what you really like is to hurt people."

He didn't deny it. I grinned. "Do it on Earth, you're in prison, or cyborged. Do it on Overworld, you're a star."

He squinted at me.

"Sure," I went on, "BM was your best chance to get to Overworld-but not anymore. You don't have it, Hari. You're not going to make it." His lips compressed, and his face darkened.

"But, you know *why* you don't have it?" I said. "Why you'll never be an adept? I saw it all when we fought in the Meadow. Your Shell? It stops at your fists. It's because when you think about hurting people, when you really let your passion run, you don't care about magick. You want to do it *byhand*."

He picked up my notescreen and fiddled with the lid; he lowered his face, underlit by the screen's sporadic flicker as he flipped it back and forth.

"Today, in the simulation, after you threw the rock, when they all started coming at you you never even thought about pulling magick, did you? It had nothing to do with what I told you; it never occurred to you to throw a spell. You forgot, didn't you?"

"No," he said, so softly that I could barely hear him, and his eyes were hooded. "No, I didn't forget. I was just ..

"Just what?"

He met my eyes, and his face shone. He had the steady, concentrated stare of a stalking lion.

"I was having too much fun."

13

It only took three days to set up.

At the end of that time, I slipped into the men's washroom in the Language Arts building after my midterm on the western dialects of Primal-my first test of that day-and Ballinger was waiting for me.

The Language Arts shifter isn't much: four stalls, six urinals, a pair of sinks, a small supply closet. Hari and I chose it because it has only one security camera, which covers pretty much the whole space.

I stood at a urinal with my dry dick in my hand, skin crawling up my back; I was too scared to pee. When I had told him my plan, Hari had measured me with that squint he got whenever he was surprised, and murmured, "Y'know, you're betting your *life* that I can take Ballinger."

"Yeah, I am," I had told him easily enough at the time. "Or at least slow him down enough for Security to get there."

Now, though, as I stood at the urinal, the doors of all four stalls behind me opened at once, and a hand like the claw of a steam shovel took the back of my neck and forced my face into the cold tile wall, and Ballinger said, "Tone, hold the door," and suddenly I didn't have any trouble peeing at all.

He wasn't alone.

We were *sure* he'd do this by himself; why wouldn't he? We were sure he didn't think he'd need help, not against me. We were sure he wouldn't want any witnesses, damned sure.

Dead sure.

I'd been expecting, too, some of his brutal, predatory playfulness, some mock-cheerful one-liners to draw things out for a minute or two before he got down to the serious business of killing me. Instead, he bounced my face off the wall.

Stars showered behind my eyes, and my knees went slack. The washroom wobbled around me as his irresistibly powerful hands turned me to face him. He held me pinned against the wall, and his tiny bearish eyes swept contemptuously down my front to my shriveling penis. "Nah, leave your pants down," he said. "That suits."

"Ballinger," I gasped, "don't-"

He slammed me against the wall again, and the lights in the washroom went reddish brown in my eyes, and I couldn't tell if he had two friends in here, or four, or six, because I'd forgotten how to count, or even what numbers might mean.

"You shouldna made a pass at me, Hansen," Ballinger said thickly. "I coulda let that go, but then you jumped me. I hadda defend myself. It was an *accident*, that's all. I dint even really mean to hurt you."

"Ballin-"

"Shut up." His massive fist hit my short ribs like a freightliner, and something broke inside me. Blood bubbled up my throat.

"Here, you little fuck," he said, his thick fingers clawing under the edge of my plastic mask. "Let's have a look." He ripped it off my face. Some of my flesh went with it.

"Jesus," he said, *eyes* full of revolted surprise. "Dint you used to be good-looking?"

My hands went to my violated face, and he threw me to the ground. I caught myself, just barely, and my palms left bloody streaks as they skidded along the tile; gasping, I stared at these twin parallel scarlet smears as though they had some arcane meaning that could save my life.

Ballinger kicked me in the guts hard enough to lift me off the floor. When I bounced back down, he stepped back for his friends to take a turn.

I heard a wet splintering rip, like a rotting door being kicked in, but at the same instant a boot hit me in the head and darkened the world.

The last sight I clearly remember was the security camera, high up in a corner above me; its little indicator diode, which shines red to let you know it's working, was as black as a seagull's eye.

14

The thing that strikes you the most, watching the recording of the fight in the bathroom, is how *fast* Hari is, all speed and preternatural assurance, like a ballet dancer executing well-rehearsed choreography.

Even as I'm hitting the ground after Ballinger's kick, you see him fly from outside the frame, already in the air, having thrown himself into a vicious cut-block that brings his hip against the side of the nearest Combat student's knee. The knee bends sideways, making the ripping, splintering sound that I thought

was the door, and the Combat student-Jan Colon, from Madrid, I found out later-falls hard, too stunned to even guess how bad he's hurt.

One down.

Ballinger kicks me again then; he doesn't yet realize what's happening. The recording shows me still semiconscious, curled around my broken ribs. Another of Ballinger's three buddies, Pat Connor from a suburb of Dublin called Dun Laoghaire, has a weapon, a half-meter length of pipe; but even as he's turning and starting to lift it, Hari leaps into his arms, locking his legs around Connor's chest and his arm around Connor's throat. His back's to the camera; you can't see what he's doing there, but Connor hits him across the back two or three times with the pipe and Hari doesn't seem to notice.

Then Connor drops the pipe and Hari lets him go, and Connor stag-gers away, howling, his hands to his face, blood leaking through his fingers. By the time we reviewed this recording, I had learned that Hari had stuck his thumb into Connor's left eye hard enough to rip the socket muscles.

Two down.

Actually, three: Anthony Jefferson, the one guarding the door, had come into this expecting a cheerful afternoon outing, a nice, safe beating; he claimed, later, that Ballinger had told him he only planned to rough me up a little. Whatever the truth may be, he certainly hadn't planned on sticking his hand into this particular meat grinder. When two of his friends went down screaming in less than ten seconds, his nerve broke and he ran out the door, yelling for Security.

Ballinger, on the other hand

The shrieks of his friends seem to make him happy, somehow-to fill him with some inexplicable confidence and joy. He turns on Hari like a bear facing a wolverine, his huge shoulders hulking forward into a graceless wrestler's crouch; there's something of the bear as well in his loose-jointed shambling step, a slow and powerful clumsiness as though he's not used to walking on his hind legs.

Hari strikes like a rattlesnake, an unhumanly swift uncoiling that swings his shinbone toward Ballinger's knee faster than the eye can follow, a kick that will cripple him. That's when you learn that Ballinger's clumsy shamble is an act, a con, a sucker play to draw Hari in. There's a reason why Ballinger's at the top of his class.

He picks up his foot not high, a few centimeters, just enough that the kick lands harmlessly on his shin-and then falls on Hari like an undermined wall.

His weight bears them both to the ground. Ballinger's on top, and once again you can't really see what they're doing. Part of the training of Combat students is jujitsu matwork; that grunting and those liquid crunches you can hear are the sounds of bad things happening to Hari's joints.

In the background, you can see me, rolling over, trying to rise. I remember knowing that Hari was in trouble, and that I had to move; I'd like to think that I was getting up to help him, but I don't know, that may be wishful thinking.

I was probably getting up to run.

Even as I find my unsteady feet, Hari somehow frees an arm from Ballinger's smothering embrace, and his hand closes around that half-meter length of pipe that Connor had dropped. He bangs Ballinger on

the back of the head once, and then again, as though to let him know that the first one wasn't an accident. Ballinger, though, he's no amateur; instead of rolling off and giving Hari an opening for a full swing with the pipe, he snuggles his head down closer to Hari's and reaches out to gather in that free arm. But then you see him twitch, then convulse, and rear up, reaching his feet in a powerful surge that ignores the weight of Hari, who is hanging from Ballinger's face by *histeeth*

Ballinger roars and shoves him away, and blood sprays; Hari slams off a wall and caroms from a stall divider, but bounces upright like a pop-up punching bag. One of his arms hangs limp from a dislocated shoulder, and one of his legs doesn't seem able to bear much weight, and he's still *smiling* as he spits out a mouthful of Ballinger's cheek.

Ballinger lunges for him again, but now Hari has room and leverage for a full-armed swing of that pipe. The pipe hits the outside of Ballinger's forearm with a wet crunch, neatly breaking the bone, and instead of trying to recover for another swing, Hari uses the momentum to carry himself into a spin like he's delivering a backfist. Ballinger's wounded arm drops; he has no guard at all as the pipe whistles around-actually *whistles*, like a bottle when you blow across its neck-and splinters his skull just above his right ear.

Ballinger's eyes roll up, and he drops to his knees, his face utterly blank, a doll's face, a corpse's, then he pitches forward to bounce, once, on the cold tile floor.

Hari stands over him, swaying, his face burning like a torch.

By the time Security arrives, I'm in the process of striking my sole blow in this battle: I'm on my knees next to Ballinger's body, puking all over his back.

15

Later, it made us heroes, of course-especially Hari. The evidence on the Security cube was incontrovertible: he had unquestionably saved my life.

There was a discrepancy or two, though, that interested the Security investigators quite a bit. For one, they couldn't seem to figure out how Hari had gotten in through the bathroom door when it was being held by a Combat student who outmassed him by forty kilos. "I don't know," Hari repeated endlessly. "I didn't even see him. Maybe he was just standing *by* the door, instead of actually holding it."

We certainly weren't going to tell them that Hari had been hiding in the bathroom's supply closet for more than an hour, waiting.

They also couldn't seem to figure out how Ballinger had planned to get away with it, when the whole act was carried out in full view of the bathroom's security camera. They kept after us for a few days on that one, and we steadfastly proclaimed our ignorance until finally Ballinger woke up enough to answer questions in his now-thick, halting, slurred voice.

It seemed that a certain Battle Magick student, Pierson by name, had conceived a rivalry with me. Not understanding the deadliness of Ballinger's intentions, he had offered to help Ballinger get even with me by disabling a security camera in the area of his choice. After tracking my movements for a couple of days, Ballinger's cohorts had established that the Language Arts shitter would be the place to take me-I hit it every day at the same time, between classes.

When questioned, Pierson admitted the whole thing with well-acted sheepishness. Of course, he'd had

no way of knowing that Ballinger planned to do more than frighten and humiliate me; how could he? As for the security camera, he gave them a shrugging, "Guess I didn't know as much about it as I thought. All I managed to disable was the indicator diode. Kinda embarrassing, really."

Pierson came from a Professional family; both his parents are electrical engineers. He'd done it exactly the way I'd told him to-he was one of those social-climbing creeps who wanted to sit at my table-and he'd also managed to patch into the camera cable to make our own recording of the incident.

That recording was read into the Conservatory computer from an open terminal in the library and was tracelessly e-mailed to Hari's Patron, Businessman Marc Vilo, along with a note from Hari comprising some specific suggestions on how this recording might be used.

Hari and I and Pierson, we'd had our stories straight well in advance, and they weren't complicated enough to lead us into a tangle of lies; handling the Security investigators didn't even make me nervous.

It was a little different, the day the Social Police came in.

Four of them-a whole enforcement squad-came to see me, blank and anonymous behind their shapeless body armor and their mirrored helmets, to park themselves on either side of my infirmary bed and take turns asking me questions in voices flattened to absolute neutrality by the digitizers in their helmet speakers. Talking to them, I was more frightened than I'd been when Ballinger slammed my head into the wall in that bathroom.

They weren't interested in anything I might have done; they were gathering evidence against Ballinger for capital Forcible Contact Upcaste. My father was pressing charges; he thought our family lawyers might be able to find a loophole in the Conservatory's statutory caste-neutral environment. If so, Ballinger could be executed.

All the Social Police wanted was to establish that Ballinger had known I was upcaste of him. That's all. But I could barely speak to them. They scared the crap out of me.

Through it all, the only face I ever saw was my own, distorted and leering in their silvered masks. They spoke only to ask me questions, never among themselves, and each digitized voice was indistinguishable from every other.

I've always believed, along with the rest of the world, that the masks of the Social Police were designed to protect the identities of their agents, so that these agents' ability to go incognito, to infiltrate the ranks of society's enemies, could never be impaired. No Social Police officer's identity was ever made public; no Social Police officer ever appeared without his or her silver mask, shape-concealing body armor, and vocal digitizer, not even in court.

Kids like to tell each other stories that even the wives and husbands of soapies never learn the profession of their spouses; I was old enough to know that those stories had to be wild exaggerations, but now I felt shifting beneath me some underlying truth, as though the earth moved and carried me to a new way of seeing, a perspective that harshened the light of the infirmary and made the antiseptic odor of my skin and bedclothes into something mephitic and sinister.

I caught myself wondering if there was a room somewhere within the Social Police headquarters where soapies might remove their masks and be simply men and women with each other. Instinctively, I doubted it; even a moment of admitting a personal identity would somehow undermine their power-would weaken the invincible magick armor of their anonymity.

They kept pressing me on Ballinger, from one side and another, as though if they kept asking me the same question long enough they'd eventually get the answer they wanted. And I wanted to give it to them, I really did but the truth was, I didn't *know* if Ballinger really understood that I was from a Business Family. I told them that again and again, but they kept after me like a pack of dogs harrying a stag. Somehow, down inside, I had a sickening feeling that it wasn't really Ballinger they were after-that their real goal was to drag a lie out of me, a lie they could use to kill him.

They wanted him dead, sure; but more than that, they wanted me to be their *accomplice*.

This didn't come to me in a flash. Once or twice, I kind of had that half-dizzy feeling a flash gives me, but I never got anything from them. And maybe that was it; maybe that was it exactly.

Maybe I did flash on them, and there was nothing there.

16

Early that evening, not long after dinner, Chandra came to see me in the infirmary, and he brought Hari with him.

I was pretty well tubed up in the bed-on a respirator and an N drip-and a little woozy from anesthetic by-products that still lingered in my bloodstream. I'd had a couple hours of surgery, to repair the lung one *of my* broken ribs had punctured, and to fix the rupture Ballinger had kicked into my spleen. I'd gone through hours of questions from the Social Police. I was exhausted, dazed, and in a growing amount of pain, but when I saw the look on Chandra's face I felt like dancing.

He looked confused, and frightened, and old. Beaten. More than beaten: *wounded*. He looked like a gutshot deer, getting weaker without understanding the pain.

Hari rode beside him in a motorized chair, one leg splinted straight out before him to immobilize his sprained knee ligaments, and his left arm in a clear plastic shoulder cast. But if he felt *any* pain, I couldn't see it through the fierce triumph on his face.

"Hansen," Chandra said, his voice stretched thin with tense exhaustion, "I have been in teleconference with your father, and--" His face twisted bitterly. "-with Businessman Vilo."

His eyes met mine, and some kind of spasm passed over his face, leaving emptiness in its wake. "Effective tomorrow, Michaelson will have his academic credits transferred and will be enrolled as a student in the College of Combat. You ..." his voice faltered, then regathered some vague strength. "You will come before the Graduation Board in July, as scheduled. In exchange for this, your father has agreed not to press charges against poor Ballinger for Forcible Contact Upcaste, and Businessman Vilo will leave me-leave the *Conservatory-alone*."

Poor Ballinger? I thought, but had other things to say; I had prepared for this moment, and I had no intention of being gracious in victory.

"I think that's generous of him," I said. My plastic respirator mask gave my words a muffled, hollow authority. "I think that's generous of them both. I think that there is a tradition of *lax leadership* here, Administrator-and it is this failure of leadership that has fostered a permissive and violent atmosphere, where bullying and beating are more than tolerated; they are *encouraged*. I very nearly lost my life because you failed in your *fundamental responsibility*: to keep order in this institution."

It sounded good coming out, and felt even better: I sounded like my father, and I began to understand the keen pleasure of self-righteously dressing down an undercaste.

But Chandra was far from crushed; his sorrowful expression hardened. "When Vilo threatened to petition the Board of Governors for my ouster, I was tempted to laugh at him. *Let* them investigate. Let them find out the truth. I know, you see, Hansen. I know that you and Michaelson set this whole thing up. *I know.*"

Hari didn't so much as blink. My first instinct was to bluster, but I followed Hari's lead and held my expression as neutral as I could.

Chandra looked from me to Hari, then back again, and the hardness in his face melted back into weary despair. "But I don't know *why*. I don't know how this--ended up here, in the infirmary. I don't know why we'll have to find a *donoreye* for Pat Connor, why Jan Colon is undergoing reconstructive knee surgery even now. Ballinger is in a coma in Athens; the best neurosurgeon in Europe has just finished pulling splinters of his skull out of the right lobe of his brain. They say he'll probably survive, but the extent of the permanent damage won't be known for days, or weeks."

A slow, sick weight gathered within my chest.

Chandra's eyes were raw with pain.

"You have what you want. Both of you. I-I cannot stand ..." His breath hitched, then steadied. "I will have no further bloodshed. One student maimed, another crippled. A third with a fractured skull and permanent brain damage. You did this, Hansen. And you, Michaelson. And for what? To get a transfer into the College of Combat?"

He opened his hands helplessly. "Why did it have to be this way? Was there no other choice?"

I wanted to answer him, but no words came to my lips. The respirator seemed to suck air from my lungs, just as it had sucked all the moisture from my mouth. I glanced at Hari, but his face was as unreadable as a fetish mask.

Chandra shook his head, and his eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Couldn't you have *asked*?"

17

Hours became days, and weeks. Hari was released from the infirmary long before I was; by the time I saw him again, he was already established in the Combat school. Though he would never have the size and strength necessary to be competitive in the tank warfare of the lumbering, heavily armored Combat Trials, he liked to point out that no one wears armor all the time, not even on Overworld. He never bothered to train in armor, himself, and there was no man or woman on campus who would care to face him over a pair of *bokken* without it.

He spent much of his time working with Hammet and Tallman on techniques that would allow him to defeat an armored opponent, taking advantage of his superior speed and mobility to knock a man down or to close with him into the infighting range where a sword is useless and a stiletto can enter a visor, or slip beneath a gorget. He got good at it, too, as I knew he would. Never good enough to consistently beat a really gifted Combat student like Ballinger once was--but good enough that no one, not even the best, was entirely comfortable coming into the ring with him, or facing him in a VA sim.

He was a celebrity on campus, a curiosity, a traveling one-man freak show. There was no one on the island that didn't know who he was, no one that didn't want to be able to say they'd spent time with him; he began to hold court in the cafeteria, just as I once had.

He was the idol of a growing circle of awed magick students, and he became the unofficial mascot of the College of Combat. Connor and Colon took to following him around like bachelor wolves behind their pack leader; far from holding a grudge for their injuries, they would proudly point them out and tell the story of how Hari had gouged out Connor's eye, and why Colon still walked with a slight limp. All his course work improved, especially his academics. By the time the Combat Trials rolled around, the week of my Graduation Boards, it was clear that Hari would graduate near the top of his class.

I didn't grudge him any of this. He deserved it. Setup or not, Hari was a real hero. Fighting four Combat students, single-handed, had never been part of our plan-but Hari hadn't even hesitated. I never forgot that he could have just stayed in that supply closet and let them kill me.

Ballinger, though-the bone splinters had sliced into his brain. He has recovered limited use of the left side of his body, they tell me, enough to walk with a crutch strapped to his shoulder, but his eyes will not focus, and half his mouth is forever frozen in rictus, and he will never be an Actor, never go to Overworld; he'll live out his days in a Temp house in Philadelphia, on subsistence.

I almost screened him, once. I don't know what I would have told him, what I could possibly have said. There was no way to make him understand that I flashed on him in unguarded moments, every day; that every day *I became* him, in his hospital bed, incontinent, a nurse emptying his diaper into a bedpan. I became him struggling through rehab with a steel strut buckled to my shoulder to take the place of a working leg, dragging the dead half of a body that once had been my greatest pride. Feeling the twisting rivulet of drool that constantly trails from my half open lips.

Maybe I wanted to tell him that I would never forget how expensive my dream had become.

I made up my midterms, took top honors in each, as usual. I went through the rest of my surgeries, took my classes, did my course work, went on with my life.

Stayed away from people.

I took my meals in my rooms, didn't speak on campus. I drifted from class to class like a ghost. Soon enough, no one bothered to speak to me, either. My circle of creeps had a new hero to suck up to, and Hari was welcome to them.

It wasn't Ballinger's face I saw in my nightmares. It was Chandra's. It was Chandra's voice I heard, asking if there had been no other way.

Hari, though, he stuck by me. I don't think he liked me much, either; I think he felt like he owed me something, and that kept him coming around, talking to me, trying to keep me going.

It was Hari who kept telling me not to surrender to Chandra's guilt-laying game, who kept reminding me that it was Chandra who put this whole thing in motion. Chandra's speech in the infirmary, he said, had been nothing more than a weak man's attempt to avoid responsibility for the consequences of his actions. Which may have been true, but it changed the facts not at all.

I hadn't tried another way. I hadn't even thought about it.

Maybe, if I had tried, I could have saved my dream without killing Ballinger's. I had slid right into Hari's world. I had turned to violence and slaughter because it was *easier* simpler, more efficient.

More fun.

I could not pay this price for my dream. I stayed in my classes on pure inertia. Though I had told no one, not even Hari, my mind was made up. I would give up Acting. Give up Overworld. Let my dream of magick die. It wouldn't help Ballinger, of course; but it would let me sleep.

All I had to do was shitcan my Boards, and then I would never have to face this choice again. There is no second chance; if you fail before the Graduation Board, they just go ahead and send you home.

The night before I was to go in front of the Graduation Board, Hari Michaelson saved, my life again.

18

We sat in my room, sharing a liter of retsina, talking about our careers. It's traditional, at the Conservatory, for a student's friends to sit up with him the night before his Boards. The night before, you're too nervous to sleep anyway, and you need friends to keep you company.

Hari was the only friend I had left.

When his Boards came, next term, he'd have a crowd of well-wishers in his room, a party so thick you couldn't squeeze from one end to the other; that night, the two of us sat at the edges of a pool of pale yellow light from my desk lamp, drank the bitter pine-flavored wine, and talked in low voices. We talked about him, because the words that would come if we talked about me, I could not bear to hear, or speak.

"C'mon, Kris," he said, a little unsteadily, as he drained the last glass. "You really think I'll make it?"

"Hari," I said seriously, "you're a star already. Look at the way people watch you around here. Everyone knows you're going to be huge. You're like something out of a twentieth-century samurai film-or a pirate movie. This industry lives on novelty ... and it's more than that, too, You've got it, whatever *it is*. Star quality. I can see it. You can, too-I mean, think about how you, like, came *alive* when everybody started paying attention to you. It's like you're a whole different person, now. Shit, if I didn't know you so well, I'd say you were happy."

He smiled into his empty glass, his eyes fixed on some far-distant future. "Where do you think we'll be, twenty years from now? Big stars, all over the nets? Whole magazines devoted to our sex lives, that kind of shit?"

I shrugged. "You, maybe-if you live. Me? I guess I'll be VP of something in Malmo, in the family industry." I managed to say it like it didn't even hurt.

He blinked owlishly, staring at me in half-potted confusion.

I shook my head at his silent question, and took a deep breath that slid painfully around the knot at the bottom of my throat.

In the end, I guess, I had to tell him. It was vanity, really. I thought I could handle the snickers, and the/

knew he never had it in him stories, and the false commiseration I would get from the other students when word got out that I'd failed. But I couldn't take it from Hari; I had to let him know I was tanking the Boards on purpose. Of all the people I have ever known, he was the one that I most wanted to understand that I could pass, if I wanted to.

I needed him to understand that this was a failure of nerve, not of ability.

"I can't do it, Hari," I said slowly. "I think about it this way, that way, every way, and I just can't do it. Remember what you told me all those months ago, right when Nye first met? *I don't have it*. You were right, man. I don't have it"

"Bullshit."

"It's true."

"It fucking *isn't* true," Hari said fiercely. "This is still about Ballinger, right?"

"Yeah."

"He got what was coming to him, that's all. He was *begging* for it." "It's not that."

"Then what is it? What?" His face flushed red, and he looked like he wanted to hit me, as though he could slap the weakness out of my head.

I only he could. "I'm a coward," I said helplessly.

"What, because you folded when he hit you? *Jesus Christ* Kris! Ballinger was three times your size, a fucking stone killer. You had *no chance* against him--but you walked into that shifter anyway. There are different kinds of courage, Kris. The hot kind, that's mine. Once the action starts, I'm all into it but there are lots of people like that. Yours is the cold kind. Cold courage, man. You have to be just about the bravest son of a bitch I ever met."

My eyes went hot, and my tongue went thick, and all I could do was shake my head. How could I explain? But if I didn't start talking, I was going to start crying, and I would have rather died.

So I said, "All I ever wanted was to go to Overworld. My whole life, all I ever wanted was to be an Actor. But you know what being an Actor is, Hari? It's stepping back into that bathroom, every day."

"You can handle it," he insisted. "On Overworld, you're gonna be the toughest kid on the block-like when you tore me up in the Meadow--"

"It's not *that*," I said. "It's not the danger. I don't care about the danger. It's stepping back into that bathroom because I'd have *to hurt somebody*, to kill him just to get another point of market share, a few bloody thousand marks. And what does that mean, to me? I'm rich already. What do I need so badly that it's worth somebody's life?"

"Fucking upcaste liberal," Hari muttered. "There's nothing cheaper than somebody's life. If you were Labor, you'd know it--Laborers are *born* knowing it. Shit, in the Mission District, you can buy a murder for less than the price of a steak dinner."

"But that's you," I said. "That's not me, and I can't pretend it is."

"Then I guess we got a problem." "We?"

He settled back into his chair and set his wineglass on the floor. "Yeah. We. This isn't just your problem. You're my best friend, Kris."

"Huh? Hari, you don't *even like* me!"

"You saved my life. I don't forget that."

I started to protest, and he cut me off. "No," he said sharply. "You did. You wash out, you go back to the life of a Businessman on the Nordic Peninsula. Hey, that's one thing; it's not so bad. I wash out, I go to the Temp slums of San Francisco. That's something else. You saved *my career*, and that's more important than my life. I'm not going to let you suffer for it."

"Too late," I said bitterly.

"Listen, let's say you graduate after all. What then?"

"The usual. Two years of Overworld freemod for acclimatization and whatever final training I can manage; say, if I can find an adept who'll take me on as an apprentice. Then I come back for the implant-"

The possibility bloomed within my head, and Hari tracked its growth by the birth of my first smile in months. He grinned in reply.

"See, Hansen? You're still too locked into the *rules*, man. You're obsessed with what you're *supposed to* do. What's the real issue here, being an Actor *or going to Overworld*? Who says it's both or nothing?"

"I ... I ..." I couldn't think of anything to say; inside my head, my brain rang with Hari's echoes.

Who says it's both or nothing?

19

The next morning, I passed my Graduation Boards with the highest score this decade.

20

I spent the next week or so hanging around the Conservatory, packing, making preparations. It had been my home for three years, and it was hard to believe I'd never see it again.

That week, my surgical mask finally came off for the last time. Now, when I look in the mirror, I see the alien features of a primal mage. My true face.

It still gives me the shivers, a little.

I'm an elf, I say to myself, over and over again.

I'm an elf.

I also spent some time watching the Combat Trials. I led the wild cheers from the Shitschool students as Hari battled his unconventional way up the ranks. He lost in the finals, but the feral joy that showed through the blood on his face when he congratulated the winner made him look like *he* was the champion, instead.

Then I went home for a week, to see my father and my mother, my older brothers and my little sister, and to walk the fields of our estate, to fish, to wander through the neighborhoods of Malmo, where I grew up. To say good-bye.

Then I came back to the Conservatory, to write this all down and tuck it away, so that someday it will be found, and someone-maybe my father, maybe Hari, maybe even I myself-will read it, and understand.

Tomorrow, I make the Winston Transfer to Overworld, on freemod. I'm crossing over into the Promised Land. At the end of two years, I might present myself at one of the Studio's fixed transfer points, to return to Earth and an Acting career.

And, I might not.

A lot can happen in those two years of freemod. Many students die. Overworld is a dangerous place-more so for us, who know of it only secondhand. Some students vanish, and are never seen or heard from again.

I have a feeling that this is what will happen to me.

It's all about Hari, you see. He's smarter than I ever gave him credit for. He was right: I never wanted to be an Actor in the first place.

I want to be a primal mage.

Maybe I'm just pretending. Maybe I'm fooling myself Maybe I'll die trying.

So what? I've faced that choice already, and I see no reason to change my mind now.

I can't stop thinking about the look in Chandra's eyes, the morning he started all this. I can't stop thinking about seeing that same blank hunger behind Ballinger's ursine glare. The link, the common thread between them-I spent days turning it over slowly in my mind, again and again, looking at it from every angle, trying to understand, and I couldn't quite put it together ... until I saw the same look in my father's eyes, as the Social Police transport van arrived with a new load of Workers for the factory.

I mean, *precisely* the same: as though the same creature had worn all three faces like a mask. My nightmares whisper of some vast, unknowable power, buried in bedrock slumber, whose dreams reach out and don us like hand puppets. Like masks. Like one of those mirror masks of the Social Police.

I've been thinking about that creature a lot. At first I thought it was just a metaphor: a myth I'd invented to solidify the way it made me feel. Now, I'm not so sure. I think that creature wore *my* face, for a while: I have a feeling that Hari saw that same abstract, impersonal hunger in my eyes there in the weight room, the day we first met. I have a feeling that's why he hated me on sight.

He beat it out of me, literally-but that didn't stop me from using Ballinger as ruthlessly, as coldly and impersonally as Chandra was using me. I used him until he was all used up.

I guess it's a habit. I guess it's the way the world works. That's what keeps the gears of civilization grinding along.

But Hari ... Well, nothing impersonal there: he hated Ballinger's guts. Maybe that's what it's really all about, in the end. Hari and that blankly hungry creature, maybe they're natural enemies.

With Hari, it's *always* personal.

Me, I'm going to run and hide. Hari won't; I can see it every time I look at him. He's going to wade on in and slug it out:

It feels strange, to write that: to admit, even to myself, that a savage, antisocial Labor thug is a better man than I am. And there I am again: He is not a savage, antisocial Labor thug.

Well, he is, but that's not all he is.

I don't think I even have the vocabulary for this. He's Hari, that's all. That's a lot.

I tried to be his teacher, but I learned more than I taught.

I told Hari that Acting was stepping back into that bathroom, every day; what I didn't tell him is that for me, a Businessman born and bred, I'm stepping into that bathroom every time I get up in the morning. That's the inescapable structure of life on Earth.

Use and be used, until you're used up. It's the way the world works. This world, anyway.

I can hear, with my enhanced elvish ears, Hari's footfalls on the walk outside, far down in the dormitory's courtyard. I'm saying good-bye to him, too, tonight.

We save the most important good-byes till the last.

Good-bye to my best friend that I never liked.

Strange world.

I go to a stranger one tomorrow.

I'll look for you there, Hari. Maybe someday, twenty years from now, you'll be sitting in an Overworld tavern, and a familiar-looking primal mage will offer to buy you a drink. There really isn't any other way to say thanks, for saving my soul.

I only wish I could save yours.

What the life you've chosen to lead will cost you, I can't begin to imagine.

I guess the best you can hope for is not to be noticed.

She was only a goddess part-time, but she loved her job, and she was good at it. She went to and fro upon the earth and walked up and down in it, and where she strode bloomed flowers and sprouted grain;

when she spread her hand, the winter was mild and the harvest bountiful, a summer storm brought showers warm and sweet as a sunlit pond, and the spring sang of things green and growing.

The First Folk called her Eyyallarann, the Flowmind; the stonebenders called her Thukulg'n, the Drowner; to the treetoppers she was Ketinnasi, the Riverman; to mankind, she was Chambaraya, the Water Father; but her name was Pallas Ril.

It was said she had a human lover, in some far-off place; that for half the year she took the form of mortal woman and lived in peace with her lover and her human child. Others said her lover was himself a god, her shadow-self, a dark angel of slaughter and destruction, and that the half of each year she spent at his side was the world's ransom: that she paid with her body to keep him beyond the walls of time, and preserve the peace of the good land.

As is common with such tales, both were true; and false; and to the same degree.

The part-time goddess had no church, no religion, no followers; she could not be propitiated by sacrifice or summoned by invocation. She walked whither she willed, and followed the course of her heart as though its turns were the twists of her riverbed; she loved the land and all things in it, and all prospered under her hand. The only prayer that might sway her was the sob of a mother over her ill or injured child-be that mother human or primal, goshawk or bobcat, elk or rabbit-and this only because the human part of her remembered what it is to be a mother.

This was probably, in the end, the real reason why she and her lover both had to die.

For the scent of her green and growing land troubled the slumber of another god: a blind and nameless god, a god of dust and ashes, whose merest dream can kill.

ONE

The severed head of a child bounced once on his mattress, then rolled against his ribs, and Hari Michaelson began to wake.

He groped for it, struggling upward through smothering blankets of hungover sleep. His gummed-together eyelids parted with the slow rip of shredding meat. Layers of dream shredded into smoke tatters, leaving behind only wisps of melancholy: He had been dreaming of the old days again. Of his long-dead Acting career. Or even earlier-he could not quite grasp the details, but he might have been dreaming of his student days at the Studio Conservatory, more than twenty-five years ago, when he was young, and strong, and full of hope. When he'd still been riding the upward swing of his life.

He found the foreign object on the bed, his fingers flapping blindly across it. Not a head, of course it wasn't a head; it was *aball*, that's it, just a kid's ball, like the one he used to play rugger with, centuries ago in those bright and happy days before his mother's death and father's breakdown. With the abstract certainty of the dreams he shed, he knew the ball was Faith's. She'd sneaked into the master suite, and this was her way of encouraging him to get his lazy ass out of bed and take her to Saturday morning soccer practice.

He rolled over and coughed a wad of phlegm out of his cottony lungs. "Abbey: Clear th' windows," he said thickly, in a tone the housecomp would recognize. "Get s'm fucking light in here."

Strange ball, though, he thought fuzzily while he waited for the windows to depolarize. Weird shape, kind of irregular-bumpy and malformed-and the texture was strange, too, smooth and soft over a hard

surface within, almost like bone

And what was this shit here? Hair? This ball has *hair* on it?

At the same moment that he realized that the windows weren't working and no light was entering the room, his hand found the ragged mess of bone and bloody shreds of flesh that remained of the neck, and an oiled voice spoke Westerling from a tall shadow at the foot of his bed. "So, Caine; it murmured with dark, humid lust, "I hear you're *crippled*, now ..."

And the head in his hand was his daughter's, and the shadow at the foot of his bed was Berne.

The blade of Kosall flickered like a flame in the moonlight, and Hari Michaelson's legs would not move.

2

Hari lay shivering beneath his tangled, sweat-soaked sheets, and hoped he hadn't crapped himself again.

A warm hand cupped his shoulder. "Hari, it's okay," Shanna said softly from close by. "I'm here. Just a nightmare, that's all."

He clenched his teeth, biting down on his courage until he could open his eyes. She knelt beside his bed, her hair a tousled halo of deeper shadow in the darkened bedroom, her eyes wide and almost luminous, a faint vertical crease of concern between her brows.

"Was I-" he started thickly, then he coughed his throat clear and tried again. "Was it loud?"

She nodded sadly. "Berne again?"

"Yeah."

"Those always seem to be the worst."

"Tell me about it." He rolled his head to the side, staring across the room at the rumpled covers on her bed; he couldn't bring himself to look down at his own. "Did I-is there a mess?"

"I don't think so," Shanna said gravely. "I can't smell anything. Do you want me to look?" She had that nurselike professional detachment in her voice again. He hated that tone; it made his stomach knot into a sick tangle of bile. That tone had loathing and disgust lurking just beneath the calm *I'll handle it* surface.

"You'd better," he said tightly. It hurt more to say this than it had to take the fucking wound in the first place. "The bypass is down again."

The neural bypass that shunted impulses around the break in his partially regenerated spinal cord was erratic, at best; he hadn't reloaded the software in three days, and some unexplained bugginess in the program made the bypass shut down unexpectedly now and again. That part of the dream had been perfectly accurate: he couldn't move his legs, couldn't feel them, or anything else below his navel. Below the three-inch-wide scar Kosall had left in his belly, he was dead as a butchered cow.

A shutdown *always* gave him nightmares, and sometimes he woke up in a pool of his own shit and piss that he couldn't feel, and sometimes-if he'd been lying there long enough to numb his nose--couldn't even smell. This was the reason Shanna no longer slept in his bed.

One of the reasons.

"Abbey: Room lights to one quarter," Shanna said calmly. "Execute."

The room lit with a soft decentralized glow, and she peeled back the covers. He made himself look. The sheets were stained only with the sweat that made his nightclothes cling to his clammy skin-that meant the shut-down was not yet complete; he still had control of his bowels and bladder. He gave a sigh of relief that threatened to become a shudder. Maybe he could make it to the bathroom before the goddamn bypass rebooted itself.

The regeneration therapy the Studio physicians had used to treat Hari's severed spinal cord had slightly better than a 90 percent success rate-that's what they kept telling him. Looking at it the other way, though, meant it had a 10 percent *failure* rate, and that's roughly where Hari fell.

So to speak.

Sure, it had partially worked-he had some urinary and rectal sphincter control, and limited sensation. But even those partial gains were sacrificed to the spinal bypass. The bypass worked by neural induction, similar to the Studio's first-handers' chairs; when it went down, it played fuckass with everything below his waist.

"Administrator?"

The screen on the night table beside his bed flickered to life, casting a cold electric glow into the bedroom, and the disembodied face of Bradlee Wing, his father's nurse, frowned out of it.

"Administrator Michaelson? Are you all right?"

Shanna lifted her eyebrows at him, and he nodded reluctantly. She hit the voice receipt key for him so he wouldn't have to drag himself across the bed using only his arms.

"Yeah, fine, Brad. I'm fine."

"I heard you shout-"

"I said I'm *fine*. Shanna's here, everything's okay."

"Want something to help you sleep?"

Almost half a liter of Laphroaig remained in the bottle beside the screen; the scotch's acidic, iodine bite still lingered in the back of his throat. He saw the expression on Shanna's face as she caught his look at the bottle, and he turned away, scowling. "Don't bother. Just check on Dad, will you? Make sure I didn't wake him."

"The sedatives Laborer Michaelson takes-"

"Don't call him *Laborer Michaelson*. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Sorry, Administrator."

"And don't fucking call me *Administrator*, either."

"Sorry-sorry, ah, Hari. The hour-I forget, that's all."

"Yeah, whatever. Check on him."

"Will do, ah, Hari."

"Yeah."

The screen faded to black.

He couldn't quite make himself meet Shanna's eyes. "I, uh, I better go check on Faith. If I woke up Bradlee all the way down on the first floor, I must have scared the shit out of her."

Shanna rose. "I'll go."

"No, no, no," Hari insisted tiredly. "Go back to bed. My fault, my job. I have to go reboot anyway-I'll use the hall toilet so you can sleep."

He whistled for his wheelchair, and it whirred into his bedroom, weaving around the furniture; the proximity sensors of its self-guidance system gave it an animal smoothness of motion. A simple command, "Rover: Stay," locked its wheels into place once it reached his bedside, but Hari engaged the manual brakes as well. His bypass had taught him a grim distrust of microprocessors.

Shanna slid a hand under his armpit to help him up. He lowered his head and didn't move. "I can do it," he said.

"Oh, Hari ..." She sounded so tired, so inexpressibly sad, as though one breath of his name could compass each of his failures, and all of her forgiveness. It made him grit his teeth till his ears rang. "Go to bed," he said tightly.

"I wish you'd let me help," she murmured, and for a moment the knots in his heart eased, just a little.

He covered her hand with his own. "You help every day, Shan. You're what keeps me going, you and Faith. But you have to let me handle what I can handle, okay?"

She nodded silently. She leaned down and kissed him lightly on the cheek, then went back to the bed on her side of the room. Hari watched her grimly, waiting until she crawled back under the covers and settled in. "Good night," she said.

"Yeah. Good night."

She rolled onto her side, away from him, and gathered the down-filled pillow beneath her head. "Abbey," he said, "lights out. Execute."

Safe in the darkness, he slowly and carefully levered himself from the bed into Rover's seat. It took both hands to move each dead-meat leg, one at a time, into place on the footrests. He sat there for what felt like a long time, breathing too hard, staring at his hands.

He'd made these hands into weapons, conditioned them until they were as deadly as any blade. In years past, he had been widely considered the finest infighter alive. His sole reminder of those days was the crumple of knuckles broken and rebroken, banded with faintly discolored scars.

He'd thought he was tough, back then. Only later, when the most use he had for his hands was shoving a glycerine suppository up his ass and manually disimpacting his bowels, did he find out how tough he really wasn't. The first time Shanna had heard him sobbing, and found him sitting on the toilet with shit all over his futile fists, splattering it in child's footprints across his dead thighs as he tried to pound some feeling, *someuse*, back into them, he realized that he'd been kidding himself all along.

He'd never be tough enough for this.

After unlocking Rover's wheels, he gripped their rims and spun the chair roughly toward the door. He'd had a levichair a few years before, but he'd sold it; he'd told Shanna, and his doctors, that he thought the levichair's magfield wasn't properly shielded, and it might have been the culprit behind his software problems. The truth was, he'd hated the fucking thing, and feared it. Any mechanical failure, even a mild powerdown, could leave him helplessly immobilized. At least Rover had wheels.

Which didn't stop him from hating it, too.

The door slid aside at his approach; he wheeled out into the hallway and turned for Faith's room. He should have stopped by the toilet to reboot first, he knew, but some irrational mulishness wouldn't let him be sensible about it. Even if the worst should happen, he wouldn't make much of a mess: Rover had a urine tube, and chemical toilet under the seat though Hari privately thought that if he ever let himself get into the habit of using them, he'd kill himself.

The smell . . . More than anything else, that's what he feared; the bare thought of it closed down his throat and stung his eyes. He remembered that smell too well: the chemical reek of illness and incontinence. It was Duncan's smell, after his breakdown and downcast spiral. The tiny apartment he'd shared with his father, in San Francisco's Mission District Temp ghetto, had enclosed that stench, concentrated it, burned it into him like a brand on the inside of his skull. Not sharp, but thick and somehow *rounded*; not pungent but gooey, filling the back of his throat like he was drowning in snot.

It smelled like madness.

Rover's comfort hookups were not a convenience; they were a threat. If he let himself fall that far, if he surrendered in the way every doctor told him he had to, if he *accepted* his disability and tried to *accommodate* it, that smell would cling to him forever. He was afraid that he might get used to it. He was afraid that someday he wouldn't even notice anymore.

Rover rolled to a stop at Faith's door. Hari touched the door with the tips of three fingers, as gently as a caress on his daughter's cheek, and it swung silently inward a few centimeters. He whispered to the Abbey to raise the lights in the hallway, and the house complied, slowly turning up the intensity until a spill of light crossed Faith's bed and gleamed on her spray of golden hair.

She lay in the boneless sprawl of childhood sleep. Hari's chest burned with a fierce ache, and he could not shift his gaze until the slow rise and fall of the nightshirt that covered her chest unlocked his eyes. He remembered staring at Shanna the same way, as Pallas Ril lay bound to the altar in the Iron Room, high atop the Dusk Tower of the Colhari Palace in Ankhana; he remembered the relief-the flood of sanity and purpose returning to the universe-he'd felt when he saw that she still lived.

No such relief ever came to him in these dark nights, when he would stop by Faith's door to stare at his daughter. The cold terror that coiled behind his eyes, the constant expectation that one of these nights he would look in and *not* see her chest rise and fall, never vanished; it was only postponed. He knew, with a certainty that went beyond religious conviction, that she would be taken from him. It was the most basic weave of his fate: Nothing so precious was allowed to remain in his life.

Her translucent skin-it seemed to glow, lit from within by the warmth of her eyes-her hair the color of sunlight on winter wheat, the classical Nordic regularity of her features, all carried just a hint of Shanna's Anglo heritage, and none at all of his. She favored her real father.

Her biological father, Hari corrected himself. *I'm her real father.*

He thought with longing of the scotch bottle on his nightstand. He should have brought it with him. He could use a little peat-fired comfort tonight; these postmidnight hours were a fertile earth for thoughts darker than the night outside.

Sometimes when he looked at Faith, he couldn't help thinking of Lamorak-of Karl. Karl Shanks: second-rate Actor, a minor star, a goodlooking swordsman with a small gift for thaumaturgy, at one time a pretty good friend of Hari's. Shanna's lover. Her betrayer.

The father of her child.

Lamorak had betrayed Shanna, and Hari; Hari had betrayed him in turn. Had given him over to torture.

Had murdered him with his own hand.

He could still feel it, even now, more than six years later, if he closed his eyes and thought for just a moment lying on the arena sand with Kosall through his guts, Ma'elKoth towering over him and Lamorak at his side. With Shanna's tears trickling across his face like the opening drops of a spring shower. He could feel the buzzing hum of Kosall's magick vibrating up his severed spine to his teeth, when he took its hilt to activate the magick of its irresistible edge.

He could feel Lamorak's head slicing free of his body with the ragged *zzzip* of a page being ripped from a book, as he pulled the traitor's neck against Kosall's blade.

It's better this way, he thought. This thought came to him every time he considered whose child he was raising; every time he reminded himself that Faith shared no Michaelson blood. Duncan liked to observe, with Thomas Paine, that virtue is not hereditary; no more so would be its opposite.

Madness, on the other hand, runs in families.

He briefly considered waking her-one sleepy smile from his daughter would chase off a whole night's worth of shadows inside his head but he knew he wouldn't. He never did. He wouldn't let himself use Faith as a drug against his black moods.

After one last longing look, to watch the rise of her chest, he wheeled Rover down the hall toward his office. When these black fits took hold of his heart, work was his only answer.

But first

He turned in at the guest bathroom, next door to his office. Rover's arms folded down, and he was able

to swing himself onto the toilet using the wall-mounted rails. His pajama trousers fastened up the back with a Velcro closure, so that he could pull them open instead of having to lower them. A four-digit code on the belt unit slung across Rover's back shut down his bypass software, and a single keystroke began the reboot.

As the software that allowed him to walk reinitialized, making his legs twitch and jerk, as his bowels and bladder spastically voided themselves, Hari Michaelson—who had once been Caine—clenched his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut against the familiar tears of his private humiliation. *Why can't I wake up? Please, God—whoever might be listening. That's what I want. That's all I want.*

I want to wake up.

3

Hari shuffled along the hall, a little unsteady on his feet. Good as the bypass was, it would never be the same as a healthy spine; he would forever totter on secondhand legs, operating them by remote control. For the rest of his life, he'd be waxworks from the waist down: a numb, half-Animatronic replica of Caine.

And how, the cold postmidnight of the empty hallway asked him, was he supposed to live with that?

The way I live with everything else, he gritted to himself for the thousandth time, or the millionth. *I'll deal with it. I'll just fucking deal.*

Rover paced him silently, its proximity sensors keeping it a precise two steps behind and to his left; it remained in the hallway, squatting beside the door, when Hari went into the office. Inside, he lowered himself gratefully into the bodyform gel-filled polypropylene of his most comfortable chair and rested his head on his hands. He felt hollow, but also somehow uncomfortably full, and frighteningly fragile, as though his guts were stuffed with eggshells.

He rubbed grit out of his eyes and checked his deskscreen's time readout: 0340. His stomach twisted slowly, sending sour scotch rasping up the back of his throat. He swallowed it again and grimaced at the lingering acid burn it left behind. Some coffee, maybe? Maybe his life looked like shit from nothing more than fatigue and the opening bars of a familiar hangover theme.

For a moment, he flirted with the idea of calling Tan'elKoth, over at the Curiozeum. He could stand to talk, tonight, even with an enemy—and Tan'elKoth was hardly that, not after all these years. They had each done things to the other that could not be forgiven—Hari freely admitted he had done more wrong than he'd taken but somehow it didn't seem to matter.

It's not like he'd wake the big bastard up; Tan'elKoth hadn't slept in something like twelve or thirteen years.

No, goddamit. No, he told himself. *I'm not doing it. Not this time.*

Calling Tan'elKoth would be only a distraction. That's all it ever was. Whatever peace Hari found in the other man's company was a sham, all smoke and mirrors. It wouldn't last an hour after they parted. There was no mystery here; Hari was not so blind that he did not see the real reason he kept company with the former Emperor of Ankhana: Tan'elKoth was the only man alive who treated him like he was still Caine.

That's something else I just gotta fucking get over.

He swiveled his chair around to the mahogany sideboard behind his desk and keyed the coffeemaker for a twelve-cup Yucatan brew. The machine's whirr was only audible enough to let him know it was working as it measured out the mexiroast beans from its refrigerated hopper, ground them, and dusted them with cinnamon. Thick dark coffee drooled into the pitcher, so strong that the smell alone started his caffeine buzz.

While he waited for the pitcher to fill, he idly played with the keypad of his deskscreen. He didn't decide to call up anything in particular, or so he told himself, but somehow his fingers seemed to know what he needed: they entered a long, detailed, specific code.

The dark rectangle of his deskscreen slowly gathered a foggy greyish light: an overcast sky. A blurred patch of brown and cream resolved into a close-up view of a man with the face of a god. Hum and rumble from concealed speakers pulsed into the rhythm of speech; of words, now, in a voice soft and warm and impossibly deep: a voice that is not heard so much as felt: a subterranean vibration, the precursor shocks to an earthquake. Hari didn't need to listen to know what those words were; he remembered them vividly. Even as he remembered that sky, and that face.

Ma'elKoth, framed against the clouds that he had called above Victory Stadium, rumbled his soothing, comforting hum:*let it go, Caine. It's all right. Shh. Lie quiet relax, and let it go ...*

Hari stared at the wall of his office while he listened to Caine's voice whisper from the speakers in the artificial speech of the Actor's Soliloquy. **Fuck letting it go. *Never surrender. *Never.* And he hadn't. He hung on, still, every day. He was still fighting. He owed that much, at least, to the man he used to be.

He sighed and reluctantly instructed his deskscreen to link to Studionet. He spoke the required phrases so that Studionet could verify his voiceprint; a moment later, fully updated hardcopy charts began to scroll out of his printer. He gathered them into his hands and shuffled through them. Hari had an innate distrust of data that existed only electronically, on the net; this probably came from growing up in the shadow of Duncan's lunatic libertarianism.

At one time, Hari had possessed an extensive library of nonvirtual books, with real cotton-and-wood-pulp pages, cardstock covers-some that dated from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, bound in leather-covered fiberboard, pages edged with gold leaf. Whenever possible, Duncan had taught Hari from books, the older the better; Duncan claimed that nothing printed after the Plague Years could be trusted.

"The print on the pages-it's *anobject*, do you understand? Once it's printed, there it is, in your hand. It can no longer be altered, or edited, or censored-if it is, you can see it, see where it's been blacked out or cut away. Electronic text, though, is at least *halfimaginary*; anyone can go in and make whatever changes they like, to suit whatever the politics of the moment happen to be. You don't believe me? Call up anything by John Locke on the nets. Call up anything by Abraham Lincoln. By Friedrich Nietzsche or Meister Crowley. Compare what you see on the screen with what you find in the old books. You'll learn."

Those books were long gone now, of course; hundreds of thousands of marks' worth had been sold. Some of them, too sensitive to be sold-banned works, by unperson like Shaw, and Heinlein, and Paine-were in a sealed vault on the Sangre de Cristo estate of Hari's Leisure Patron, Marc Vilo. Hari couldn't keep books like that in the house, not with Duncan here.

The commutation of Duncan's sedition sentence was conditional. At the first hint of subversive behavior—for example, possession of banned works of literature—Soapy would sink his teeth into Duncan's ass and drag him away, and not back into the Mute Facility at the Buchanan Social Camp. This time, he'd be cyborged, and sold as a Worker—and Duncan wouldn't last a week under the yoke; as ill as he was, he wouldn't last a day.

He remembered an argument Duncan had had with Tan'elKoth, four or five years ago—back when Duncan still had enough fine motor control to speak aloud. "We hold these *truths* to be *self-evident*; that *all men* are created *equal*; that they are *endowed* by their *creator* with *certain unalienable rights* ..."

Hari half smiled, remembering. Duncan had been quoting Jefferson with a high, acid-edged screech; that meant Tan'elKoth had been baiting him again. He often fell back on Jefferson when Tan'elKoth had boxed him into a logical corner.

Hari could see the scene as though it unfolded once more before his eyes: Tan'elKoth at the table in the Abbey's kitchen, his bulk dwarfing it to the size of a child's playset. The coffee mug in his massive hand looked like an espresso cup. He wore an immaculately tailored Professional's suit, single-breasted in a stylish taupe, and his mane of chocolate curls was pulled back in a conservative ponytail. He carried himself with the suave cool of a male model, but his eyes danced with unconcealed glee: he loved tangling with Duncan.

"Self-serving propaganda," he'd rumbled, and lifted a finger, pontificating. "Whatever the intent of this hypothetical creator—whose mind you pretend to know—I can tell you this: The gods have no interest in *rights*. There are no rights. Or wrongs. There is only power, and weakness. I have been a god, and I am acquainted with several more; our concern is with the *structure of survival*. A human life is defined by its relationship with others: by its duty to its species. In the face of this duty, *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness* are meaningless. What you call *individual rights* are merely the cultural fantasy of a failed civilization."

"Fascist bastard; Duncan had croaked happily. His eyes rolled like misshapen marbles, but his voice was clear, and stronger than it had been in a month. "Can't trust a fascist truth is always your first sacrifice to the welfare of the state."

"Hmp. As you say. If you do not wish to take my word, ask your daughter-in-law; though she is a weak god, a flawed and failed god, she is a god nonetheless. Ask Pallas Ril where *individual rights* place in her hierarchy of concern."

"Not gonna argue gods with you, you smug sonofabitch," Duncan had croaked.

Duncan had been sitting up that day, his chest strapped securely to the raised back of his convertible traveling bed, its wheels locked alongside the table where Tan'elKoth sat. Veins bulged and twitched among the translucent scraps of white hair that remained on his scalp; his eyes rolled, his hands trembled uncontrollably, and a line of frothy drool trailed down from one corner of his mouth, but he seemed mostly lucid.

Arguing political philosophy was the only thing that had seemed to hold Duncan's attention, even then. Before the autoimmune disorder that was progressively eating his brain had become symptomatic, Duncan had been a professor of social anthropology, a philologist and an authority on the cultures of Overworld. He had always loved to argue, loved it perhaps more than anything else, including his family.

He had nearly ended his life under a sedition sentence in the Mute Facility of the Buchanan Social

Camp for one overpowering reason: He could not learn to shut up.

Hari had never been able to argue with him. He didn't have the right kind of mind to spin political fantasies back and forth across a table. Hari had always been too busy surviving the realities of his existence to waste time dreaming about how things *sought* to be. Sometimes a week or more would pass when he could barely get a coherent sentence out of Duncan, but somehow Tan'elKoth always seemed able to draw Duncan up from whatever nirvana into which his private madness had sealed him.

Duncan had gone on, "Don't care about gods. Gods are irrelevant. What counts is *people*. What counts is having *respect* for each other."

"I respect what is respectable," Tan'elKoth replied. "To ask for respect where none has been earned is childish maundering. And what is re-spectable, in the end, save service? Even your idol Jefferson is, in the end, measured by how well he served the species. The prize of individualism-

its goal is self-actualization, which is only another name for vanity. We do not admire men for achieving self-actualization; we admire self-actualization when its end result is a boon to humanity."

"Huh," Duncan said, wiping his chin with the back of his hand. "Maybe self-actualization is the only way to *really* serve humanity. Maybe it's people like *you* that harm it. When *you* try to `serve humanity; you end up making them into sheep. You serve them, all right: you serve them for *dinner*. People eat sheep." He rolled his clouded eyes at Hari, a distinct twinkle within them welcoming him to the table, to the discussion, as if to say, *People like you. My son, the predator.*

Tan'elKoth hummed disagreement. "Sheep are very successful, as a species. Humanity, at least on my world, is not. Your individualism leads, inevitably, to men who place their own desires above the welfare of others-of any others, perhaps all others."

"Men like Leonardo, and Mozart. Like Charlemagne and Alexander."

"Hmp. Also," Tan'elKoth said with an air of finality, as though he had cunningly led Duncan into an inescapable rhetorical trap, "men like Caine."

That was when Hari had decided he was done with this conversation. "That's *enough*," he said. He set his mug down too fast and too hard; coffee slopped across the table. "Change the subject."

"I meant no insult-" Tan'elKoth said mildly.

"I don't care. I'm not insulted. I'm just sick of listening to it."

Duncan didn't seem to hear; or perhaps he heard, and chose to ignore. "Caine did a lot of good for a lot of people-"

"Purely by accident," Tan'elKoth interrupted.

"Aren't you the one who doesn't believe in chance?"

"*Hey*," Hari said, louder. "Cut it out, both of you."

Duncan swung his strengthless head toward his son. "I'm only trying to stick up for you, Killer," he said, a tremor leaking into his voice.

"I don't need you to defend me, Dad; Hari told him. "I just need you to shut up."

Deeper clouds had gathered behind the cataracts in his father's eyes, drawing a veil between his consciousness and the world. "Sorry ... I'm sorry . .

Sitting now at his desk in the black morning, those last three words burned him. How could he have said such a thing? How could he have been so childish?

And though he might pretend otherwise, the answer was all too clear. The wound left by the excision of Caine from his life had been too fresh, back then. He hadn't had a chance to adjust to the granite fact that he could never, ever be that man again. Never again would he be that strong. Never that sure.

Never that free.

He hadn't known, then, the source of his pain-he'd kept telling himself *I got everything I wanted I won, goddammit! What the fuck is my problem?* All he'd really understood was that *he hurt* all the time; all he had was blank animal incomprehension and the social grace of a wolverine with a toothache.

Not long after that, Duncan's voice had gone forever. Right now, he couldn't remember if his father had ever spoken to him again.

Hari spent a long time staring at the hardcopy charts spread across his desk. Gradually, he forced himself to make sense of the numbers. *Christ, that's ugly*, he thought. He rearranged them, gathered them up, shuffled them, and spread them across his desk once again. No matter in what order he stacked them, the brutal truth was unmistakable.

He didn't know what the fuck he was doing.

Of the six fiscal years that he had been Chairman of the San Francisco Studio, his Studio had lost money in four; three in a row, now, and getting worse. He had taken the number one Studio on Earth-the flagship of the entire Adventures Unlimited system-and he had pooched it so badly that now only the freight fees paid by the Overworld Company were keeping it afloat.

This is a mystery? he thought bitterly. *This was supposed to be a surprise?*

He had been given the Chairmanship-and its attendant upcasting to Administration-as a blatant public-relations stunt, a transparent attempt to counter the disastrous aftermath of Caine's final Adventure, *For Love of Pallas RiL*. The fallout of that Adventure had toppled SF's previous Chair-man, Arturo Kollberg, and had blackened the reputation of the entire Studio system. At the time, briefly, Hari had been the most famous man on Earth-*For Love of Pallas RiL* was the single most popular Adventure in history, setting records for both viewership and receipts that still stood, nearly seven years later-and he could have done incalculable damage to the industry. So they bought him off.

That's a little too generous, Hari thought. *I wasn't bought off. I was just bought.*

Bought with the chance to live in peace with the woman he loved. Bought with the chance to raise his daughter as an Administrator. Bought with the chance to get to know his father again, as a man. And in return?

All he had to do was sit down and shut up.

One of his new colleagues, the Chairman of the St. Petersburg Studio, had put it cogently when they first met, a couple of weeks after Hari's upcaste: "Perhaps the most significant skill an effective Administrator ever develops is the ability to do nothing. Knowing *when not to act* is vastly more important than knowing *what to do* can ever be."

And there he had it: a philosophical rationale for being a good boy, for sitting quietly and marking days till his pension. Thus *conscience does make cowards of us all*, Hari thought.

He was strong enough to survive any given day. But when he looked down the long bleak tunnel of the rest of his life, he saw far too many nights like this one, sitting at his desk after 0300, staring into the cement-grey certainty that today would be exactly like yesterday, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeping in its petty pace from day to day, world without end, amen.

If he was lucky.

Another keystroke or two pulled up an abstract of the latest brief filed in Social Court by lawyers for Avery Shanks. Whenever Hari was in a really shitty mood, like tonight, he could access the growing archive of *Bsn. Shanks v. Adr. Michaelson*, and brood about what would happen if Studio Legal ever dropped the ball.

Businessman Avery Shanks-Karl Shanks' mother, *Lamorak's* mother, the head of the electronic chemicals giant SynTech-had personally filed capital Forcible Contact Upcaste charges against Hari within days of the climax of *For Love of Pallas Ril*-before Hari was even out of the hospital. She had used the SynTech legal department as her personal attack dogs, filing and refileing, contending that her son's caste of Professional had been only pro forma, attendant to his employment as an Actor. SynTech lawyers continued to argue that Karl should be considered a Businessman in the eyes of the court.

Which, without the Studio's protection, would be enough to get Hari cyborged and sold as a Worker.

On his worst nights, Hari suspected that the reason the Studio hadn't quashed this lawsuit altogether is that they planned to drop it on him like a hammer if he ever stepped out of line.

He closed the lawsuit archive, rustled his hardcopy charts again, straightened them with an irritable snap, but his attention circled inevitably back . . .

Legal fees alone could wipe him out. Shanna's income couldn't support the family by itself, even without the costs of a court battle; she still had a fanatically loyal core audience, but her overall receipts had been dropping for years. She didn't even have first-handers anymore. She spent each of her twice-yearly three-month shifts on freemod, her experiences being graved into a microcube: an ironic echo of one of Arturo Kollberg's innovations, the Long Form.

The experience of being a goddess has a certain charm-the seamless serenity of her powerful connection to her entire world, the mind-bending awareness of every living thing within the Great Chambaygen watershed, the uplifting consciousness of boundless power perfectly controlled-but her fans had soon discovered they could get the same effect from her cubes. Even from a single cube. Since each day was much like another for Chambaraya, her rentals were shit. To keep first-handers coming back, for good rentals and cube sales, you need *story*. Story was exactly what Pallas Ril didn't have. She was complete; there was nothing she could need that the river did not provide. For Chambaraya, there is no necessity. Without necessity, all is whim.

He shook his head to rattle his attention back to the charts in his hands. He'd been staring at them sightlessly for he didn't know how long. The figures on the page no longer had any meaning he could comprehend; they had become vaguely threatening hieroglyphs, an apocalyptic prophecy in Linear A.

With a sigh, he finally surrendered. He folded the charts once, then again, then tucked them neatly into the disposal chute alongside his desk "Abbey: Call out. AV," he said. "The Studio Curiozeum. Private line of Tan'elKoth. Execute."

In a moment, the *Waiting* logo on the screen dissolved to a high-contrast, discolored view of Tan'elKoth's face. "*Caine. Another sleepless night?*"

"Goddammit," Hari said for what seemed like the millionth time, "if I have to call you Tan'elKoth, you can fucking well call me Hari." But this protest had become familiar, reflexive, and he could hear the insincerity that blunted its edge.

Tan'elKoth heard it, too. One majestic eyebrow arched, and the creases at the corners of his eyes deepened a trifle. "*Just so.*"

"What's wrong with your screen? You're all orange, and the contrast is so bad it looks like half your face is missing."

Tan'elKoth shrugged and rubbed his eyes. "*The screen is fine. I can no longer abide reading from a monitor, and the incessant flicker of your electric lights gives me a headache.*" He turned the screen so that Hari could see the large book open on Tan'elKoth's reading desk, and the tall flame of the oil-burning hurricane lamp that sat beside it. "*But you did not rise in these wee hours to chaff me for poor equipment maintenance.*"

"Yeah," Hari sighed. "I guess I was wondering, if you weren't too busy-"

"Busy, Administrator? I, busy? Perish the thought. I am, as I have been for lo, these many years, entirely at your disposal, Mr. Chairman."

"Forget it," Hari muttered. He lacked the strength to shoulder Tan'elKoth's heavy irony tonight. He reached for the cutoff.

"*Caine, wait,*" Tan'elKoth said. His eyes shifted, and he passed a hand over his face as though he wanted to wipe away his features and become a different man. "*Please-ah, Hari forgive my tone. I have been too long alone with bitter thoughts, and I spoke without thinking. I would be glad of company tonight, should you wish it.*"

Hari studied Tan'elKoth's image on the screen: the dark streaks beneath his eyes, the new creases and sags of his once-perfect skin, and the downtwist at the corners of lips that had once known only smiles. *Shit, Hari thought. Do I look as bad as he does?*

"I was thinking," Hari said slowly, "that I might brew a jug of coffee and sail over. Feel like walking?"

Tan'elKoth's downtwists flattened toward what might have been a smile, on somebody else. "*Into the District?*"

Hari shrugged like he didn't care, fooling neither himself nor Tan'elKoth. "I guess. Game?"

"Of course. I enjoy your old neighborhood; I find it stimulating. Rather like one of your antique nature films: an ocean of tiny predators, circling each other." He cocked his head at the screen and spoke with the soft cheer of a man telling an off-color joke in a crowded restaurant. *"When was the last time you killed someone?"*

Below the desk, one of Hari's hands found its way to the numb, deadmeat oval of scar tissue at the small of his back. "You should remember. You were there."

"Mmm, just so. But, one never knows: Perhaps tonight, we shall be lucky enough to be attacked."

"Yeah, maybe." *"If we run across a wolfpack that's stone fucking blind,"* Hari thought. "All right, then. I'm on my way."

"I'll be at the South Gate in half an hour."

"See you there."

"Yes, you shall-" He smiled as he poked the cutoff. *"-Caine."*

Hari shook his head and directed a disgusted snort at the dark rectangle of screen. He hit his own cutoff and found half a smile growing on his face.

"Hari? You never came back to bed."

He looked up, and his smile faded away again. Shanna stood in the doorway, looking at him reproachfully through her pillow-twisted hair. Her face wore the fading ghosts of beatitude, a slowly dimming glow of transcendent peace: she'd been dreaming of the river.

It made him want to throw something at her.

"Yeah, I-" He lowered his head and tried not to look guilty, and gestured at the stacks of hardcopy spread across his desk. "I decided to get some work done."

"Who were you talking to? That was Tan'elKoth, wasn't it?"

He lowered his eyes and stared at the fists he'd made against his legs. "You know I wish you didn't spend so much time with-"

"Yeah, *I know,*" Hari interrupted. This was a familiar argument, and he didn't feel like spinning it up again at this hour of the night. "I'm gonna go out for a little while."

"Now?" These days, it never seemed to take long for that transcendent peace to flush out of her face; it was gone already. "You're going out in the middle of *thenight?*"

"Yeah. I do that, sometimes." He left unsaid *the And you'd know it, if you were here with me and your daughter more than six months a goddamn year,* but it hung between them anyway, silently poisoning the air.

She pushed back her hair with the heel of one hand, and her face had that pinched, overcontrolled look he remembered too well, from the bad old days when *they* couldn't so much as open their mouths without starting a fight.

Bad old days? Who am I kidding? he thought.

These are the bad old days.

"Will you be back in time for breakfast?" she asked; then she slipped in the cheap shot like a knife between his ribs. "Or do I need some lie to tell Faith about where you are?"

He started to snarl back at her, but caught himself. Who was he to complain about cheap shots? He let out a long, slow breath and shook his head. "No. No, I'll be back for breakfast. Look, I'm sorry, Shanna. Sometimes, I just need somebody to talk to."

When he saw the look on her face, he wished he'd bitten his tongue in half before those last words had come out.

Her eyes pinched almost shut, and her mouth set in a painfully thin line. "Sometimes I still let myself hope you might want to talk to me."

"Oh, Shanna, don't-look, I do talk to you." He did: whenever he could stand to hear for the billionth fucking time *How Easy It Is to Be Happy*, if he just let himself *Flow Like the River* and shit like that. He looked away so that she wouldn't read this on his face. None of this was her fault, and he'd promised himself over and over again he wouldn't take it out on her. "Ah, forget it. I'm going."

He shuffled the hardcopy into a stack and stood up. She came into the room as if she could stop him. "I wish you'd be more careful with Tan'elKoth. You can't trust him, Hari. He's *dangerous*."

He brushed past her, careful not to touch her on his way to the door. "Yeah, he is," he said. He added under his breath, as he walked away down the hall, "Like I used to be."

And behind him, with endless inanimate patience, paced Rover.

4

She leaned on the window of his study, cooling her forehead against the glass, and watched him go. The black teardrop of his Daimler Nighthawk followed a long, smooth, computer-directed arc upward toward the cloud deck.

She ached for the river.

Forty days, she thought. *That's really just five weeks-well, six. For six weeks, I can stand anything.*

Forty days from today, at 0900 hours, her next shift as the goddess would begin. At 0830 she would snug the respirator and lower herself into the freemod coffin and lock down its lid; she'd lie motionless on the gelcot for the endless minutes of mass balancing-the freemod transfer requires an extremely precise exchange of mass/energy between the universes-and for those slow-ticking seconds she would hang in delicious anticipation, awaiting the mind-twisting soundless thunderclap of freemod transfer. Awaiting the first notes of Chambaraya's Song: the deep, slow hymn of welcome that would fill her heart and draw forth her answering melody. Twice a year, for three months at a time, she could be part of the river.

Twice a year, she could be whole.

She'd never told Hari how she longed for that music; she'd never told him how empty and stale Earth had become for her. She loved him too much to tell him how painful it was to be alone inside her head. *Can't you see?* her heart cried to the departing arc of his car.

Can't you see how lonely I am?

Slow tears rolled down her cheeks. How could she live, with nothing inside her but memory and hope?

"Mommy?" Faith's voice came tentatively from behind her. "Mommy, are you all right?"

Shanna pushed herself away from the window. She didn't bother to wipe away her tears; the intimate bond she shared with Faith for half of each year made lying impossible. "No," she said. "No, I'm sad today."

"Me, too." Faith knuckled her eyes as she slowly came into the study. Shanna met her and picked her up, straightening Faith's pajamas and brushing the fine-spun golden hair back from her face. Faith sighed and laid her cheek against Shanna's shoulder. "You miss the river, huh?"

Shanna nodded silently. She sat back down on the window seat and held Faith on her lap; she looked out toward the orange-underlit gloom of the cloud deck.

"Me, too," Faith said solemnly. "I miss the music. It's always so quiet when you're home-sometimes I get a little scared."

Shanna hugged her daughter tightly, intimately aware of how small and fragile she was, holding her small head against her shoulder. The physical contact was only a poor echo, though, of the intimacy and love they could share when connected by the river. Faith had been born nine months-almost to the day-after her battle at the Ankhnan docks, The cells that would someday become her daughter had been already riding in her womb, that first time she'd ever touched the river and joined its Song.

Faith had been brushed with power at the apotheosis of Pallas Ril.

"I miss you when you're here," Faith said. "It's pretty lonely, without the music. But Daddy needs you, too."

"Yes," Shanna said. "Yes, I know."

"Is that what happened? Were you and Daddy fighting?"

"No, we weren't fighting. No one fights with your father anymore," Shanna said hopelessly. She looked out toward the swell of cloud where the Nighthawk had disappeared. "I think that's most of the problem."

5

The tenement sagged under the weight of two hundred years' neglect. Its smog-blackened walls gave back almost none of the glow from the single cracked streetlight outside: a vacant, slightly lopsided rectangle, it loomed against the overcast night, a window into oblivion.

Hari stood on the crumbling pavement, staring up into the alley behind, at the spot where he knew his window still was: 3F, third floor in the back, farthest from the stairwell. Three rooms and one walk-in

closet barely big enough for an eight-year-old boy to have a cot. That tiny closet had been his room until a month after his sixteenth birthday.

And that window, which could be pried open silently if he worked at it carefully enough: with better light-or younger eyes-he was sure he'd be able to pick out rope scars on the ancient aluminum windowsill.

He could still feel the coil of that rope pressing against his ribs from its hiding place between his thin camp mattress and the steel slats of the cot frame. That coil of rope had saved his life dozens of times; sometimes his only chance to escape Duncan's intermittent homicidal rages had been to lock the door of his room and slip out that window, lower himself to the street. Down here among the whores and the addicts and the prowling sexual predators he had been closer to safe than anywhere within his father's reach.

Closer to safe than breathing that apartment's stink of madness into his lungs.

"I once thought," Tan'elKoth said beside his shoulder, "that I understood why we come here. I believed that you come to remind yourself what an extraordinary journey your life has been. From here, one can see both where you began-" He nodded at the tenement, then turned to regard the spire of San Francisco Studio Central, only three kilometers away. "-and the pinnacle which you have achieved. The contrast is, not to put too fine a point on it, astonishing. Yet it seems to give you no satisfaction."

Hari didn't need to look at Tan'elKoth to know the expression he'd be wearing: a mask of polite interest that half concealed a savage hunger. The ex-Emperor had an interest both intense and abiding in anything that might cause Hari pain. Hari didn't grudge that interest; he'd earned it.

"That's not why I come here; he said heavily.

He looked around at the crumbling buildings that leaned over the broken pavement; at the darkened basement bars on every corner, filled with loud music and restlessly still people; at the food bank, where empty-eyed men and women with silent children were already queuing up for the breakfast that was still two hours away. Not far away, a rumpled mound of tattered clothing moved slightly, revealing a ragface in the final stages of his long descent: his eyes rolled sightlessly, blind with methanol poisoning, his nose and part of his upper lip rotted into oozing open wounds. The ragface opened a plastic bag to pull out his dirty wad of fuel-laced handkerchief and pressed it to his mouth, shuddering deeply as he inhaled.

Hari lifted a hand, dropped it again: a brief hopeless flick that encompassed the entire Mission District. "Sometimes I have to remind myself it's a long fucking way down."

An old, old punchline whispered in the back of his head, bitter and unfunny: *The fall ain't so bad-the problem's that sudden stop at the bottom . . .*

"You are considering a leap?" Tan'elKoth said slowly.

Hari shrugged and started walking again. Rover hummed along in the street behind him, keeping its robotic two-pace distance.

Tan'elKoth swung alongside with the ponderous majesty of a battle cruiser at half speed. "And this is why you bring me here? Do you hope that I hate you enough to convince you to jump?"

"Don't you?" He squinted up at the enormous man beside him. Tan'elKoth wore the cable-knit sweater

and chinos of a casually stylish Professional, and his dark mane was pulled back in a conservative ponytail. Middle age was softening his jawline toward a curve of jowl, but he still had the titanic build of the god he had once been. The metallic straps of the ammod harness that he wore over his sweater gleamed like armor under the streetlight. It was easy to imagine that the pavement would tremble beneath his step.

"Of course I do," Tan'elKoth said easily. They ambled along another block, passing from shadow to light to shadow again, sharing a companionable silence.

"I have dreamed your death, Caine," he said finally. "I have lusted for it as the damned in your Christian hell lust for oblivion. Your death would not give me back my Empire, would not return to me the love of my Children, but it would ease-if only for the few seconds that I crush your life between my fingers-the suffering of my exile."

He lowered his head as though to examine the sidewalk. "But: once done, I would be bereft. I have nothing else of which to dream."

Hari sidestepped a pair of drunks who leaned on each other as they tried to decide whether to go indoors or pass out here on the street; Tan'elKoth shouldered them effortlessly out of the way. They shouted something slurred and angry. Hari and Tan'elKoth kept walking. "And further," Tan'elKoth murmured, "I confess that I would miss you."

"You would?"

"Sadly, yes." He sighed. "I find myself living more and more upon memories of the past. They are the sole comfort of my captivity. You are the only person with whom I share those memories; you are the only man alive who truly remembers-who truly *appreciates-what I* once was." He spread his hand in a gesture of resignation. "Maudlin, isn't it? What a revolting creature I have become."

This cut a little too close to the bone for Hari's comfort; he walked on without speaking for a block or two. "Don't you-" he began slowly, then started again. "You ever think about going back?"

"Of course. My home is never far from my thoughts; Ankhana is the land of my birth, and of my rebirth. The bitterest wound that life has inflicted upon me is the knowledge that I will never taste that wind, never warm my face with that sun, never stand upon that earth, ever again. I could leave this life a happy man, if only my last breath might be of Ankhanan air."

Tan'elKoth lifted his massive shoulders and dropped them again. "But that is an empty fantasy. Even if your masters would allow such a thing, the Beloved Children have no need of me; I am of greater value to the Church as a symbol than I could be as a personal god. And that god still exists: The power of Ma'elKoth is a function of the pooled devotion of my worshipers. Priests of Ma'elKoth still channel the power to perform miracles by praying to my image-I should say, His, for He and I are no longer coextensive."

He released a long, slow sigh, empty of all feeling save loss. "I cannot pretend that the world fails to turn for lack of my hand upon it."

Hari nodded. "Shit just turns out that way sometimes," he said. "You should be used to it by now."

"Should I?" Tan'elKoth came to a halt; he appeared to study the urine-stained wall at his side. "And how is it that I should find my defeat more tolerable than you have your victory?"

Hari snorted. "That's easy: you can blame it on me," he said. "Who do I blame?"

Chocolate brows canted upward over his enormous liquid eyes as Tan'elKoth considered this. "Mm, just so," he admitted at last, nodding to himself with a rueful half smile. "It is a curiously consistent characteristic of yours, Caine, that you always seem to be just a bit smarter than I anticipate."

"Yeah, sure. I'm a genius with a capital J."

Tan'elKoth laid one finger alongside the bend in his nose where Caine had broken it: the only flaw in his classically perfect features. "Do you know why I have never had this repaired?" he asked. He opened his hand as though releasing a butterfly. "For the same reason that I changed my name."

Hari squinted at him again, narrowing his eyes to overlay his vision with the memory of this man as he'd been in the days he had ruled the Ankhanan Empire, as Emperor and living god. In those days, he had called himself *Ma'elKoth*, a phrase in Paquli that translates, roughly, as *I Am Limitless*. *Ma*, in Paquli, is the present nominative case of *to be*; *tan* is its past tense.

I Was Limitless.

"So that every time I hear my name-every time I see my reflection-" Tan'elKoth continued, "I am reminded of the penalty for underestimat-ing you."

His tone was distantly precise. Well rehearsed. More and more, during these Earthbound years, Tan'elKoth seemed to be talking for someone else's benefit-as though he was playing to an audience that existed only in his mind.

Hari grunted. "Flatterer."

"Mmm. Perhaps."

"Is that why you've never Made a try for me?"

Tan'elKoth began walking again. "Revenge is an occupation of inferior minds," he said meditatively. "It is the shibboleth of spiritual poverty." "That's not an answer."

Tan'elKoth only shrugged and walked on. After a moment, Hari followed him. "Perhaps I have not destroyed you," the ex-Emperor murmured, "because it is more enjoyable to watch you destroy yourself."

"That's about right," Han said with a snort. "Everything I've done my whole life has been somebody's *entertainment*."

Tan'elKoth hummed a neutral agreement.

Hari rubbed the back of his neck, but his fingers couldn't loosen the knots that had tied themselves there. "Maybe that's part of what's so hard to take, at the end of the day. I've done a lot of shifty things in my life. I've done some pretty good things. But when you come right down to it, none of that matters. Everything I've done, everything that's been done to me-win, lose, love, hate; who gives a fuck?-it all only counts as far as it helps some bastard I've never met while away a couple idle hours."

"We are indeed a pair," Tan'elKoth mused. "Our wars long fought, our glories passed. Is it truly that your life was mere entertainment which troubles you-or is it that your life is no longer so entertaining?"

"Hey, that reminds me," Hari said. "I don't think I've invited you lately to go fuck yourself."

Tan'elKoth smiled indulgently. "I wept because I had no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet." He nodded down the sidewalk, at a ragged legless beggar dozing in his ancient manual wheelchair. "Consider this man: I have no doubt he would give up his very hope of the afterlife to walk-even so badly as you walk-for one single day."

"So?" Hari said. "So he's more crippled than I am. So what?" Tan'elKoth's smile turned cold. "You have a much nicer wheelchair." "Oh, sure," Hari said. He grunted a bitter laugh. "Rover's a real treat." "Rover?" Tan'elKoth said. One eyebrow arched more steeply. "You gave a name to your wheelchair? I hadn't thought you the type."

Hari shrugged irritably. "It's a command code, that's all. It lets the voice-control software know I'm talking to it."

"And Rover is a dog's name, is it not? Like Faithful-mm, Fido?"

"It's not a dog's name," Hari said, disgusted with himself. "It's a joke, that's all. It started as a bad joke, and I just never bothered to change it." "I don't see the humor."

"Yeah, me neither." He shrugged dismissively. "I know you don't watch a lot of net. You know anything about twentieth-century serial photoplays?"

"Little, save that they tend to be infantile."

"Well, there was one called *The Prisoner*. Ever hear of it?"

Tan'elKoth shook his head.

"It's kind of too complicated to really explain," Hari said. "Rover was a very efficient prison guard. That's all."

"Mmm," Tan'elKoth mused. "I think I see-"

"Don't go wise and philosophical on me-every time you pull that shit, I start to regret I didn't kill you when I had the chance."

"Just so." Tan'elKoth sighed. "Sometimes I do, too."

Hari looked at him, trying to think of something to say; after a moment, he just nodded and started walking again, and Tan'elKoth fell in at his side.

They walked together in silence for some time.

"I suppose ... the actual question is, What, in the end, does one want?" Tan'elKoth asked finally. "Do we want to become happy with the lives we have, or do we want to *change* our lives-into lives with which we will be happy? After all, to content yourself with your current situation is a simple matter of serotonin balance: it can be accomplished by medication."

"Drugs won't change anything but my attitude." Hari shrugged, dismissing the idea. "And changing? My whole life? This was what I was *fighting* for."

"Was it?"

"*I won*, goddammit. I beat Kollberg. I beat *you*. I got everything I goddamn wanted: fame, wealth, power. Shit, I even got the girl."

"The problem with happy endings," Tan'elKoth said, "is that nothing is ever truly over."

"Fuck that," Hari said. "I am living happily ever goddamn after. *I am*."

"Ah, I see: It is *happiness* which has brought you to these streets, at this hour, with me," Tan'elKoth murmured. "I have always supposed *living happily ever after* at four A.M. would somehow involve lying in bed, asleep, with one's *wife*."

Hari looked at the filthy pavement beneath his feet. "It's just . . . I don't know. Sometimes, y'know, late at night ..." He shook his head, driving away the thought. He took a slow breath, and shrugged. "I guess I'm not handling getting old so well, that's all. This is . Ahh, fuck it. Midlife crisis bullshit."

Tan'elKoth stood silently at Hari's side, motionless, until Hari looked up and found the ex-Emperor staring at him like he'd bitten into something rotten that he couldn't spit out. "Is this the name you give to your despair? Midlife crisis bullshit?"

"Yeah, all right, whatever. Call it whatever the fuck you want-"

"Stop," Tan'elKoth rumbled. He put a hand the size of a cave bear's paw on Hari's shoulder and gave him a squeeze that stopped just short of crushing bone. "You cannot trivialize your pain with *nomenclature*. You forget to whom you speak, Caine."

Tan'elKoth's gaze smoked; it held Hari as tight as his smothering grip did. "In this way, we are brothers; I have felt what you feel, and we both know that no mere word can compass and contain this injury. We are *wounded*, you and I: with a hurt that time cannot heal. Like a cancer, like gangrene, it grows worse with each passing hour. It is *killing* us."

Hari lowered his head. The pain in his chest allowed him no answer; he could only stare, grip-jawed and silent, at the faint bands of soft color across his knuckles.

Drunken voices slurred from behind them, "Hey, you flickers! Hey, shitheads!"

Hari and Tan'elKoth turned to find two men lurching toward them along the street: the pair of drunks Tan'elKoth had shouldered off the sidewalk. As they wove unsteadily through a pool of mercury-argon lampglow, Hari could see the length of pipe in one's hand. In the hand of the other, two decimeters of blade gleamed steel-bright.

"Who th'fuck y'think y'are?" the one with the knife asked owlshly; he turned his head from side to side as though searching for an angle that might clear his vision. "Who y'think y'r shovin'?"

The knife guy was in the lead; Hari took one step forward to intercept him. He could read this bastard like a street sign. The knife was for show—for intimidation, for self-respect: eight inches of steel penis,

bright and hard.

Hari saw three ways he could settle this right down. He could apologize, maybe buy them a drink, cool them off a little, let them feel like they mattered-that's all they really wanted. Or he could pull out his palmpad and key the Social Police, then point out to these guys that he's an Administrator and Tan'elKoth's a Professional, and they were looking at life under the yoke if they didn't back off. Simplest would be just to tell them who he was. Laborers are as celebrity-struck as anybody else, and unexpectedly meeting Caine himself on the street would dazzle them.

Instead, he angled the right side of his body slightly away from the guy, presenting about a three-quarter profile, his hands boneless at his sides, a bright tingle beginning to sizzle along his nerves. "Y'know, you shouldn't pull a knife unless you're gonna use it."

"Who says I'm not planning to-"

Hari leaned into a lunge, his left hand becoming a backfist as it blurred through a short arc from his thigh to the guy's nose. It struck with a *wetwhack* like the snap of a soaked towel, and tilted the drunk's head back to the perfect angle for Hari's right cross to take him precisely on the point of the chin.

Hari staggered a little, grimacing-his bypass's secondhand footwork left him off balance, open for a countering slash of the knife-but it didn't matter: the drunk fell backward like a toppling pole and stretched his length on the pavement.

"It's not about what you're *planning*," Hari said.

Both his fists burned and stung.

It was a good pain, and he welcomed it.

"Fuck my *mother*," the other drunk breathed, the pipe hanging forgotten by his side. "You-I know you *youare*, aren't you? I mean, aren't you *Caine*?"

"I used to be," Hari said.

"I'm a big fan-"

"Thanks. Take a fucking hike."

"No, I mean it, I really am-"

"I believe you. Now get out of here before I kill you."

The drunk stumbled off, muttering to himself, "Shit, holy shit, holy son of a motherfucking shit ..."

Tan'elKoth nodded down at the man who lay on the street. "Is he dead?"

"Maybe." Hari shrugged. "Probably not."

Hari's combat rush faded as fast as it had risen, leaving him bleak and bitter and slightly sick. His hands throbbed and his mouth tasted of coffee grounds. So, *here I am, thirty years later: still beating up drunks in the Mission District.*

Why not just go ahead and roll him for loose change?

"You asked me what I want. I can tell you ..." Hari said slowly. "I can tell you exactly what I want."

He nudged the drunk with his toe, not even really seeing the man anymore; in this drunken, bleeding Laborer lying in the street, his face busted up because he was too stupid to back off, he was looking at himself

"I want to find out who it is that keeps reaching down into my life and turning everything I touch into shit," Hari said. "I want *to meet* him. I'm not asking for much: I want to share a little bit of pain with him, that's all." He pressed his fists against his legs, and said through his teeth, "I want to get *my hands* on the motherfucker."

"Mm. This is a dream I can share with you, Caine." Once again, Tan'elKoth laid his hand across Hari's shoulder like a blanket, and through that physical connection sparked a current of understanding.

Hari pulled away.

Tan'elKoth kept his hand in the air, turning it over as though to read his own palm. He loomed over Hari, blank, impenetrable, inhumanly solid: a sarsen stone outlined against the dawn-lit clouds above.

"Be careful for what you wish," he said softly. "A very wise man of your world has observed that when the gods would punish us, they answer our prayers."

The god of dust and ashes had slept for an age, fitful in slow, infinite starvation, restlessly gnawing on the bleak cinder that had been its world.

Though the god slumbered, its merest dream maintained its dominion, for it was attended by priests who never guessed at its existence. It had a church that did not seem to be a church, had a religion that did not know it was a religion, and had followers that prayed to other gods, or to no god at all. Years passed while it awakened-but when it finally roused, men leaped to serve it, though they thought they served only themselves.

For this is the power of the god of dust and ashes: to weave the lives of its followers so that the fabric thus created has a pattern none of them intend.

Two.

As the crisp late-summer afternoon faded to evening, the shadow of the God's Teeth mountains stretched to the east and swallowed first the mines, erasing their billowing towers of smoke, then wiped across the Northwest Road and engulfed Thorncleft, the tiny Transdeian capital city.

The Monastic Ambassador to Transdeia, a young man the world named Raithe of Ankhana, sat in a straight-backed, unadorned, unpadded, and exceptionally uncomfortable chair, staring out at the shadow's grope with blank unseeing eyes.

Most unsettling, those eyes were: the pale blue grey of winter ice, set in a face as dark and leathery as that of a Korish desert tribesman. The startling contrast made his stare a disturbing, almost dangerous

thing; few men could bear to match his gaze. Fewer still would care to try, if they knew just how deeply those pale eyes could see.

Late in the afternoon, five elves, had come to Thorncleft. Raithe had seen them first from this very window: dusty, in clothing travel-worn and stained, mounted on horses whose ribs showed even under their mantles of green and black. Those mantles had been embroidered with the star-browed raven that was the standard of House Mithondionne.

Raithe had stared at them, memorizing every discernable curve of shoulder and tangle of hair, every faded patch where the sun had bleached color from their linen surcoats, all the details of posture and gesture that made each of them individual, as the elves walked their horses up highsloping Tor Street. He had stepped from the shadow of the half-built Monastic embassy into the street, shielding his eyes against the lowering sun, had watched them answer the challenge at the vaulted gate of Thorn-keep, had watched as the gate swung wide and the elves led their horses within.

Then he went back into the embassy, into his office, and sat in this chair so that he could see them more clearly.

He held himself perfectly erect and controlled his breathing, timing it by the subtle beats of his own heart: six beats in, hold for three, nine beats out, hold for three. As his heart slowed, so did the cycle of his breath. He built their image in the eye of his mind, drawing details of their backs from his trained memory, since their backs were what he had seen most clearly: a spray of platinum hair pricked through by the barest hint of pointed ears, a diagonal leather thong to support a waterskin, the inhuman grace of stance, the way shoulders move when hands swing in small, light gestures.

Slowly, slowly, with infinite patience, he fed details into the image: the dark curls hand-tooled into their belts, the lace of scar tissue across one's forearm, the sideways duck of another's head as he whispered to one of his companions. These were details he had not seen, could not have seen; these were details that he created in his powerful imagination. Yet as he refined them, and brought them more vividly before his mind's eye, they became plastic, shifted, and finally organized into plain, visible truth.

Now ghosts of their surroundings materialized in his mind: the marble floor, deeply worn but highly polished, on which their boots made almost no sound, the long tongue of pale blue carpet that entered the doorway before them. He got a vague sense of huge, high-vaulted space, oaken beams blackened by years of smoldering torches below.

He hummed satisfaction under his breath. This would be the Hall of State.

He had been inside that hall many times in the few months since he'd been posted here from Ankhana; using his recollection of the details of the hall brought the scene inside it into sharper and more brilliant focus than he could have seen with the eyes of his body—from the glittering steel of the ceremonial weapons that bedizened the walls to the precise color of the sunlight that struggled through the smoke-darkened windows. There before the elves was the Gilt Throne, and upon it lounged Transdeia's lazy, spineless puppet lord: Kithin, fourteenth Duke of Thorncleft. Raithe could see even the stitching on Duke Kithin's shirt of maroon and gold; with that as a mental anchor, he swung his perception to see the room as Kithin saw it. Now, for the first time, he could get a good look at the faces of the elves.

He didn't trouble to study these faces too closely; elvish features lack the creases that time and care paint upon human physiognomy, and thus reveal nothing of their character. Elves, in Raithe's experience, looked very much alike.

He was rather more interested in what had brought them to Thorn-cleft, and so he studied the silent motions of lips and tongue; though he spoke little Primal, they would be conversing in Westerling for the benefit of Duke Kithin, and lipreading is easy, when practiced through the pristine vision of his mindeye.

His mindeye had always been one of his most useful talents.

Raithe had been only a boy when he'd discovered his gift thirteen years old, barely into adolescence. One golden morning he had lain in bed, in his room above his father's tiny smithy, slowly awakening from a dream. In the dream, he'd kissed Dala, the raven-haired sixteen-year-old girl who sold sticky buns on the corner of Tanner and the Angle; as he lay in bed fingering the erection this dream had given him, he'd imagined her rising for the morning and pulling her nightdress off over her head, imagined her round, swelling breasts bouncing free, her nipples hardening as she splashed herself with water from the pitcher beside her bed. In his mind, he saw her stand naked before the mirror, braiding her hair in a new way, coiling it into a gleaming black helmet instead of the long strands she usually allowed to trail down her back; he imagined that she chose her oldest blouse to wear that day, the one he loved the best, its fabric so worn and supple that it clung to her curves and gave a hint of the dark circles of her nipples.

Sheer fantasy, of course: the vivid daydreams of an imaginative boy in lust.

But when he'd gone that morning to buy buns for his father's dinner, blushing so that he hardly dared even to look at her, he'd found that she was wearing that very blouse, and she had chosen that morning to coil her hair up in a new style, tight and shining around her head-exactly as he had imagined it.

That had been Raithe's first hint that he was destined for greatness.

Mastering his gift had not come easily. In the days and weeks that followed, as he spied on Dala's naked body at every opportunity, he found that his vivid imagination was more hindrance than help. Too often, his mental image of her would lift hands to breasts, to fondle and squeeze them as he wanted to do. Too often, he would fantasize one hand creeping down to the silky nest between her legs ... and the vision would scatter into the random eyelights of total darkness. He discovered that clear imaging required a certain coldness of mind, a detachment; otherwise, his sight became murky, clouded with his own desires, with ghosts of wish-fulfilling fantasies.

Those wish-fulfilling fantasies had a power of their own, though, as he discovered one day when Dala met his eye with a shy smile, when he gazed at her while he held a perfectly formed mental image of their naked limbs entwined in a tangle of sheets-and she reached out, took his hand, and led him to her room on a clear, hot summer's afternoon, and took his virginity with exactly that same shy smile.

That had been the sweet brush of his destiny's lips, as well.

He'd entered his novitiate at fourteen, using the advanced education available only at the Monastic Embassy to sharpen his powers; the Esoteric training of both body and mind gave him the self-discipline to ruthlessly strangle those desires that crippled his gift. Now he used his mind as another friar might wield a sword: as a weapon, sworn in the service of the Human Future.

At twenty-five, he was the youngest full Ambassador in the Monasteries' six-hundred-year history-and not even the Council of Brothers could guess how much their decision might have been influenced by the subtle power of a young friar's dreams.

Now in Thorncleft a haze began to obscure his vision, as though he peered through a twisty veil of gauze, while the great doors of the hall swung wide and in marched a double column of the Artan

Guards, their curious springless pellet bows held at ready aslant their scarlet-armored chests. They spread out into the wide arc of an honor guard.

The elves gazed at them with bald curiosity, not yet aware of their import. Lord Kithin, for his part, sprang hastily from the Gilt Throne and dropped to one knee, inclining his head to welcome the Artan Viceroy, Vinson Garrette. Lord Kithin could be trusted only to handle situations of purely ceremonial nature. No business of import could be conducted in Transdeia without the presence of the representative of this land's true rulers.

Raithe's heart began to pound.

Garrette seemed to speak cordially to the elves as he walked among them. Raithe felt a surge of anger at the mental haze that prevented him from fully experiencing the meeting-if he could only hear what Garrette said, perhaps he could understand the import of these legates. He burned for that understanding.

With a need as sharp and immediate as hunger to a starving man, he ached to understand where, in all this, was the connection to Caine.

But his sudden swell of desire ruptured his concentration and scattered his vision; now he saw only the view from this window in the half-completed embassy. He snarled at himself, then shut his eyes, laid his hand across them, and forced himself to concentrate once more. He slowed his breathing, a measured count of nine to inhale, hold for three, exhale for twelve, and the Hall of State began to coalesce once more inside his skull.

"Headache, Master Ambassador?" asked a greasily solicitous voice nearby. "Would you like a cup of willowbark tea? I'm having one."

Raithe's view of the hall vanished as he opened his eyes and glared at Ptolan, the fledgling embassy's Master Householder, a fat and perpetually befuddled Exoteric who seemed perfectly content to pass his fading years humming tunelessly to himself and tending the last few strands of his unruly steel-spring hair. Nolan stood in the archway, not too far from the small iron stove he kept lit beside his desk for warmth-his sluggish nature made even this late summer afternoon too chill for his sagging, repellently pale flesh. He smiled at Raithe expectantly as he poured water into a teapot from a small brass carafe.

"Thank you," Raithe said icily, "no."

"It'll put a little color in your cheeks," Ptolan said, in what the fat fool must have imagined was an encouraging tone. His own cheeks sported blotches red as a whore's mouth. "Two brew as easy as one, y'know. It's a, well, a sharing, y'know? Brotherhood and all that. I know you began as an Esoteric, but we in the public services do things a bit differently ..."

Instead of a reply, Raithe gave him a chilly stare-one of those steady bleached-out gazes that he used to intimidate weaker men. Ptolan swallowed and looked away, chuckling nervously in the back of his throat. "Please yourself, haha, you usually do, I suppose. I'll, ah, I'll just-" He rubbed his hands together, and chuckled some more. "I'll just, ah, go ahead for two, and if you change your mind-"

"Don't bother-" Raithe began.

"Oh, it's no bother-"

"I was *saying*-" He bared his teeth. "-don't bother me."

He set his head against the uncomfortable scrollwork of the chair's high back and shut his eyes. "Go away."

For a brutally long moment, the only image he could summon was of Ptolan standing in the archway, his slack thick-lipped mouth open-ing and closing with the soundless dismay of a hungry chick. Then hesitant footfalls faded toward the outer chamber, and Raithe regulated his breathing; soon, the interior of the Hall of State took hazy shape once more.

Though Garrette stood beside the Gilt Throne, where Lord Kithin sat, there was no question as to who was the true ruler of Transdeia. The Artan Viceroy projected a calm authority that was unmistakable; Lord Kithin himself never spoke without first glancing to Garrette to search his long gaunt face for any sign of disapproval.

Still Raithe's concentration was too scattered to pick up their words, but his hazy perception of Garrette's face let him read one word from the Viceroy's lips:*Diamondwell*.

Raithe nodded to himself and let his vision dissolve into a random scattering of eyelights. So the Mithondionne legates had come about *Diamondwell*; he had warned Garrette that Mithondion would respond-all subs stick together, in the end-but the Viceroy had firmly refused to worry about that possibility until it presented itself.

Diamondwell had been a dwarfish reservation in the Transdeian hills that had styled itself, with typical subhuman arrogance, as a "freehold." The trouble had begun nearly a year ago-before Raithe had been posted here as Ambassador-when the dwarfs' children and elderly began to fall ill. Having been born and bred to mining, the dwarfs had soon recognized the symptoms of metals poisoning. Viceroy Garrette himself had generously-overgenerously, in Raithe's considered opinion-ordered an investigation, using Artan resources to find the cause. When this cause turned out to be runoff from Artan smelters leaching into the *Diamondwell* groundwater, Garrette-again overgenerously-had offered to resettle the dwarfs in a new reservation, higher in the mountains and farther away from the Artan mining operations.

The dwarfs had refused, citing some sentimentalized twaddle about their ancestral lands. They had instead chosen, foolishly, to begin a guerrilla campaign of sabotage against the Artan mining machinery and smelting plants, hoping to make mining and smelting in those hills so expensive that the Artans would move their operations, instead. They had failed in the most basic principle of warfare:*Know your enemy*.

Artan military technology was even more advanced than their mining technology; to march into *Diamondwell* and arrest the entire population turned out to be much less expensive than moving the mining operations would have been. Those who came peacefully had been rewarded with tasks in the mines, clean food and water, and comfortable cots on which to rest; those who resisted had been slaughtered like the animals they were.

It had been a messy situation, one that Raithe privately believed could have been much more simply resolved: merely adding a more potent poison to the *Diamondwell* groundwater would have settled the issue with great swiftness and economy. Garrette's pretense of good nature and helpfulness, the facade of concern for the dwarfs' troubles he had presented, had only made the situation worse: it had emboldened the dwarfs, and allowed them to wreak considerable havoc upon the mines before they were finally contained.

Raithe imagined that something similar was going on in the Hall of State even now. Garrette was probably hemming and hawing, trying to allay any suspicions the elvish legates had developed; he couldn't

understand how much trouble he was already in. He had no conception of the power that Mithondion still could wield if a war should come-of course, conversely, neither did the Mithondionne elves have any idea of the power of the Artan rulers of Transdeia.

It seemed to Raithe that there was a vast opportunity here-but opportunity for what, and how should he approach grasping it?

Once he understood how all this related to Caine, he would know what to do.

2

Anyone who is of a thoughtful, philosophical cast of mind will occasionally be struck by the appearance of certain organizing principles of history. The form these principles seem to take inevitably depends upon one's specific obsession. For a monarchist, history might be a story of the clash of great leaders; for a socialist, history is a struggle of classes in economic civil war. An agriculturalist sees the dynamic of populations, land, and availability of food; a philosopher might speak of the will to power or the will to synthesis; a theologian of the will of God. Raithe was not by nature a thoughtful man, but the events of his time had conspired to make him aware of one of these vast organizing principles, one so powerfully obvious that he was consistently amazed that no one but him seemed aware of it.

A lifetime ago-when he had been a young, hopeful, passionately dedicated friar, just entering the Esoteric Service in Ankhana-that governing principle of history had intervened and shattered Raithe like overfired pottery. Piece by piece, he had rebuilt-reforged--himself, but the man who emerged from that crucible was no longer Raithe of Ankhana, though he still answered to that name.

In those days, Creele of Garthan Hold had been the Ambassador to Ankhana. Raithe could still see him as clearly as though he stood before him now: a man of grace and beauty, eyes constantly sparkling with his extraordinary wit, a brilliant thinker, an intellect like fire leaping from root to branch. Ambassador Creele had taken an interest in young Raithe, had made clear that his career was upward bound. Creele had encouraged Raithe in his study of the Esoteric arts of fighting and espionage, and the skills of mind that were now his greatest weapon.

Raithe had watched in helpless horror as Creele had died by Caine's hand.

On that day, Raithe had sworn to Caine's face that there was no place the murderer could hide, to escape Monastic vengeance. But after Creele's murder, the Ambassadorial post has been taken by that plodding hypocrite Damon, who had muddied and confused the issue before the Council of Brothers-not that it had mattered, in the end; for by that time, Caine was widely supposed to be dead.

Creele's murder had been the opening tap of Raithe's destruction; like the first rap of a carpenter's hammer, it had seated the nail firmly for a single, final blow. Because Creele had died that day-because the embassy had been in great turmoil-Raithe had been on extra duty on that fateful noon five days later. He had been sitting at a writing table in the scriptorium, surrounded by spineless Exoterics, while he painstakingly lettered the fifth copy of his report on Creele's murder.

If Caine hadn't murdered Creele, Raithe would have been in Victory Stadium: beside his father, the honest, pious blacksmith, who'd been proud of his position as the house farrier at Janner's Livery; beside his mother, the quiet, faithful wife and homemaker whose loving arms had always circled Raithe like a mystic ring against the hurts of the world.

His parents had been early converts to the Church of the Beloved Children; his mother, especially, had

been passionately devoted to Ma'elKoth. And so of course they both had stood cheering in the stands, when Ma'elKoth's procession had entered Victory Stadium. Cheering-until the riot had begun, and the cheers had turned to screams.

If Raithe had been there, he would have fought for them. He would have saved them. But he wasn't there. Because of Caine.

His parents died in the riot. Slaughtered like animals.

Because of Caine.

Because of Caine, he had reforged himself into a weapon.

In the years that followed he had devoted himself to the study of Caine and his people, the alien race of *Aktiri*. He became the Monasteries' leading expert not only on Caine, but on the *Aktiri* and their world. It had been Raithe himself who had discovered the origin of the mysterious Artans, the outlanders who ruled Transdeia; shortly thereafter, Raithe had persuaded the Council of Brothers to make him the first Ambassador to the Artan court.

The world believed what the Church told them, that Caine had died on the sand at Victory Stadium. Raithe knew better. Somewhere, somehow, the murderer of his parents lived in the smug enjoyment of his rancid victory; Raithe could see him in his dreams. And in every dream, Raithe renewed his promise.

I will teach you my name.

He would teach the world his name; but the name he would teach it was not Raithe. The name *Raithe* was now a mask, a costume he wore to conceal his true face. *Raithe* had been brittle, fragile enough to shatter under a single sharp blow-a bit of pottery, no more. The man who now wore his face was a weapon, a blade of tempered steel gleaming from the forge. Only in his deepest, most cherished dream of dreams, in the stone: he whispered to himself in the darkest midnights, when his ghosts all crowded round his heart, did he dare to call himself by his true name.

He had become the Caineslayer.

Childish? He knew it was-but he had been a child when he'd sworn himself to it. Now, seven years later, he could make his cheeks burn merely by imagining the humiliation of anyone ever learning how much he still cherished this adolescent melodrama . . . but that only made him clutch it ever more tightly to his heart.

In swearing himself to that name, he had made a vow that would never be broken. Now he kept perfect vigilance, waiting.

In comparing Caine's history to those of others in the Monastic Archives, he had discovered what he'd come to think of as Caine's defining characteristic. In each of his recorded endeavors, from the smallest assassination to the epic undertaking that had crushed the Khulan Horde at Ceraeno, there would always come a fulcrum, one defining point of balance, where a mere shift of Caine's weight toppled history in an unexpected direction.

Caine was, somehow, behind every twist of history in Raithe's short lifetime. This lesson had been burned into him like a brand upon the inside of his skull.

How had the Empire come to be? Caine saved Ankhana at Ceraeno, and Ma'elKoth triumphed over the superior forces of Lipke in the Plains War. How had Ma'elKoth come to be? Caine delivered up unto Ma'elKoth the crown of Dal'Kannith. How had Raithe come to be the Caineslayer? How had the Caineslayer come to be the Monastic Ambassador to the Artans?

The answer to every question led back to Caine.

Raithe had made it his personal rule of thumb, as private as his darkest fantasies, never to act until he understood how an event was connected to Caine. This rule had been his guidepost of destiny for nearly seven years. The connection might be distant, tenuous, tortuous-but it had always been there. This was how he maintained his perfect vigilance.

This was no longer a matter of vengeance; oh, certainly, he had started along this path seeking revenge, but revenge was a crippling desire, one of those that he had sloughed away like a snake shedding its skin. Caine need not be punished. He must be *extinguished*.

It wasn't personal, not anymore.

After all, was not Caine as much a pawn of destiny as Raithe himself? Caine had not intended to kill his parents; it had been purely an act of fate: as though all the universe conspired to create the Caineslayer.

Raithe thought of himself, of his mission-of his dream of the Caineslayer-as a metaphor, now; just as Caine had become a metaphor. To the Church of the Beloved Children of Ma'elKoth, Caine was the Prince of Chaos, the Enemy of God. He had become a symbol for all of humanity's basest instincts of low selfishness, greed, and aggression; a symbol for everything against which stood the Church. He represented that part of human nature that set man against man, woman against woman, the selfdestructive bloody-mindedness that was the single greatest threat to the Human Future.

This was the fundamental error of the Church: by elevating Caine to the status of the Enemy of God, they gave power to his legend. Raithe was a loyal elKothan himself, as his parents had been; he found it astonishing that the Church would admit of anyone or anything that could oppose the power of Ma'elKoth. Though it was Church doctrine that Caine's opposition to God had, against his will, served the greater glory of Ma'elKoth, Raithe sometimes suspected that it might be the other way around.

Caine was slippery that way.

So all this led to a single, simple terminus. To act properly on this matter of the Mithondionne legates, he had to know: *Where was the connection to Caine?*

For one awful, dizzying moment, he wondered if perhaps there might not be any connection to Caine at all; black doubt yawned beneath him, and only a frantic mental scramble brought him back from a lethal fall. There was a connection. There would be. And he would find it. He had to.

It was his destiny.

3

"Mmm, Master Raithe?" The greasy voice of Ptolan once again shattered his concentration.

Raithe opened his eyes; full night stared back at him through the open window, spangled with hazy stars. How many hours had he sat here, dozing away his opportunity? He twisted, rising from his chair,

suddenly red-faced with fury. "Rot your guts, Ptolan-*Itold you* not to bother-"

"Sorry, uh, sorry, Brother, really I am-but Brother Talle has come up saying the lamp on the Artan Mirror glows, and your instructions were that, no matter what you're doing, or what time of day it might be, or-"

"*Allright*," Raithe snarled. "Jhantho's*Faith*, can't you shut up? I'm on my way."

4

Damon of Jhanthogen Bluff, the-Acting Monastic Ambassador to the Infinite Court, looked out over the teeming ballroom and allowed himself to feel moderately pleased. The orchestra played with spectacular skill; across the broad expanse of dance floor hundreds of couples swayed, while through the crowded fringe and the smaller side rooms wove dozens of young, white-robed friars bearing trays of cocktails and appetizers. The general light came from no specific source, making the air itself seem to glow and pulse gently in time with the rhythm of the waltz, casting a glamour subtler and more enticing than mere lamp flame-making the men more dashing, the women more beautiful, the setting absolutely flawless.

Over Damon's six-year tenure as Acting Ambassador, the Monastic Ball had become the premier diplomatic event of the Ankhanan social calendar. Damon himself was a stolid, pragmatic man, with little time for social niceties and no liking for parties at all, but the value of an event such as this could not be denied. The Monasteries formed a sovereign nation, but it was a nation without borders, one that spread across every known land. On this most neutral of all neutral ground, representatives of every government across the civilized world could meet and partake of each other's company without the interference of protocols of national precedence and the like.

Here within his view stood two perfect examples: the Lipkan Ambassador traded slightly sodden jokes with his Paqulan counterpart, as they leaned on each other in drunken friendship despite the ongoing privateer raids between Paquli and the Lipkan Empire; and on the dance floor, the jel'Han of Kor in his outlandish gold-embroidered bearskin roared with laughter as Countess Maia of Kaarn lowered him into a very competent dip. Damon's normally expressionless face bent into a small grim smile of satisfaction; he reflected that he would never know how many wars and assassinations and diplomatic conflicts of all descriptions had been averted by parties just like this one.

He had not sought this post, nor did he enjoy it but the job was his to do, and he could take some satisfaction in having done it well.

Faintly through the music and laughter, Damon heard voices raised in anger. They seemed to be coming from beyond the ballroom, perhaps from the Gate Hall, outside the thrice-manheight doors, and were angry enough that they might signify violence. The friars who served as the embassy's security staff were all blooded veterans and experts in unarmed combat; they could stop any fight without unnecessary injury or insult to the participants, and so Damon was not overly concerned-until the orchestra fell silent in a chaotic tangle of flattening notes.

A man in the gold-and-blue dress livery of the Eyes of God stood beside the conductor, gesturing emphatically. The ballroom poised momentarily in apprehensive silence.

A white-robed junior friar had forced his way through the press, and now he bowed jerkily to Damon and spoke far too loudly, his breath-less words ringing in the quiet. "Master Damon-the Patriarch, he-the Eyes, the Grey Cats, they've arrested Hem, and lento, and, and, and*Vice*

Ambassador t'Passe!"

A bitterly cold shock went through Damon, and for a blank instant he could neither move nor speak.

The ballroom burst into uproar as Ambassadors and delegates and en-tourages from every nation sought each other, gathering themselves into self-protective knots. The orchestra struck up the Imperial anthem, "King of Kings," and as the first strains entered the general roar, the ballroom doors swung back. Through them flooded hard-faced men in grey leather, swords in hand. Behind the leather-dad warriors walked a dozen Household Knights in their full blood-colored battle armor, escorting a small group of Eyes of God.

In their midst limped the stocky, dark-clad figure of the Patriarch of Ankhana.

Damon's paralysis broke. "Summon Master Dossaign to my office, boy. Tell him to get on the Artan Mirror to the Council of Brothers, with the word that we have been attacked, and the embassy has been occupied by Imperial forces."

The young friar hesitated. "But I don't understand! How could even the Patriarch dare-?"

"You need not *understand*," Damon snapped. "You need only obey. When the Master Speaker has sent the message, have him disconnect the Mirror and hide it, so that it is never seen by unworn eyes. Now go!"

He jumped like a startled rat and scampered away.

The Grey Cats fanned out through the crowd, their ready blades persuading all and sundry that the wisest course would be to wait silently, and watch, and hope that the Patriarch had not come for any of them.

Damon caught the eyes of several nearby friars. They moved toward him, opening a path through the press. Damon stepped into the gap and waved to the orchestra, which now fell silent. In the breathless quiet, he met the colorless gaze of the Patriarch of Ankhana.

The Patriarch was a man of somewhat less than average size; his face was pale and heavily scored by the burdens he bore. Damon was personally aware that the Patriarch never spent less than twelve hours a day laboring at the business of the Empire-and those twelve-hour days often extended to twenty. The hair that strayed from beneath his flat cap of soft black velvet was the same neutral, undefinable grey brown as his eyes-eyes that now gazed upon Damon with the same expressionless dispassion they had held in the days when the Patriarch had been the Duke of Public Order.

That had been before the Assumption of Ma'elKoth; in the chaos that followed the Emperor's transfiguration, the Duke of Public Order had seized the reins of power, bullying the nobility into confirming him as the Steward of the Empire. Shortly after solidifying his Stewardship, the former Duke had proclaimed the Doctrine of elKothan Supremacy and had named himself the first Patriarch of the Church of the Beloved Children of Ma'elKoth.

By acting always in the name of the Divine Ma'elKoth, the Patriarch had gathered to himself greater political power than the Emperor Himself had wielded; Damon privately considered that Toa-Sytell, former Duke, now Steward and Patriarch, was the most dangerous man alive.

"Your Radiance; Damon said in a tone of flatly correct courtesy. He did not genuflect, or even offer the

slightest incline of his head for a bow; he was the sovereign of this tiny nation bounded by the embassy walls, and he owed no obsequence to any invader. "I presume there is some explanation for this outrageous conduct. Your armed invasion of these premises, and your detention of Monastic citizens by threat of force, are acts of war."

Toa-Sytell's only response was a slight preliminary compression of the lips.

Damon drew himself up and said with clipped, ominous precision, "You are not the first ruler to delude himself into believing he had the power to violate Monastic sovereignty."

"I apologize; the Patriarch said blandly. "No one has been harmed, and it was not the Empire's intention to give offense. The Empire does not invade. The Empire does not attack. Those detained will be released, once it can be established that they are Monastic citizens in truth, and not terrorist criminals engaged in high treason against the Empire: offenses against God Himself. The matter will be explained fully in Our formal apology to the Council of Brothers. Perhaps we could continue this discussion in your office, Excellency?"

"Perhaps His Radiance could explain *now*, in the presence of all here," Damon said grimly, "how he could come to believe that one of my *Vice-Ambassadors* might *not* be a Monastic citizen?"

The Patriarch did not so much as glance at the breathless crowd that hung upon his every word. "The woman calling herself t'Passe of Narnen Hill," he said imperturbably, "has associated herself with Cainists, and has herself been heard to espouse political views tantamount to Cainism."

This brought gasps and indignant whispers from the assembly-*the astonishing effrontery of this man, Patriarch or no*-and a number of outraged and disbelieving looks directed both at the Patriarch and at his attending Grey Cats.

Damon's face remained impassive, but inwardly he raged at his underling for her foolishly idealistic nature, and at himself for forbearing to beat that out of her. He said calmly, "This would be disturbing, if true-but only disturbing, *not criminal*. To the best of my knowledge, holding Cainist views does not constitute high treason."

"The best of your knowledge," the Patriarch said, with a quiet exactitude that touched on subtle irony, "is sadly out of date."

He let those words fall into the silence for a long, long moment.

"On this, the Eve of Saint Berne, let it be known: There is no safety for the enemies of God. Traitors and terrorist criminals cannot take shelter behind diplomatic convention. When the welfare of the Beloved Children of Ma'elKoth is threatened, even Our well-known respect for Monastic dignity must give way. Monastic sovereignty is temporal; the power of Ma'elKoth eternal. Ma'elKoth is supreme!"

The Patriarch, the Household Knights and every Grey Cat struck their chests with closed fists, as though each drove a dagger into his own heart, and then opened their hands as though offering their hearts' blood to their Lord: the primary gesture of their faith.

Toa-Sytell nodded briskly to Damon and limped beyond him toward the doors that led into the embassy's interior, rocking from side to side on his crippled leg. As he passed, he said softly, "Your office, Damon. Now." Four Household Knights trailed in his wake.

Damon stood motionless for an endless second, his mind boiling; finally he pulled himself together enough to speak.

"This matter," he said, not loudly but with a crisp, penetrating tone so that all could hear, "is between the Empire and the Monasteries, and shall be settled as such. Let it not interfere with your evening's entertainment." He waved to the conductor, and the orchestra struck up a sprightly reel. Without waiting to see if anyone would actually join the dance, Damon turned and followed the Patriarch.

Before he left the ballroom, he signaled to six of the embassy's security staff. All six were Esoterics, each man a specialist in personal combat against an armored opponent. He had no illusions that he or his embassy could survive a violent encounter with the might of the Empire-but he intended to ensure that the Patriarch would not survive it either. If he could not settle this matter peacefully, it would be settled in blood.

5

Toa-Sytell eased his aching joints in the high-backed chair at Damon's enormous, scarred writing table in the Ambassador's office. One hand massaged his crippled knee, while with the other he held a snifter of fine Tinnaran brandy he'd found in a chest beside the table. He took a long, delightfully aromatic sip and gazed across the snifter's lip at Damon, a slight tilt of his head taking the place of a smile. "Are you certain you won't join me?"

The Acting Ambassador only stared at him stonily.

Toa-Sytell sighed. "Oh, unbend a little, Damon. I'm sorry for the show in the ballroom. That was only to make a point it's a tale that will spread far beyond the Empire's borders before the week is out, as was intended. Meanwhile, I'll let your people go, and the Church will pay whatever reparations the Council requires. All right? I will exonerate your underlings, and deliver a formal apology for the affront to your office-with the codicil that had your people been found to be Cainists, they would have received the same Imperial justice meted out to all enemies of God. But that's only a detail. Have a drink."

Damon released a long breath, shaking his head, but he stepped over to the liquor cabinet, took a glass, and poured himself three fingers of Korish cactus whiskey. "I cannot say what the Council's response to this will be," he said, "but they have ever been open to reparations; they will want war no more than does the Empire."

Toa-Sytell nodded approval and waved his snifter at the furnishings of the office: an expensive array of delicately carved hardwoods, in the light and airy open style that defined recent Ankhanaan craftsmanship. "I see you still have Creele's furniture."

Damon shrugged. "I am only Acting Ambassador. I have no authority to make changes."

"Mmm, yes-no one really trusts you, do they? None of the Council factions has the power to get their own toady in here, and so they leave *you* in place: perhaps the only honest man in the Monastic diplomatic corps." Toa-Sytell found himself chuckling at the thought of an honest ambassador. "I've always admired you, do you know that?"

His friendly tone had its effect: the tension began to drain out of Damon's face, and the Acting Ambassador lowered himself onto a lovely embroidered settee. The wariness was still there, but wariness was acceptable, so long as Damon was relaxed enough not to do something foolish-such as order those friars outside to attack the Household Knights who guarded the doorway. Toa-Sytell wondered in

passing if Damon might be feeling as much disappointment as relief; the Ambassador had clearly nerved himself up for a noble martyrdom.

"Honesty is not such a virtue," Damon said tiredly. He took a sip of his whiskey and went on. "I tell the truth because that is my nature. I don't incline to the lie. It's like the color of my hair, or my height: neither good nor bad. It simply is."

"Mm, you just do what you do, is that it?" Toa-Sytell murmured, mildly amused. "That makes you sound like a bit of a Cainist yourself." Damon grunted, and shook his head. "I'm not political."

"Neither are they, to hear them tell it. They're *rephilosophical*."

Damon's mouth set into a grim line. "You should tell me why you've come here. I shouldn't think it's to discuss the finer points of Cainism."

"Well, my friend, there you would be wrong," Toa-Sytell said. He drained his snifter and poured himself another drink before continuing. "Tomorrow is the Feast of Saint Berne. Assumption Day is only three months away, Damon. This will be the seventh Festival of the Assumption, by the will of Ma'elKoth."

He lifted the glass to the small elKothan shrine that occupied one corner of the office and drank to his god. "It will be the single most important day of my Patriarchy. There are those, among the more gullible of Our Beloved Children, who expect Ma'elKoth Himself to return on that day."

Damon nodded. "I've heard this tale."

"It is only a tale," Toa-Sytell said. "The Ascended Ma'elKoth will not return in the body; He is transcendent, immanent, omnipresent. He has no need of a physical form. But the Empire, on the other hand-the Empire has a *great* need for a flawless Festival of the Assumption, do you understand? It is crucial symbolism of the doctrine of elKothan supremacy." Glass in hand, he made a gestural sketch of offering his heart's blood toward the shrine.

"I begin to see," Damon said. "You expect that Cainists will attempt to interfere."

"Of course *they* will," Toa-Sytell said wearily. "How can they not? The opportunity is too good to resist. To disrupt the Festival seems a small enough matter-but to make the Imperial Church appear weak and foolish threatens the very existence of the Empire."

Once again, he drained his glass. He told himself he should not have another; he was so tired the brandy was already making his head swim. The room seemed to press in more closely around him, and the air became thicker, harder to breathe.

"By the Festival, Cainism will be only a memory; whatever Cainists who survive will be too worried about living out the day to risk embarrassing the Imperial Church. I've been lax, Damon. I've let them go too far, and they have become bold. Now they must be crushed before they do us real harm."

Damon's response was a grim stare. Toa-Sytell often surmised that the Ambassador had personal reservations about the value of the Empire in the pursuit of the Monasteries' overall goal of ensuring the permanent ascendance of humanity; he was consistently silent on the subject. The Council of Brothers openly supported the Empire as humankind's brightest hope. Damon's steadfast devotion to the Monasteries wouldn't let him publicly disagree with the Council, but his fundamental bedrock of honesty wouldn't let him pretend to agree-and so he never said anything at all.

Toa-Sytell sighed and poured himself another brandy. It was unexpectedly relaxing, to sit here with a man who-though not quite a friend-was someone he had no need to manipulate, with whom he was not required to maintain his exhausting facade of Patriarchal infallibility. He decided that once he finished his business here, he would go straight back to the Colhari Palace and sleep until dawn. "Do you know," he said slowly, "that it was in this very room that I first met him? Caine. Right here."

"I recall," Damon said grimly.

"Of course, of course. You were here, weren't you?"

Their eyes met, and they shared a glance that skated across the open expanse of carpet between them. Nearly seven years ago, they had stood in this room and watched Ambassador Creele lie on that carpet as the light slowly faded within his eyes: as his heart failed, after Caine had broken his neck.

Toa-Sytell often wondered how the world might be different today, if he had done the wise thing that night ordered Caine shot down like the mad dog he so obviously was. "It's because of him that you have this post," he mused. "You took the Acting Ambassadorship after he murdered Creele-"

"Executed him," Damon said firmly.

Toa-Sytell ignored the correction. "In fact, it's because of him that you still have it. When you testified on the murder before the Council, neither Creele's friends nor his enemies liked what you had to say. You ended up in the middle, with both sides against you-a precarious position, but you have proved to possess exceptional balance."

"I told the truth," Damon said with a shrug; then he cocked his head curiously. "How do you know of my testimony? Proceedings of the Council of Brothers are-"

"Secret, yes, yes," Toa-Sytell said, waving the question aside. "I simply find it a subject for curious contemplation, from time to time. Caine himself truly was the precise definition of evil, as he is named by the Church: an indiscriminate slaughterer who cared nothing for the lives he shattered in the pursuit of whatever happened to catch his fancy of the moment. He betrayed Our Lord, yet it was through his betrayal that Ma'elKoth was transfigured. He crippled me-shattered my knee beyond even magickal repair, so that I am reminded of him by the pain that wrenches my every step-yet gave me rulership of the Ankhanaan Empire. He sparked riots that nearly burned the city to the ground, civil war-the First Succession War as well as the Second, in fact."

Toa-Sytell's chest clutched with suddenly remembered grief; Tashinel and Jarrothe, his sons whom he had loved beyond all measure, his only children, had died in the First Succession War. He shook this aside-it was an old, familiar pain, flooding back now on a rising tide of alcohol-and went on. "Yet he also saved Ankhana at the Battle of Ceraeno. His murders were countless . . . but one cannot forget that he also did our land the very great favor of killing that madman Berne."

"It's your Church that names Berne a saint," Damon pointed out.

"Not mine. Ma'elKoth's." Toa-Sytell made another sketch of a salute toward the corner shrine. "You forget: I knew Berne. What we celebrate tomorrow is his sacrifice for God, not his character. As a man, he was a rapist and a murderer-worse even than Caine, and I don't mind saying so. Privately."

Damon smiled painfully, as though bending his lips made his face hurt. "You sound a bit like a Cainist,

too."

"Ah, it's the brandy," Toa-Sytell said, tilting his glass high to catch the last drops before pouring himself another. "It must be made clear, Damon. Cainism is *treason*. Adherents of Cainism openly declare themselves the enemies of society, and of God. It will not be tolerated within the Empire's bound-not even from Monastic diplomats."

Damon frowned. "You cannot expect to dictate the politics and philosophies of Monastic citizens," he said stiffly.

This, too, Toa-Sytell waved aside with a weary pass of his snifter. "I don't. What I do expect is that the Council of Brothers will find it expedient to post holders of such views elsewhere-to avoid the appearance of deliberate offense to the Empire and the Church. After all," he said reasonably, "the Cainist heresy can't be very popular with the Council, either; if Caine had not died at Victory Stadium, I'm sure you would have found it necessary to kill him."

Damon stared gloomily down into his glass and swirled the whiskey within it. "There are some who say that Caine survived-that he waits beyond the world, and that when Ma'elKoth returns Caine will as well, for their final battle."

"Primitive superstition," Toa-Sytell snorted. "This kind of 'final conflict' myth will always be popular among the ignorant-and it is the Cainists who spread it, no doubt. I intend to ensure that the Cainists never get the chance to fulfill their false prophecies. This is why I now speak with you privately, here in your office, Damon. I want you to understand that what I do is in the same service of humanity to which you and every friar are sworn; Cainism is our common enemy, and it can only be defeated by our common effort."

The wariness he had earlier seen in Damon's face now returned with redoubled force. "I am not yet convinced that Cainism is our common enemy," he said. "What common effort do you expect? What is it you want from us?"

"From you, specifically, Damon," Toa-Sytell said easily. "Time grows short; I do not have the month or six weeks to spare as couriers travel beyond the Empire's borders and return. I wish to converse with Raithe of Ankhana, the current Ambassador to the Duchy of Transdeia."

"Speak with . . .?" Damon stiffened. "How do you-"

"You have a device-the Artan Mirror, I believe it's called-that you acquired from these Artans who now rule Transdeia. It's generally used here in this room, your office. I don't know how it is operated; if you would be so kind as to use it to make contact with Ambassador Raithe, I would be most appreciative."

"But, but, it's impossible that you should-"

"Know of this secret device?" Toa-Sytell sighed and drained his snifter one last time. "After a lifetime spent in the gathering of secrets as a profession, I find it has become something of a relaxing pastime in itself-a welcome diversion from the heavy cares of church and state."

He allowed himself a rare, lazy smile as he fisted his chest then spread his hand before him. "The Eyes of God see all, you know. Ma'elKoth is supreme."

Toa-Sytell watched attentively as the Artan Mirror was set up for use. He'd had report of this device, but he had never seen it, nor did he know how it worked.

The Artan Mirror was a valise-sized box that the Master Speaker, Dossaign of Jhantogen Bluff, situated upon Damon's writing table. The Master Speaker then attached a thin, flexible cord of some kind to another that came unobtrusively in through the office window. It was faced with a very ordinary-looking mirror that appeared to be merely silvered glass, and on its side was a ring-shaped handgrip that seemed to be made of gold. Having joined the cords together in some fashion Toa-Sytell couldn't quite appreciate-he seemed to simply jam the end of one into the end of the other, like a branch grafted onto a fruit tree-the Master Speaker retired. One of his assistants-called a Speaking Brother-took hold of the handgrip and briefly closed his eyes.

A long, long moment passed in silence, then the Speaking Brother opened his eyes and said, "I am received."

Damon took the seat, facing into the Artan Mirror; the Speaking Brother took his hand. "Greetings from Ankhana," Damon said. "Ambassador Damon calls upon Ambassador Raithe."

Toa-Sytell shifted his weight forward, peering at the box-shaped device; to his eye, it seemed that Damon looked solely at his own reflection, and spoke to himself.

Another long moment passed in-silence, then Damon said, "Not well, Master Raithe. This is not a personal call. I have with me here His Radiance the Patriarch of Ankhana, who wishes converse with you."

After a pause, Damon said severely, "But he does know. And it would serve you well, Raithe, to remember that the Patriarch once directed the King's Eyes. I chose not to insult him with disingenuous pretense, and I suggest that you follow my example . . . Very well. Yes, I recall, and you may be certain that the Patriarch does, as well. Bide a moment."

He let go of the Speaking Brother's hand and turned to Toa-Sytell. He said with quiet irony, "Master Raithe bids me remember how*busy* he is, in his duties as Ambassador." He rose, and offered his seat to Toa-Sytell.

The Patriarch sat down and regarded himself in the mirror. The deepening creases that accompanied the developing slackness of jowls along his jawline, and the near-black swipes of exhaustion under his eyes, made him wince and promise himself to take a long-needed vacation once the Festival was safely and successfully complete. He sighed-it seemed that he had been promising himself a vacation for seven years.

He forced his attention back to his purpose. "How is this used?"

The Speaking Brother extended his hand. "Your Radiance need only join grips with me, and speak as though Brother Raithe is here within this room."

Scowling, Toa-Sytell took the Speaking Brother's hand. His scowl deepened further when his face in the mirror blurred and faded into greyish mist, which then coalesced into a new image: a thin, sharp-faced man with a pointed chin and skin like tight-stretched leather, a nose like a knife blade dividing rather close-set eyes as penetrating as an eagle's. His tonsured head sprouted a fringe of lank brown hair, and he wore the rich blood-colored robes of a Monastic Ambassador. And those eyes-they were decidedly

disturbing: pale, almost colorless blue grey against his swarthy skin, flat and clouded as chips of ice set into his skull.

He could not have been more than thirty years of age, was perhaps only twenty-five or -six.

Astonishingly, Toa-Sytell *recognized* him; though he could not say when, Toa-Sytell knew that he had seen this intense young man before, perhaps years ago-and for a moment, he could only wonder at the tangled web of lives that touch each other again and again, for no discernable reason.

Ahh, bugger it, Toa-Sytell thought. I must be getting drunk

"Your Radiance?" The title had a slightly testy edge-it was Raithe, speaking to him through this device, from hundreds of miles away. The room where Raithe sat could not be seen; it was as though the Ambassador floated within a dense grey mist. "How may I be of service?"

Toa-Sytell huffed a sigh through his nose. He could think of no reason to waste breath in polite chatter or to speak with less than absolute plainness. "You, as a Monastic citizen, are not an Imperial subject, and so I do not command you. The Council of Brothers does, however, require that the Empire be given aid and support to the fullest power of each and every friar; therefore, think of my request as proceeding from their lips."

Raithe's pale eyes narrowed. "Please continue, Your Radiance."

"Give this word to your Viceroy Garrette. Today, to expound-or even privately hold-Cainist ideas has been declared to be treason against the Empire, and an insult to God," Toa-Sytell began.

At this, those eyes seemed to catch inexplicable fire, as though a winter sun had burned through their permanent overcast. "This is a great day, Your Radiance-but, to tell the Viceroy? I don't understand."

"Of course you do, Raithe; Toa-Sytell said irritably. "It is known that you are not a fool. It is also known that you received your current post for the sole reason that you are the Monasteries' leading authority on the Aktiri."

Raithe's gaze focused like sunlight through a glass; Toa-Sytell would have been unsurprised to find his face blistering under its heat. "You cannot *possibly*-!"

"Spare me." When he continued, Toa-Sytell endeavored to recover his customary dry precision of speech. "Our message to Garrette is simply this: To support the actions of these Cainist traitors will, from this day forward, be considered an act of war.

"His Radiance," the young Ambassador said, "is making a terrible mistake."

"This is not a discussion, Ambassador. Tell Vinson Garrette that he is known to the Infinite Court; from the mortal arm of Ma'elKoth, nothing can be hidden. Tell him, We know that he and his so-called Artans are in truth *Aktiri*. Tell him, We know the *Aktiri* have aided the spread of Cainism. And tell him that if he and his *Aktiri* masters continue their campaign of Cainist terror against the Empire, their tiny foothold upon Our world will be utterly destroyed."

Raithe snorted with open insolence.

"We will cry a crusade," Toa-Sytell said. "Do you understand?"

Raithe appeared to, swallow, twisting his head as though his throat pained him, then nodded. "Yes, Your Radiance. I understand."

"Make certain that Garrette does, as well. We know that the *Aktiri* wield potent magicks-but We also know that *they* die as easily as any other men. The Artans and the Empire do not have to be enemies; tell him this, too. The path is for him to choose: friendship, or death."

"Your Radiance, please-" Raithe's young face worked as though he chewed upon broken glass. After a moment, he seemed to master himself, and he said thinly, "Though not of your Empire, Your Radiance, I am of your flock. I am, as I have been since the very birth of the Church, a Beloved Child. I passed through the Womb of Ma'elKoth under His own direction, and my devotion to the Church has never wavered. In the name of that devotion, I ask you to reconsider what you require of me. I know Viceroy Garrette too well -a threat this bald may spark the very war we all would wish to avoid."

Toa-Sytell grunted his unconcern with this possibility. "Should Garrette wish to continue his Cainist games, We may turn to the solution Caine himself would employ, in the hope that Garrette's successor will prove more reasonable."

"Your Radiance, you cannot." The young Ambassador spoke with clinical certainty. "You have no conception of the powers you confront-you would never be safe. There would be nowhere you could hide from Artan vengeance."

The words echoed in Toa-Sytell's mind, and in their echo they subtly altered: *You will never be safe, Caine of Garthan Hold. There is nowhere you can hide from Monastic vengeance.* "Ha!" he barked, snapping his fingers and pointing at Raithe's image in the mirror. "*I know you now-I remember!*"

Raithe's brows drew together. "I'm sorry?"

"You were *here*, in this room!" Toa-Sytell said triumphantly. "That night-that night Caine killed him here on the carpet. You were one of the guards-"

"I was," Raithe confirmed grimly. "But I do not see how this relates to your business with the Artan Viceroy."

"Well, of course it does ..." Toa-Sytell frowned; of course there was a connection here. Wasn't there? He felt sure that the connection was an important one, a point that must be made, though now he couldn't remember why. He reached for his brandy snifter, but found it to be empty; he felt a bit dizzy, and he decided he had drunk enough for the night. "I, ah, the point is . . . I was only thinking," he said lamely, "about the way lives seem to cross each other, for no reason ..."

At this, Raithe stiffened as though he'd taken a shock, and a vein bulged, pulsing, around his right eye, but Toa-Sytell was too light-headed to attach any significance to this. He wiped his free hand across his eyes and said, "Give my message to Garrette. Now. Tonight."

Before Raithe could begin another protest, Toa-Sytell released the hand of the Speaking Brother, and Raithe vanished. Toa-Sytell blinked at the mirror, somewhat surprised to find himself staring at the reflection of an aging, exhausted drunk. *Time to go home*, he thought, and pushed himself unsteadily to his feet.

From a seat beside the writing table, Damon stared at him, white faced, appalled by even the half of the

conversation that he had heard. Toa-Sytell shrugged and shook his head to indicate there was nothing to worry about, though he could not bring himself to form the words.

"Sorry about the ball, Damon," he said thickly. "Hope the rest of it goes well. I, ah, I'm going home now."

He lurched toward the door, thinking *Well, that should have gotten things rolling.*

7

Raithe sat frozen before the Artan Mirror, his hand upon the golden grip. *Me*, he thought in wonder. *It's me.*

He saw it now: his entire life lay unfolded before him, all its twists and turns laid bare. Here at this crux of history, standing on the nexal node of conflict between the Empire and the Artans and the subhuman House Mithondionne, he had found the connection he had sought. He had found the hand of Caine.

He had found it in the mirror.

Caine had *made* him; Caine had driven the quest for power and knowledge that had ended with Raithe being right *there*, right *now*, where history was so delicately balanced as to topple according to his slightest breath. Caine had put Toa-Sytell upon the Oaken Throne. Caine had inspired the heretic terrorists who had sparked Toa-Sytell's use of the Mirror, to bring those words to him: *...the way lives cross each other, for no reason ...*

But there was a reason. *Caine* was the reason.

He saw it now: saw the possibility, saw the opportunity. He saw what *Caine might do here-if* Caine served the true dream of One Humanity. He saw the opening for a Caine-like stroke: a balance upon which he could throw his own weight. On this whole continent, perhaps the whole world, there was no greater threat to the future of humanity than the elves of House Mithondionne. With one elegant gesture, he could bring against them the unguessable power of the other great threat to the true dream: the *Aktiri-the people of* Caine.

And let the two most powerful enemies of the Human Future destroy each other.

He rose.

"Ptolan," he said calmly, distantly amazed at how serene and *normal* his voice sounded to his ears. "Master Ptolan, attend me."

Only the scuffle of a step or two preceded the voice; Ptolan must have been eavesdropping. "Yes, Master Raithe?"

"Summon the Speaking Brother; wake him, *if* need be." Raithe had the Mirror skill, to send this message himself, but he had urgent business within the walls of Thorncleft Castle above the town-business that could not wait the minutes such a message would require.

"The Council must be informed," he said. "There exists a state of war between the Artan overlords of Transdeia and the elves of House Mithondionne."

"War?" Nolan asked breathlessly. "Warnow?"

Raithe's lips thinned; he stared far into the night sky. "Let us say, within the hour."

As Nolan scurried away, Raithe slowly turned to the corner of his room, to strike his chest and offer his heart's blood to the shrine of Ma'elKoth.

8

The elvish legates stood in Vinson Garrette's drawing room with indifferent poise, as jarringly out of place as ballerinas in a slaughterhouse. Administrator Garrette gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the sweat that trailed down his ribs from his armpits.

He had designed the room's decor himself, modeling it loosely upon the Cedar Room of England's Warwick Castle. Darkly polished, intricately carved, and interlocking wall panels stretched fifteen feet to the elaborate, gold-leafed plaster of the ceiling, which was done in the massive Baroque style of Italy's seventeenth century. The fireplace was an astonishing edifice of rose-veined marble, half again Garrette's height; upon the mantel stood an enormous mechanical clock, its bejeweled pendulum scattering multicolored fire. Five enormous crystal chandeliers blazed with the light of three hundred candles. The carpet had been hand woven in a single piece, its design mirroring that of the ceiling above, and everywhere on that carpet rested furniture of unparalleled grace in design.

This potent combination of wealth and taste would give any man pause, would place him in his proper relationship with the Artan Viceroy, starting all dealings off with the proper note of deference to Garrette's power and discernment which, of course, had much less to do with his own vanity than with his devotion to the Company. As Viceroy, he was the public face of the Overworld Company-of what the natives believed was the Kingdom of Arta-and, as such, it was his duty to present an image that commanded the respect the Company deserved.

These damned elves, though

They had minced around the room, muttering among themselves, occasionally giving out that tinkling wind-chime laughter of theirs. Now and again one would turn to ask him a courteous question on the origin of this fabric or the history of some particular type of scrollwork upon the furniture-questions of the sort that no one could have answered except some bloody interior designer, certainly not a man engaged in the important business of running this duchy. And they had seemed privately amused by his ignorance.

He had hated them on sight.

Those alien faces sketched in a cartoon of hauteur, the inhuman poise that underlay their polite interest in the furnishings-everything about them made him feel like some bloody yokel, a bumpkin displaying his backwoods sty as though it were a palace. They made this magnificent room feel like something an infant might fingerpaint in his own shit.

He could dismiss the insult to himself, but disrespect to the Company was unforgivable. They made a joke of his entire life.

And it was more than that, as the Administrator was not ashamed to admit. Those overlarge, overslanted cat eyes of theirs, their misshapen skulls, brought to mind the child-stealing bogymen that had haunted his dreams even through his teens: they looked like the villains of a thousand childish terror tales.

They looked like Greys.

Garrette cleared his throat. "On the matter of, ahmn, Diamondwell, gentlemen-ah, gentle, mm, gentlefolk ... ?" Damn this bloody Westerling! Had he insulted them? The blasted language was purely clumsy. He was an Administrator, not some damned diplomat. He was uncertain as to the actual relationship between Diamondwell and House Mithondionne-weren't dwarfs and elves supposed to hate each other, or something? He couldn't remember if that idea came from Overworld history, or some damned fairy tale his mother had made him read as a boy.

And now they were staring at him, all five of them. Garrette's face began to heat up. The damned elves stared at him like they could read his mind.

"Ah, yes, Diamondwell," one of them said-Quelliar was the name Garrette had been given, and he'd taken this elf for the leader. "It was lovely. I guested there, mmm, perhaps it was in the second decade of Ravenlock-that would be, oh, nine hundred-odd years ago, as you humans reckon, Your Highness. Spectacular, it was. Caverns that gleamed of travertine, and a jolly, sturdy folk: fine cooks and uproarious dancers."

"Though no ear for music," another put in.

"Ah, but *therhythm*," Quelliar countered. "For their taste, rhythm outweighs pitch."

"Hmm, true," a third said. "The stonebenders of those days did not speak of an ear for music, but rather of a heart for dance."

Garrette's face remained attentively blank, while inwardly he struggled to keep his frustration from boiling down to fury. This was some kind of damned *game* for them, he was sure of it.

A lovely place indeed, he sneered inside his head. He had seen those caverns: dark, dank, airless holes in the rock, their only real value lying ignored in the stone. Those dwarfs had been no better than savages, bowing down before their tribal fetish while the very walls around them gleamed and glittered with untold mineral wealth. The Company's geological survey still explored the caves, and each new report was more exciting than the last; stoping had begun around the first two drill sites, and the extracted ores had been found to be rich beyond imagining.

What a waste, Garrette thought, as he always did when he imagined all the centuries those dwarfs had squatted in the caves. Diamondwell was the latest example of one of Garrette's primary rules: *If you don't know how to use something you have no call to complain when it's taken by somebody who does*. The stunted little troglodytes didn't even really understand what *they* had lost.

But-as always-it seemed that the solution had constructed a problem of its own. These damned elves

One had to respect their power, though. Every report had made that clear. Elves can *reach into your mind*; they can make you hallucinate on command. This was why every door to this room was posted with Overworld Company secmen-the "Artan Guard"-wearing the latest magick-resistant ballistic armor and bearing chemically powered assault rifles. At the very first indication that Garrette saw something in this room that didn't belong, one shout would bring six heavily armed men through those doors, and they would come in shooting. He would not take the slightest chance.

And if the damned elves *could* read his mind, let them read that there. Maybe then they'd give him his due respect.

He forced the thought away. That was nothing but a conflict rehearsal. He did this too often; it was a bad habit that he'd been trying for years to overcome. *Rehearsing a conflict brings that energy into your life*, he repeated to himself. It was another of his primary rules.

Back to business: He took a deep breath and tried again. "The, ah, Diamondwell resettlement camp is not far from Thornclef. Perhaps in the morning, I might take you to it? You could see for yourselves how well they are cared for."

Quelliar's eyebrows slanted even more. "Like pets?"

"Like partners," Garrette corrected firmly, but Quelliar seemed not to hear.

"Humans and their pets," he said, impenetrably patronizing. His voice chimed with alien laughter. "Who owns whom?"

"*Valued* partners," Garrette insisted. Two could play that I-don't-hear-you game, he told himself. "They have been of such very great assistance in our mining-"

"Perhaps our difficulties arise from language," Quelliar said graciously. "In Mithondion, the sort of partners that must be confined by fences are called cattle. Do you not know that word?"

Garrette pasted on his professionally blank Administrator's smile while he strove to guess at an appropriate response. He was rescued by the opening of a door. A secman, assault rifle slung, took one uncertain step inside and closed the door behind him; then he came to attention and saluted, his right hand to the brow above the silver-mesh face shield of his antimagick helmet.

"Apologies for interrupting, Administrator," he said in English. "The Monastic Ambassador is in the hall."

"Raithe?" Garrette said, frowning. What on Earth would the Ambassador be doing here *at this* hour?

"Yes, sir. In the hall outside."

"What does he want?"

"He wouldn't say, sir. But he insists that it's extremely urgent."

For that matter, how the devil had the Monastic Ambassador gotten this far into Thornkeep without Garrette having been informed? Garrette gave his head an irritable shake. "Very well," he said crisply. "Tell his Excellency that as soon as I have completed this business ..."

His voice trailed off as the door swung silently inward to reveal Ambassador Raithe standing patiently in the hallway beyond. The Ambassador stood very straight and very still, his robes of crimson and gold draped like folds of stone. He held his hands clasped before him in an unusual manner, his fingers knotted in a way that Garrette's eyes could not clearly resolve.

"Oh," Garrette said faintly. Relief and gratitude flooded through him. "Oh, thank God . . ." *Raithe* was here! At last! Garrette hadn't realized how much he had *missed* Raithe, how much he had needed the simple reassurance of his friend's presence. "Raithe!" he said, brightening. Now that he was here, Garrette could breathe again. "Please, come in, come in. I can't tell you how happy I am to see you."

The Monastic Ambassador paced into the room. "And I am grateful to have arrived in time. Send your guard back to his post."

"Of course, of course." Garrette gestured to the secman, who went back to join his partner in the hallway. "And shut the door, you idiot!"

"No need," Raithe said quietly. He stared at the door, and the door swung closed.

By itself.

Garrette's mouth dropped open. "What?"

Raithe gazed down at the lock, and his colorless eyes narrowed. The lock gave out a *flatsnikt* that echoed in the silence like a rifle being slowly and deliberately cocked.

"What?"

From the door opposite came a similar click; Raithe glanced at the third door, and its lock clicked. One by one the siege shutters banged closed over the windows, and their locks secured as well.

"Raithe?" Garrette ventured uncertainly. "Raithe, what are you doing?"

Raithe compressed his lips slightly and met each pair of eyes in turn. He offered them all a narrow smile. "I am preventing the escape of these assassins."

Quelliar turned with the inhumanly deliberate grace of a cobra seeking the sun. "Human child," he said. The chime of his amusement became the toll of distant bells, ancient and cold. "I am the Eldest of Massa. The petty tricks you display? *Itaught* them to ten generations of your ancestors, a thousand years before your birth, when humans were no more than our-" A dark glance at Garrette. "*-partners*. Do not force us to demonstrate that your elders are also your betters."

Though the elf neither moved nor even changed expression, he was somehow the source of a chilling wave of awareness that broke over Garrette and drenched him with dread. It was as though Garrette suddenly awoke from some inexplicable dream: he stared at the Monastic Ambassador in growing horror. Friends? How had he believed they had ever been friends? He barely *knew* the man, and privately considered him a tiresome fanatic, a borderline personality who wavered between earnest dullness and freakish monomania. And the look Raithe gave Quelliar, an unblinking stare of expressionless, psychopathic fixity, began to transform Garrette's sudden dread into actual physical fear.

"I am Raithe of Ankhana," he said, and struck his hands together: a rasping, scraping clap as though he dusted sand from his palms in Quelliar's direction.

Nothing happened.

The elves still stared at him curiously. Garrette barely dared to breathe, praying that this was some ungodly prank. Raithe folded his arms, a tiny smile of grim satisfaction wrinkling the corners of his eyes. Quelliar coughed, once. His companions turned to him.

Garrette flinched, afraid to look, unable to resist.

The elf's feathery brows drew together in astonishment; his head cocked like that of a puzzled puppy.

He sank slowly to his knees. Still looking only surprised, not even alarmed-much less in any kind of pain-Quelliar vomited a gout of black blood that splashed across the carpet. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, to Garrette. "I'm very sorry."

Then he pitched face first into the spreading pool of bloody vomit. He convulsed, writhing, gagging up great scarlet-laced chunks that plopped from his lips, as though something had diced his stomach, his liver, and his intestines and now forced pieces of them up his throat. A spray of cherry-black droplets splattered across the delicate embroidery of a Louis XIV couch.

Finally, he made only fading aspirated grunts-"*hghkh ...gkh ... gkh . . . ghss*"-and lay still.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Raithe said serenely. He raised his eyebrows at the other elves, but their leader's sudden death seemed to have astonished them into immobility. Garrette drowned in terror, shaking, unable to breathe, certain that the elves somehow communicated with each other without word or gesture, planning some unimaginable alien vengeance; Raithe, on the other hand, turned aside as though they could be utterly dismissed.

Once again he folded his hands in that unusual way, and Garrette's fear vanished; even the memory of having been afraid shredded like smoke and blew away. "Call your guards," Raithe said. "Have these murderers shot."

And because Raithe was, after all, one of Garrette's oldest friends, that was precisely what he did.

9

The Railhead once had been a square, a plaza in the midst of Lower Thornclef; the buildings that faced and surrounded it still stood beneath a ceiling that was a graceful arc of steel beams and armorglass-like a medieval street preserved in an Earthside tourist trap-and armorglass formed the walls that sealed the streets that once had led into the plaza. Only the steel ribbons of the railways entered unhindered. Massive steam-powered locomotives hauled laden freight trains into the Railhead five times an hour. Little sunlight could enter through armorglass blackened by near-constant coal smoke; gas lamps illuminated the Railhead's interior twenty-four hours a day. Even at noon, all within took on a greenish moonlit cast. Now, at night, everything became pale and alien.

The Overworld Company offices occupied a large building that once had been the townhome of a prosperous merchant. It stood adjacent to the warehouse that had been converted to hold the Overworld link of the transfer pump, and so a trace of ozone and sulphur always hung in the office air: it smelled like Earth.

In what had been the merchant's basement was the true nerve center of the offices: nestled snugly below ground, within an Earth-normal field powered by the transfer pump next door, was the Data Processing Center. Here, where the EN field protected sensitive electronics from the randomizing effects of Overworld physics, lay the computers and Earthside communications equipment that were the brains of the Company.

Crossing the threshold of the DPC awakened Garrette with a shock like a bucket of ice water had been dumped on his head. He staggered, gasping, reaching blindly around himself for something, anything, to hold on to, to support himself against a shattering surge of panic.

A strong hand took his; then a muscular arm enfolded his shoulders with comforting warmth. He found himself staring into the ice-colored eyes of Ambassador Raithe from close enough to kiss.

Garrette screamed.

But only a muffled moan came out past the hand Raithe clamped over his mouth. "Shhh," Raithe murmured soothingly. "It's all right, Vinse; I won't hurt you. Shh."

Garrette trembled with shock, too frightened to struggle. He tried to swallow, failed, and panted harshly through his nose until Raithe finally took the hand away from his mouth. "What-? How did you-? My God-"

He remembered it all: the death of Quellar, the roar of assault rifles as the secmen had broken down the doors of his drawing room and shot the elves to rags. He remembered inviting Raithe to accompany him while he made his report on the incident to his superiors-remembered sitting in the carriage beside him, chattering like a schoolgirl, all the way from Thornkeep to the Railhead

Remembered ordering everyone out of the DPC-

Oh, my God, Garrette moaned inside his head, and his eyes rolled wildly in renewed panic. All that returned his gaze were the mindless patterns of screen savers flickering across the screens in empty cubicles. *Oh my God, I did it, I sent everybody out of here-I'm alone with him!*

Raithe gazed into his eyes as though his heart could be read there like a book. "Vinsé," he said slowly, cajolingly, "Vinsé, Vinsé, Vinsé. Calm yourself. I'm on your side. We're partners, now."

"But, but, but, what did you *do* to me? How did you make me bring you *in here*? And why? *Why*?"

"We're here, Vinsé, because as soon as you left my presence, you would have realized that you had acted under my influence. We came here to speak because I wish you to be persuaded, not controlled. Here-" His gesture took in the cubicles and the glowing deskscreens. "-as you will understand, given only a moment's thought, no power at my command can force your mind against your will. For our partnership to prosper, I must reach your reason."

"My reason-? *Partnership*?" Garrette squirmed and pushed himself away from Raithe's encircling arm and turned to face him, livid with terrified anger. "My *God*, man! Partnership? You've started a *war*!"

"No, Vinsé," Raithe said calmly. His lips bent in a smile both warm and sad. "You started the war. All I've done is give you the chance to strike the first blow."

Somehow that smile stifled Garrette's urge to bluster. Instead, he turned away and sank into the nearest chair. He swiveled around so that he could lean on the desk and rest his face on his hands. "You're talking about Diamondwell."

"Of course I am. The Diamondwell stonebenders have been allied with House Mithondionne since before the Liberation. More than a thousand years. If those legates had returned to T'farrell Ravenlock, having seen what they had seen, war would have come whether you willed it or no. The war began when you poisoned the Diamondwell aquifer."

"Oh, my God," Garrette whispered. He dug his thumbs into the corners of his eyes, struggling with a sudden suicidal urge to jam them in, to gouge his eyes right out of his head. "Oh, my *God*. Why didn't you *tell* me? You were here-you knew, you could see what was happening. *Why didn't you tell me?*"

Raithe shrugged. "Why should I?"

Garrette lifted his head to stare at the Ambassador. His face felt raw and numb, as though he'd been scalded by boiling water though the pain had not yet hit.

"Stop a war between the limitless power of Arta and the greatest enemy of Humanity?" Raithe said reasonably. "I would be mad to do so. Why should the Monasteries care what losses you take? To rid the world of elves, no price is too high-and war between the two of you costs us nothing at all."

"Then w-why-" he stammered, "what are you doing . . . ? Why ... ? I mean, you said, partnership ... ?"

"Oh yes, Vinse. I am not blind to one vital, essential, overwhelming fact: Artan or no, you are as human as I am."

I'm a lot more human than you are, you crazed savage, Garrette thought, but he kept his expression perfectly neutral. Right now his situation was so impossibly desperate that he'd take any help, from anyone-even this fanatical psychopath.

"And I know, too," Raithe went on, "that you are not a warlike man. I know that you prefer negotiation to violence, and that is admirable, Vinse; it is truly-so long as there is a chance that negotiation will succeed. But there can be no peace between *species*, Vinse; negotiation would only give the elves more time to mass their forces and organize their campaign. That is why the legates had to die *as they* did. Now, war is inevitable. It is your sole remaining option. And it may be weeks, even a month, before House Mithondionne learns the fate of its legates. Now, *you* are the one with time as an ally. Use it wisely, Vinse. Prepare your strike."

"But, but you don't understand," Garrette said hopelessly. "I can't just declare a war! I don't have the authority . . . I have superiors, to whom I am accountable-and even they are accountable to the, to the, er, the nobility of Arta. Most of the, uh, *thenobility* would never accept a war--I would be ordered to pursue a purely diplomatic solution."

Raithe shrugged. "Can you not merely appear to do so? I may be able to offer you clandestine allies to do the actual fighting."

Garrette squinted at him, calculating. He imagined himself speaking before the Leisure Congress, cloaked in statesmanship; he imagined offering the Company's services as a peacemaker, an arbitrator, a go-between seeking *an end to the violence between two of Transdeia's valued neighbors*

Not only might he be able to protect the Company, his own career might yet be saved.

"Allies?" he said.

"Mm, yes," Raithe replied judiciously. "I should think allies would be very possible. What would . your *superiors* ... say to an alliance with the Ankhanan Empire?"

"Ankhana?" Garrette was dazzled by the sheer boldness of it. "You could arrange an alliance with *Ankhana*?"

"Very likely. Oh, to be sure, it would be informal-even secret, at first-but I should think that the common interests of Arta and Ankhana could only serve to bind them together more and more closely as time passes."

"How-how would we go about this?"

"First, as a gesture of good faith," Raithe said crisply, "you and your *Aktiri* brethren can stop supporting Cainism within the Empire." Garrette gasped and left his mouth hanging open.

Raithe smiled thinly. "Do you forget how I came to be here? I have seen into your mind. I know that Artans and *Aktiri* are one and the same. I know that Caine was an *Aktir*, and that the *Aktiri* fight in the Cainist cause."

"I--I--"

"I also know-I should say, *I believe-that* the ultimate goals of the Empire, the Monasteries, and Arta finally coincide. We all serve the Human Future. Is this not so?"

"I, well, I suppose--"

"Once we've established normal relations between Arta and Ankhana, you can sell Artan military magick to them-those springless repeating pellet bows would be ideal-and I'd imagine they'd be more than happy to use them in the wholesale slaughter of elves."

Garrette bit his lip. It was an attractive idea, audacious, powerful, but . . . "It's not that simple," he said. "There's no way we could keep it a secret, and the nobility would resist even that."

"The nobility, the nobility," Raithe spat. "Does your king live in fear of his *nobility*?"

"We have no king," Garrette said. How was he supposed to explain the Leisure Congress so that Raithe's feudal mind would understand? "We have a . . . a ruling council of nobles. And my ultimate superiors form only a small fraction of that council. Should the majority decide against us, we would be forced to give way. We can't be seen to even *prepare* for war until we've already been attacked."

"*You have* been attacked," Raithe said virtuously, "and treacherously-in your own chambers. Were it not for the alert action of the Artan Guard, you would have been killed."

"Mmm, maybe," Garrette said, "but some will find that a bit too convenient, and a bit less than convincing. No, we can't do it that way."

Raithe gave him a hard smile and reached out to put his hand on Garrette's arm. Garrette met his gaze curiously, and then he realized why Raithe looked so suddenly gratified: Garrette had begun speaking-and thinking-of Raithe and himself *asa we*.

As a partnership, with a common goal.

And he found, too, that he felt gratified as well. He had never realized how lonely he had become, *how* burdensome had been the weight of protecting the Company's interests day after day, year after year. Raithe didn't seem to be such a bad sort, after all, not really a psychopath, only a hard man-a violent man, certainly, but he came of a violent culture, one not really advanced enough to recognize the sanctity of human life

Not that elves are actually human, anyway.

Garrette was always careful to remind himself that *an enlightened man does not judge others by his own cultural standards*, this was one of his primary rules.

"We should be looking for some way to win the war before it even starts, but *by accident*," Garrette said. "We have to make it look like we never meant them any harm."

"I know that you-Artans, I mean-are an expansionist people," Raithe said thoughtfully. "You must have found yourselves in conflicts with hostile native populations in the past; I'm sure you've developed some kind of strategy for dealing with them-some way of eliminating the threat that doesn't arouse the resistance of the more fuzzy-minded among your nobility . . . ?"

Garrette stared at him, his mouth slowly opening as he remembered another story from his childhood, one of those whispered legends that Administrator kids tell each other. It had to do with an Amerindian tribe . . . the Su? Something like that. It didn't matter.

Suddenly he was electrified by a jolt of possibility.

He could do it. Right now Right here. The master stroke that would save the Company, and save himself.

My God, he thought. He rose, his hands fluttering with jittery energy. "Raithe, I'm brilliant-I'm a genius, by God, I've got it!"

He clapped the Ambassador on the arm, and shook his hand, and barely managed to stop himself from maiming his dignity by doing a little dance. He couldn't make himself sit down; he swiveled the nearest desk screen to an upward angle and stroked it to life. As the screen saver vanished, he accessed the telecom program and gave his identity code.

English, he reminded himself. *Have to speak English with these people.*

The screen cleared to the cheerfully pretty face of a young man in Artisan dress. "San Francisco Studio Central," he said happily. "How may I help you?"

"I am Administrator Vinson Garrette of the Overworld Company. This is a Priority One Confidential call to your Chief of Biocontainment. Prepare for encoding."

The young Artisan's eyes widened sharply. He swallowed hard and said, "Yes sir, Administrator! Preparing ..." Through the speaker came the sound of fingers flitting over a keypad. "Prepared."

"Engage."

My God, Garrette thought as he waited for the Biocontainment chief to answer. *My God, you must love me after all.*

The dark angel waited in bondage within a prison he had built, shackled by chains of his own making. For a span of years, he had no food but his own body. He fed upon himself gnawed his own bones, sucked out his own marrow.

He did not know for what he waited, but wait he did, nonetheless.

On one black day, there came the faintest whisper of distant trumpets, and the dark angel stirred within his prison.

THREE

Hari slid a hand inside the back of his toga, reaching for the ripple of scar at his lumbar vertebrae. He massaged it fiercely through his chiton, trying to rub away the ache; his back felt as if he were lying on a rock the size of his fist. That dull pressure was as dim and rounded as painkillers could make it without knocking him out altogether. He had work to do.

His scar always hurt when he was at work these days; maybe it was this goddamn new chair. It had looked good in the catalog, but somehow he couldn't get comfortable. His back usually started to ache while he rode his private lift down to his office-buried in the bedrock below the San Francisco Studio Center-anticipatory twinges shooting up into his shoulders while the lift sank its silent three stories. The ache would grow all day long, most days; usually it was bearable.

Lately it had been brutal.

This goddamn chair . . .

I should have kept Kollberg's, he thought. *He was a sack of fucking maggots, but he knew how to be comfortable.*

One of the first things he'd done, when he'd finally won his struggle to actually direct the operations of the SF Studio, was redecorate his office.

It was something he'd always been-vaguely, more or less-planning to do, ever since the Studio installed him here six years ago. At first, he'd taken a very real malicious pleasure in sitting inside Arturo Kollberg's office suite, in using the disgraced former Chairman's chair, his desk, staring at the ocean through Kollberg's Sony repeater. But that kind of petty shit swiftly pales. Kollberg's office furniture had been rounded, organic, womb-like, no sharp corners anywhere-kind of like Kollberg himself. Hari had loathed this office just as he'd loathed its former occupant, but for years it hadn't occurred to him that he could change it just because he didn't like it.

It had, in fact, never occurred to him that Kollberg had chosen his own furnishings; things look different to a man who grew up Labor. This wasn't just the office where the Chairman worked, it was *the Chairman's Office*. It had seemed to him a sort of mythic sanctum, like the throne room of an Overworld king, its trappings dictated by millennial tradition rather than the whim of its occupant.

It was funny, now-looking back on it, he could only shake his head with a rueful smile. He'd always had a guilty suspicion that this office wasn't really his, that he had been installed here as a piece of replaceable equipment, a temporary plug-in until a real Chairman came along to take the job. Like a Fool King in the Kirischan spring carnival, everyone would pretend he was in charge only so long as he didn't try to make any laws.

The Chairman's office was now a place of dark-grained paneling, deep pile carpet, an immense wraparound desk of burl walnut imported from Overworld, walls lined with heavy bookshelves filled with real books. He had a few plays, a few histories, but nearly all fiction in leather-bound editions: fantasies, mysteries, even some socially irresponsible, slightly risky works from the vanished genre of science fiction. Most of them had been brought out from the vault on Marc Vilo's estate. If anyone

asked-say, the Board of Governors, or even the Social Police--Hari could claim that he culled the old novels for Adventure ideas; it gave him a perfect excuse to maintain a collection here that he could never have kept at home.

The only problem was, his fucking back still hurt.

The analgesics he used helped a little, but not much. The Studio doctors wouldn't give him anything stronger; they didn't really believe he was in pain. One of them would occasionally remind him that the touch/pain receptors around his wound had been severed when his bypass was installed-which was true; the scar itself was numb as a slice of steak-and that he really couldn't be hurting, not there.

He was willing to allow that the pain might be psychosomatic. So what? It still hurt.

Hari had given up arguing with them. Instead, he carried a small bottle of grey-market meperidine hydrochloride in his purse, which not only took the edge off the pain of his back, but dulled the pain of his life, as well.

And if it was all in his head, why did it hurt *worse* now, when he could sit in a chair that *he liked*? His new chair was an old-fashioned highbacked swivel, upholstered in calfskin over gelpack stuffing, more expensive and better designed than the one in his study in the Abbey. It should have been more comfortable than his *goddamn bed*, let alone that shapeless blob of a chair he'd inherited from Kollberg.

He forced his attention back to the display of his deskscreen, which was filled with the latest inspection reports from the mining colony in Transdeia. He'd heard some disturbing rumors about shit going on over there; Garrette, the Overworld Company's Viceroy, was ruthless as a child molester, and some people were saying he had been turning a blind eye to Transdeian pogroms against subhumans on the duchy's borders. So Hari could fantasize about a surprise inspection, dream of writing a report that would really stick Garrette's head in the shitpot, and it would keep him happy enough for an hour or two

The annunciator on his deskscreen beeped for attention.

He jumped a little, then shook his head and thumbed the acceptor. His itinerary vanished behind an image of his secretary's weasely face. "Yeah, Gayle?"

"It's the soap booth, Administrator. They say it's urgent."

"Put them through."

"Right away, sir."

The view changed to a nervous-looking man in tech whites. "*Uh, Chairman Michaelson, sorry to bother you-*"

"Forget it, technician. What's up?"

"Uh, well, we got Rossi's visuals back. He's awake, and he doesn't seem injured ..."

"Mm, that's good news."

Francis Rossi was in one of Hari's pet projects, his Interlocking Serial Program. The ISP involved ten different Actors, all doing three-month shifts in Ankhana. Instead of the usual seven- to ten-day

Adventure, their first-handers could sign on for any length of time, from a few hours to a month, and they could even switch back and forth between all the different Actors in the ISP. This let the Actors lead something resembling normal lives in their Overworld personae, let them develop significant relationships with natives and with each other, since they didn't have the pressure of maintaining slam-bang action-packed-adventure every minute. It made their experiences deeper and more emotionally powerful, without the endless violence that other Studios used to artificially generate excitement.

The critics loved it; the audiences were somewhat less enthusiastic-*they* called it by a derisive epithet that dated back to the early twentieth century:*soap* opera-but Hari intended to stick with it as long as he could.

Hari thought of it as a kinder, gentler form of Acting, less repugnant than the wholesale slaughter that had made Caine, for example, so successful-and it was certainly easier on the Actors. He'd been afraid Frank Rossi was going to be the ISP's first fatality in two years.

On Overworld, Rossi was known as J'Than, a freelance bounty hunter loosely affiliated with the Ankhunan private security service Underground Investigations. His story arc was usually the most action-oriented of the entire ISP. J'Than projected a carefully cultivated facade of hardboiled amorality; Hari had personally created the character, and had made Rossi read *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Underground Man*, and *The Last Good Kiss*.

J'Than had been nearing the end of his current three-month story arc, tracing a gang of politically connected slavers. Last night, he'd swung a freelance security gig at the hottest society show in Ankhana: *The Nasty Little Princess* at Alien Games, which in its very first week was already being declared the hit of the decade. He'd bribed his way past the off-duty PatrolFolk who guarded the private boxes.

After that, it had been far too easy.

The whore assigned to that box had been very forthcoming; human, long-legged and beautiful, she had dropped dazzling hints of where she might be able to lead him, and had followed with a truly spectacular blowjob. With her raven hair splayed across his loins and his penis buried deep in her throat, he never heard the box's door open behind him. He didn't even know he was in trouble until a bag went over his head and its drawstring mouth closed around his neck tighter than the whore's lips around his cock.

When his unknown assailant choked him out, the techs in the soap booth switched his audience over to another Actor in a related storyline, also present at the premiere. When Rossi wasn't immediately strangled to death, two impromptu betting pools sprang up, one predicting the time and the other the method of his eventual demise. But by 1000 this morning, he was still alive, and still unconscious.

"Okay, he's awake, great," Hari said. "Switch his audience back." Why were they bothering him with this? They knew what to do-all this was SOP, covered in the ISP guidelines that were posted on each screen in the techbooth. "Thanks for the report, technician."

"Uh, Administrator, wait-that's not, I mean, I think there might be a problem . . ."

Hari sighed. "All right. Go ahead."

The tech explained. They had been casually monitoring Rossi's telemetry, waiting for him to wake up. *They* had the usual instructions: to switch his audience back to his storyline when he recovered consciousness. When the hero is taken by the bad guys, something interesting usually follows, whether it be a climactic confrontation with the main villain or a simple death by torture.

But Francis Rossi woke up in a forest.

And not in a forest, too. His transponder signature clearly still came from Ankhana-from Alientown, in fact: almost certainly from inside Alien Games.

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes, sir; all diagnostics check out. Uh, you think I could pipe his POV through to your desk, sir? It's easier to just show you than it is to explain." "Yeah, sure," Hari said, frowning. "Put him on."

The image on his deskscreen became noontime in a forest, in the midst of a sort of jumbled shantytown, built of woodland scraps-Populated with elvish corpses.

Rossi's POV rolled smoothly through the shambles, as though he were mounted on wheels and someone pushed him from behind. The bodies lay strewn haphazardly in the clear areas, some fresh as beef in a slaughterhouse, some blackened with decay, bellies swollen to bursting with internal gases. Rossi's involuntary retching echoed in the booth.

Hari's mouth compressed into a grim line, and he reflected that being confined to a desk job had its advantages: Caine had been in places like that more than once, and he had a vivid memory of how they smell.

The belly of one of the corpses burst with a sound like a wet, sloppy fart. Rossi's POV panned right and left, showing the extent of the carnage-bodies everywhere, some hacked to pieces, most just dead-and then dollied forward once again.

It was that motion, that familiar net-feature swing of POV, that gave it away. Hari's fingers began to tingle. With one startling intuitive leap, he understood exactly what was happening. Whoever had Rossi was using him like a video camera.

This was bad; for Rossi, this was about as bad as it could get. *They know he's an Actor.*

Garbled, hissing semiwords came over the techbooth's speakers, the broken half phrases of the mainframe's translation protocol struggling with an unfamiliar language. The telemetry readout of Rossi's heart rate and adrenal production had shot deep into the red end of the scale, dangerously high. "What's that language?" Hari asked. "You have analysis yet?"

"The TP doesn't recognize it, sir. Maybe some kind of elvish dialect, you think?"

Elvish dialect my ass, Hari thought. "Look at his telemetry. I think Rossi understands, even if the TP doesn't. He's scared out of his fucking mind-he's not even *monologuing*, for Christ's sake. Frank's a pro; it takes more than some rotting bodies to make him forget his Soliloquy."

Now the view on the POV screen swung to its first image of a living creature: a bald, sickly looking elf with no eyebrows, tall and broad shouldered for his race. He wore a simple, new-looking shift of clean white, belted at the waist over leggings of forest brown. He walked toward Rossi with a peculiar staggering limp, as though his legs didn't work well and he had to throw his weight from side to side to keep his feet under him.

When he spoke, the techbooth speakers muttered gibberish.

"Who's *this* guy?" Hari asked.

"Don't know, sir. We've seen him once already. He seems to be the captor." Hari stared at the screen. "Close the translator."

"Sir? "

"Shut down the translation protocol."

"But sir, then the computer won't have a chance to analyze the phoneme-"

"Listen to me, you idiot. This whole thing is *staged*, you get it? He's not in a forest, he's in Ankhana. At Alien Games. This is a little play, and *we're the audience*. They're sending us a message, and they damn well sure wouldn't go to this much trouble and then use a language we can't understand. *Close the fucking translator.*"

"Yes, sir."

Closing the program silenced the speakers for two or three seconds; then they came on again with the elf's unfiltered voice, exactly as it fell on Rossi's ears.

"...no reason to bother showing you what you already know you're doing to us, here on the borders of Transdeia: the murders of our people, and the rape of our land by your mining machines ..."

The mikes on the techs' screens in the booth were sensitive enough that Hari could hear them both whisper *Holy crap* in perfect unison. *Yeah*, he thought. *That about sums it up.*

The mysterious dialect spoken by the bald, sickly looking elf with no eyebrows was easy to understand.

It was English.

The sole defender of the part-time goddess was the crooked knight. He was the reflection of knighthood in a cracked mirror, and what he did, he did backward.

The crooked knight wore no armor, and he did not care for swords. He was small and thin, ugly and graceless. He could not ride a warhorse, and no squire would serve him. He was a deceiver, a manipulator, his life built upon a lie.

His strength was the strength of ten, because his heart was stained with corruption.

FOUR

Ankhana spread like a canker across the valley floor, a rank and oozing fester that drained its sewage and manufacturing waste into the river that men called the Great Chambaygen. As the barge lumbered round a riverbend far to the north and east of the Imperial capital, the city coalesced out of the pall of smog that covered it: a ragged blot upon the earth, washed by the haze of intervening miles to the necrotic grey of dead flesh.

At the bow of the riverbarge stood a fey in woolen clothes tattered by time and hard travel. He looked as though the clothes may have fit him once, long ago—he had the frame for it, broad shouldered for one of the First Folk—but now they hung on him as though on a rack. His face had been carved into deep lines: scars of privation and grief deeper than any a true primal ever shows. His hair stuck straight out from his scalp around his sharply pointed ears: a platinum brush the length of the first joint of his thumb. His boots might have been fine, if they were not so battered; for a belt, he wore a thick-braided hemp throwline, tied around his waist. He bore no purse, and in place of a gentleman's weapons he had only the mop on which he leaned.

He stared downriver at Ankhana, and his knuckles whitened on the mop's handle. His lips pulled back over teeth sharp as a wolf's, and his great golden eyes, their pupils slitted to razored vertical lines in the afternoon sun, burned with barely controlled desperation. Once, not so long ago, he had been a prince.

His name was Deliann.

"You workin', decker?" the foredeck second rasped behind him. "Or you fuckin' off?"

The primal gave no sign that he heard.

"Hey, shitsuck, you think I'm not talkin' to you?"

Thunderheads spread like a hand extended to grasp the towering twin-bladed spire of the Colhari Palace; they grumbled and spat lightning at the earth. He could see, even from this distance, that the threatened rain held off the black-brown coal smoke of the Industrial Park still hung thickly over the northern quarters of the city. No rain had yet come to drive it down from the autumn sky and wash it into the river.

Another storm, another fishkill: the runoff from Ankhanan streets slew river life wholesale. Deliann shook his head bitterly. *You have to go a week downriver before you can drink the water again. And my brothers like to remind me that I am one of these people.*

But I'm not. I'm not.

What I am is worse.

For more than a thousand years that city had fouled these waters, from its very birth as a river pirates' camp on the island that was now Old Town. Panchasell Mithondionne himself had laid siege to the city, more than nine hundred years ago, leading the Folk Alliance against it when the city was a haven for feral humans during the Rebellion. He had fallen there, killed in his final failed assault, passing the lordship of his house, and all the First Folk, to the Twilight King, T'farrell Ravenlock.

This is where we lost, Deliann thought. The Folk had fought the ferals for decades beyond the Siege of Ankhana, but this had been the turning point of the war. Now, nearly a millennium later, even *feys* who were themselves veterans of the Feral Rebellion, who had fought the ferals hand-to-hand, no longer called them *ferals*. Everyone called them what they called themselves: *human*—*"of the humus."*

The Dirt People.

"Hey" Now the voice behind him was accompanied by a rough shove on the shoulder and a short *rrrip* of tearing cloth—the foredeck second's fighting claw had tangled in Deliann's shirt. He turned to face the foredeck second, an aging ogrillo with a rumpled mass of scar where his left eye used to be and a broken

ivory stump where his left tusk had once jutted up from his undershot jaw. The foredeck second kept his snout canted slightly to the primal's right so that he could look down at him with his remaining red-gleaming eye.

"You know the only thing I hate worse'n fuckin' lazy-ass deckers tryin' to scam their passage?" The ogrillo leaned close enough to hook out Deliann's eye with one twitch of his tusk. "Fuckin' *elves*, that's what. Now: You moppin'? Or you *swimmin'*?"

The primal barely glanced at the second; he looked up, beyond the ogrillo's shoulder, at the twin teams of ogre poleboys that now jammed their thirty-foot lengths of oiled oak hard into the river's bed. The teams—each made up of six ogres nine or more feet tall, weighing over half a ton apiece—leaned into their poles in slowly counted cadence, pitting their massive muscles against the barge's momentum, their clawed feet digging furrows in the barge's deck cleats.

"Why are we stopping?" he asked tonelessly.

"You stupid, shitsuck? Ankhana's top port on the river—our slip don't come open till afternoon tomorrow." The foredeck second grunted a laugh as ugly as he was. "You think 'cause we a day early, you don' gotta make you full passage-work? Fuck that. You *work*, elf. Or you fuckin' swim."

"All right. I'll swim."

Deliann opened his hands to let the mop handle drop to the deck. Expressionlessly, he turned and gathered himself to leap into the water, but the foredeck second was too quick: his heavy hand closed around the primal's arm, the fighting claw below the thumb digging into the primal's ribs, and hauled him roughly back to the deck. "Not fuckin' likely," the ogrillo snarled. "You owe one more day's *work*, shitsuck. What're you, some kind of Cainist? Think you can do what you fuckin' want?"

"I'm not sure what a Cainist is," Deliann said. "But you should let me go."

"Fuck that. No fuckin' elf scams me."

He yanked Deliann's arm upward, inflicting a little preliminary pain and pulling him off balance. He expected a struggle or even a fight, and was more than ready for either—but instead, the skinny, haggard primal went absolutely still. "You want to take your hand off me."

The ogrillo's hand sprang stiffly open, and his fighting claw flattened back against his forearm. He frowned at his hand in disbelief. "What the fuck?"

"I've endured you for five days," Deliann said distantly, "because I had no swifter course for Ankhana. Now I'm leaving, and you can't stop me."

"My ass," the ogrillo said, lifting his other hand and making a fist to curl his fingers out of the way of his fully extended fighting claw. There was no law on the Great Chambaygen save what the barge crews made for themselves and no one would task a deck officer for the maiming or death of a mere decker. "I'll gut you like a fuckin' trout."

The creases that hunger and hard travel had etched into the primal's face deepened now, and transformed into something like age-impossible age, as though Deliann looked down into the world from some millennial distance—and the ogrillo's fist dropped limply to his side.

The ogrillo snarled, his vented lips pulling back from his tusks, and wrenched his shoulders as though his arms were held by invisible hands that he could shake off-but they weren't. They swung freely, but not under his command. Both arms hung dead from his shoulders.

"I'm elfshot," he muttered with growing amazement that swiftly became righteous fury. "Fuckere~~lf~~shot me! Yo,*carp!*" Along the entire length of the barge, heads came up at the foredeck second's yell.

Though the river is a lawless bound, there are a few traditions that the barge crews honor above their lives, and none more than this one. In seconds, all twelve ogres had shipped their poles; all the cargoboys had dropped their bottles, set down their cards, and put away their dice. Even the deckers, the poorest of the river scum who worked for nothing more than food and transport, set aside their buckets and their brushes and mops and picked up belaying pins and cargo hooks, and every one of them came running full tilt toward the bow.

Deliann watched them come with only a slight tightening of his feathery brows. The nearest ogre-then another, then a third-pitched forward and slammed thunderously to the deck, howling and clutching thighs knotted in convulsive cramps that crippled them as effectively as a knife to the hamstring.

The rest of the crew had to slow their headlong rush to pick their way around and over the writhing ogres; before they could, a sheet of flame twenty feet high sprang up from the deck to bar their path.

"It's just a Fantasy!" the ogrillo yelled. "It's just fuckin'*elf magick*, you morons! It can't really hurt you!"

Apparently some of the crew knew, as the foredeck second did, that most of the magicks worked by the First Folk operate on the mind of the victim only; braver than their fellows, they leaped through the fire and staggered screaming across the deck, clothes and hair blazing, trailing smoke and flame as they dived for the river.

The foredeck second's good eye blinked, and squinted, and blinked again. "Elf magick can't really hurt you," he repeated numbly.

"That might be true," Deliann said, "if I were really an elf."

He reached up and grabbed the foredeck second by his one good tusk and hauled the ogrillo's face down to his own with shocking strength. He put his lips against the ogrillo's ear-cavity and said softly but distinctly, "I don't like violence. I don't want to hurt you, or anyone else. But I'm*leaving*. I don't have time to be gentle. If anyone comes after me, I'll kill them. You understand? And then I'll come back here, and I'll kill you. Tell me you understand."

The ogrillo stepped back and tossed his head, trying to rip his tusk free, but this skinny, almost fleshless fey had astonishing power in his hand and arm. He yanked the ogrillo close once more, and now smoke leaked' from within his grip, smoke that reeked of burning ivory as the tusk scorched against his palm; the ogrillo gave out a low moan that rose toward a despairing shriek.

"Tell me you*understand*," he repeated.

"I, I, I--I get it," the ogrillo whimpered. "Go just go!"

Deliann opened his hand, and the ogrillo staggered, his tusk blackened where the primal had held it. He nearly fell into the flames, but as he stumbled back the fire died as though smothered by an invisible blanket, leaving only a broad line of smoldering embers across the deck.

Deliann turned to the bow and looked down, to be certain none of the crewmen who'd sought the river were in his way below, then he dived in and swam strongly to the bank. He pulled himself from the water and struck out running along the river without so much as a bare glance back at the barge: running hard for Ankhana.

Manblood, he could hear his brothers sneer. It was their favorite *jab*. *Always must be doing; never can be being. That manblood-like a human, you throw time away. Like a wastrel who finds a pouch of gold in the street, you have so little that spending what little you have means nothing.*

Maybe so, he answered them inside his head, *but right now, I have more time than you do*. And he wanted so desperately to be wrong about that; the ache of his wish that this was not true burned his heart like the fire he'd set on the barge's deck.

Ankhana's outskirts lay three miles ahead along the flat floodplain, and night lowered upon the city with the rain.

He had an ugly, stumbling run, as though his legs belonged to someone else—as though both were half crippled, and his natural gait was the average of two conflicting limps. Despite this, he ran hard and fast, pulling Flow to power his overworked muscles, and made the shantytown that surrounds Ankhana's Warrens in a quarter of an hour.

The storm swung out to meet him, and soaked him thoroughly in rain that reeked of sulphur. Without slackening his pace, he turned up the road that circled northward around the Warrens and the Industrial Park.

Even the empty-eyed human dregs that crowded these outlying slums had a moment to spare to spit at him as he passed; to hurry past humans as though he had someplace to go was disrespectful. Ankhana was the heart of the human lands, and the only Folk *who* had ever been welcome here were those *who* knew their place.

Finally he reached Ankhana's Folk ghetto, Allentown, and he released the swirl of Flow that had given him strength. He needed more attention than mindview could spare him, if he wished to negotiate these narrow, crowded streets, jostling and being jostled by countless shoulders of primal, stonebender, ogrillo, and human alike.

As night fell, even some trolls took to the streets; now and again one would pause to speculatively watch him pass, and to make hungry sucking noises as it inhaled the drool that leaked around its curving tusks. The stench stole breath from his lungs; the noise and sheer restless energy of this place made his head swim. The filth, the waste, the emptiness he saw in the eyes of the Folk here—Ankhana had been the reason he'd left humanity behind for the deepwood.

Allentown had been transformed in the twenty-odd years since he'd last walked these streets. Then, it had been a tiny cramped ghetto, jammed with primals, stonebenders, treetoppers, ogrilloi and their giant cousins—all scraping out bare livings on the fringes of the capital, selling their strength and the use of their bodies to their human masters, losing themselves in narcotics and drink, snarling and snapping at each other like rats in an overcrowded cage.

In the old days, human constables had kept order in five-man patrols, their brutal tactics and free use of their iron-bound clubs earning them the nickname *headpounders*; now, it seemed that the pounders had been replaced by teams of two—one human and one Folk, usually primal or stonebender. The humans

wore black and silver, the Folk scarlet and gold. Again and again, Deliann saw these pairs shouldering through the streets, breaking up fights, forestalling arguments, opening the crowds before the carriages of the wealthy. He could only shake his head in wonder.

Twenty years ago, wearing those colors had announced membership in two of the powerful Warrengangs, the Subjects of Cant and the Faces-but neither of those gangs had had territory in Alientown, and the Faces had certainly never extended their membership to include Folk. And those gangs had been *criminals* the Faces had been peddlers of flesh and illegal narcotics, and the Subjects of Cant had been pickpockets and beggars, with strong sidelines in protection and extortion. How they had been transformed into a public constabulary, he could not imagine.

The ghetto had tripled or even quadrupled in size, bulging outward like a colony of fungus, and now, at night, it bloomed like a pitcher plant, sticky-sweet and dangerously inviting. A riot of colored lights clashed into muddy rainbows on the wetly glistening cobbles: light cast from blazing coronal signs that wreathed hulking hotels and casinos.

These signs proclaimed the entertainment to be found within: games from knucklebones and roulette to cockfighting, bearbaiting and human/ Folk/ogrillo cross-species pit-fighting; food from the most exquisite imported tophalmo wings to all-you-can-eat spiced-pork-and-cornmeal buffets; drink ranging from grain alcohol to Tinnaran brandy; narcotics from simple roasted *rith* to exotic powders that make one's darkest fantasy feel as sharply real as a poke in the eye; whores to suit any species, sex, age, experience, and taste, from delicate pederasty to the kind of action where the price includes on-site postcoital medical care.

Twenty years ago, when somebody wanted something special in Alientown, something that he just couldn't find anywhere else-it might be illegal, or seductively dangerous, or simply too repugnant for widespread popularity-he'd go to an establishment called the Exotic Love. The Exotic Love seemed, to all appearances, to be a small, well-appointed, rather exclusive brothel, just off Nobles' Way; but once a man became a regular, once he had shown he could be trusted-that is, once the proprietor had acquired enough blackmailworthy evidence that this fellow dared not take a breath without permission-he would find himself ushered into a sensual world of literally infinite possibility. At the Exotic Love, nothing was out of reach; it was merely expensive.

But now, it seemed that all of Alientown had been transformed into a street-bazaar version of the Exotic Love, and the place itself could not be found. Deliann stood in the street, staring blankly up at the sign of the fungist who had taken over the building just off Nobles' Way. He read mechanically down the list of stimulant, narcotic, and hallucinogenic spores for sale within; this was a futile self-deception, a dodge to briefly postpone the moment when he would realize that he had no guess what to do next.

He had come so far

Light fingers brushed his flanks, where most Folk carry their purses. Deliann's hand flicked almost too fast to be seen, and he hauled the owner of those fingers around in front of him: a dirty-faced human child. "Sorry, fey, sorry-I just tripped," the boy said hastily.

"This place," Deliann said heavily. "This place was once called the Exotic Love. What happened to it?"

The boy's eyes went wide and round, then closed to streetwise slits. "Hey, I don't whistle *that* tune-but I gotta sister, she's eleven, never done nothing but the once awhile blowjob-"

"That's not what I asked for."

"Right, right-truth: she's thirteen, but I swear-"

Deliann shook him once, hard. "The Exotic Love," he repeated.

The boy's eyes rolled, and suddenly he screamed with shocking, painful volume, "*Short-eyes! Short-eyes! Get this Cainist buttfucker offa me!*"

The boy kicked him in the shin-it hurt less than his shout-and wrenched his arm free. He dashed away and vanished into the crowd, many of whom now stared at Deliann with gathering hostility, muttering darkly among themselves. One took it upon himself to express the general sentiment: "Short-eyes motherfucker . . . Wanna stick a kid, y'oughtapay for it likedecent folks!"

It might have turned uglier-some in this crowd looked to be the sort to enjoy a casual stomping, and none of these could see any hint in this ragged, exhausted looking primal of just how lethal the attempt might turn out-but shouldering through the crowd came a tall man in a chain-mail byrnie of black and silver, and a thickly muscled stonebender in a scarlet-and-gold cloth kirtle.

"All right, all right, shove it over," the stonebender repeated tiredly, stepping on toes, elbowing ribs, occasionally giving this one or that an encouraging shove. Her short arms were knotted like cypress knees; when she shoved, people moved. "Break it up. Keep it moving - yah,you, shit-in-the-head. Get going."

The man came over to Deliann and sized him with a cold stare. "Got trouble, woodsie? Or looking for some? Either way, we're here for you."

"What I'm looking for," Deliann said slowly, "is the feya who used to run the brothel here."

"Here?" His brow wrinkled. "Don't think so. Ruufie--the fungist, here-he's been here, what? More'n eight years, I'd have to guess-since before I came on Patrol. Hey, Taulkg'n, you know of any brothel here?"

His partner snorted into her beard and muttered something Deliann half heard, that might have been a derisive comment on humanity's short lives and shorter memories. She gave the last of the onlookers a healthy shove down the street and turned back. "Yah, the Exotic Love, useta be."

"The Exotic? No shit." The man's eyes lit up, and a half smile canted his mouth. "Hey, Taulkie, this woodsie's looking for the*Duchess*."

The stonebender approached, her fists on her hips. She looked Deliann up, then down, then up again, and shook her head sadly. "Don't bother, woodsie. She won't see you."

"I don't know any duchesses," Deliann said patiently. "The feya I want went by the name Kierendal."

"That's her," the man said. "They just call her the Duchess because she's fucked better'n half the Cabinet."

The stonebender trod heavily on her partner's toes. "Mind your manners."

"Just tell me where I can find her."

"She runs Alien Games, now-"

"Alien Games? That whole-block complex, back on Khazad-Lun?" "Yah, but she won't see you, woodsie, I'm tellin' you. She's *busy*, *you* hear? She's an important-"

Deliann missed the rest of what the stonebender tried to tell him: he was already running.

2

Alien Games squatted at the center of the swamp that was Allentown like an immense, malignant toad queen, glistening with multicolored slime. Only eight years old, it had already grown until it swallowed every adjacent building; now the size of its footprint exceeded that of the Colhari Palace itself. Three restaurants, seven saloons, four casinos, two theaters, and dozens of performance booths of varying sizes and degrees of privacy-within that complex could be purchased anything from cigars to sudden death, with room charges prorated by the hour. It shone like a beacon that might be seen from the moon, ringed by a gigantic halo. The halo was the rainbow reflection that scattered from a stupendous bubble of force-a titanic Shield-that enclosed the entire structure, made faintly visible by the drizzle that collected on its surface and trailed to the streets.

Deliann leaned against a wall of rain-slickened limestone, within the mouth of an alley down the street. The soggy wool of his tunic dragged at his shoulders. The runoff that dripped onto his face from the eaves above had a faintly acid, chemical taste, and he stood just deep enough within the shadows of the alley mouth that his face picked up only dim highlights from the lurid scarlet, green, and golden glare.

Alien Games blazed even brighter in mindview than it did to normal vision. A gigantic vortex of Flow towered above it, impossibly vivid intertangling rivers of crimson and amethyst, ichor and viridian, azure and argent curling like party streamers down toward the roof. At the perimeter of the Shield bubble stood massed crowds of onlookers, peering at the nobles, celebrities, and society brilliants who alighted from each carriage of the endless train as it pulled to a stop at the purple velvet carpet that ascended the broad marble steps. The onlookers leaned on the Shield as if it were glass, pressing their noses against it as though they could will themselves from the chill damp darkness outside to the endless summer noon within.

A marquee the size of a riverbarge burned on the roof of the immense vaulted portico, proclaiming the Senses-Shattering World Premiere of some vulgar-sounding show featuring performers of whom Deliann had never heard.

He spent a moment studying the operation of the bubble. Clearly, it consisted of several overlapping Shields; Alien Games must employ six or seven thaumaturges, probably human, to maintain it. Whenever a carriage would approach along the street, its footmen forcing a path through the crowds, a gap would open, just large enough for the carriage and its attendants to pass; then the gap would close behind them like a gate to keep the rabble out. Some of the Shields would be semipermanent, charged in advance like those that sheltered the entire complex from the drizzle outside, maintained by stored power instead of the disciplined mind of a thaumaturge, but the ones that opened like gateways must be the work of men, not crystals. He could slip through one of the crystaled Shields without too much difficulty and without raising much of an alarm-but then he'd have to find some other way to attract Kierendal's attention.

He moved out into the street.

He forced his way through the press, ignoring the countershoves and curses that pursued him. When he reached the midstreet point where the carriages had been passing through, he wedged his arms between

a large human and a small troll. "Excuse me," he said politely.

The human and the troll looked down at the ragged, bone-thin primal between them, then smirked at each other. The human said, "Piss off, elf. Find your own spot."

"I have," Deliann told them, and shoved them violently apart. They stumbled into the people to either side, neither remotely prepared for Deliann's preternatural strength. The troll wisely recognized that this fey had unknown resources, and faded back, muttering darkly to itself in its native speech of grunts and slurps; the human, less intelligent, decided to take exception.

"Hey," the man said, "hey, you little bastard, who you think you're shoving?"

Deliann stood still, waiting, feeling a little sick.

The man raised a heavy fist. "I'm gonna enjoy making-"

Deliann interrupted him with a stiff overhand right that smashed blood from the human's nose. The human's eyes filled with blinding tears, and Deliann kicked him solidly in the balls. While the man folded, Deliann stepped around him, put one hand on the back of the man's head and the foreknuckle of his other hand against the man's upper lip. The knuckle against the man's shattered nose was more than enough to stand him up and bend him over backward until he fell to the ground.

When he had the man arranged on the ground to his satisfaction, Deliann kicked him once more: the toe of his boot stabbed with exceptional precision into the man's solar plexus. The man curled into a fetal knot of pain, his breath coming in ragged, broken gasps.

Deliann straightened. He eyed the surrounding crowd expressionlessly. "Anyone else?"

No one offered themselves.

He bared his exceptionally long, sharp, carnivore's teeth. "Then *back off.*'

He turned away, unable to hide the twist of revulsion on his face. To do such things gently would require him to be clever, and he was too tired to be clever; it would require imagination, and that he dared not touch. For two weeks his imagination had given him nothing but the color of screams, the texture of dead children, the smell of genocide.

Inside the endless summer noon of the bubble, the ushers and footmen all wore livery of scarlet and gold; flanking the door were six sleepy ogres, up past their bedtime in full field armor, their steel enameled in the same colors so that it gleamed like glazed pottery. They held their blood-colored halberds extended at parade rest.

Deliann's mindview showed him no swirls of Flow around anyone on the street, except for a tiny whorl that brought a bright glow to the jewelry of the beefy woman who descended from a carriage with the help of two solicitous porters. He nodded to himself. With any luck, all he'd have to deal with out here would be ordinary guards.

In mindview, he tuned his Shell to the shifting pattern of the Shield in front of him and took the measure of the thaumaturge who maintained it. The man was barely third-rate; this Shield was hard-pressed to hold back the rain, much less the crowd that pushed against it. Deliann gathered Flow, focused it into a lance of power, and punched through the Shield with the brisk efficiency of an injection. His Shell was

tuned delicately enough to register the scarlet grunt of pain from the thaumaturge; with little effort, he swelled his lance of Flow until it forced open a door-sized hole in the Shield, and he stepped through.

The crowd at his back stared in silent wonder: to normal sight, he had effortlessly walked through the bubble that had resisted their best strength. They surged against it behind him, but he had already released his power, and the Shield was once again solid as a wall. The thaumaturge inside would have no illusions about what had happened, though; he should have already sounded some sort of alarm.

Sure enough, within the space of a single breath an elegant primal in formal evening wear detached himself from the group at the doorway and touched the shoulders of a pair of burly stonebenders in the scarlet footmen's livery; the trio approached him over the dry cobbles of the Shielded street as quickly as they could without appearing to hurry.

They met Deliann twenty yards from the entrance, arrayed in a loose arc that effectively barred his path without being so obvious as to be rude. The fey was tall and graceful, and his dark suit was immaculately tailored; his manicure gleamed like his buttons as he clasped his hands together and leaned politely toward Deliann. "May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, you may," Deliann said, brushing between him and one of the stonebenders as though they were not there. "Announce me."

"Sir?" the fey said delicately, in an eloquently dubious tone that described, in one word, the tatters of Deliann's clothing, the wear of his boots, his hempen belt, and the unnatural creases that marked his face. He followed at Deliann's shoulder, and the stonebenders brought up the rear; Deliann could hear them cracking their knuckles.

Deliann said, "You may announce me as the Changeling Prince, Deliann Mithondionne, Youngest of the Twilight King."

The fey took this without even a blink. "Does the prince have a reservation?"

Deliann kept walking.

"Please, Your Highness," the fey murmured smoothly, well practiced in his technique of handling lunatics, which he clearly presumed Deliann to be, "this is not an insuperable difficulty. We have a section reserved for visiting royalty; if the prince would care to follow me?"

Deliann could guess exactly what awaited him if he did so: a savage beating in a darkened room, his unconscious and bleeding body dumped on the street outside the bubble as a salutary example for any other gate crashers. "That won't be necessary," he said. "I didn't come for the show. I'm here to see KierendaL"

"Please, sir; I'm afraid I must insist."

Hands as hard as the roots of a mountain seized his arms. The pair of stonebenders bent him forward with efficient leverage, making him look as though he'd half fainted and he needed their help to walk; in fact, his boots barely brushed the cobbles. For one moment, his exhaustion dipped him into unresisting comfort, the childhood ease of being carried, even though their grip hurt his arms-but they were taking him the wrong way. He got his feet beneath him, and he opened his mind.

Far above, the arc of the Shield shimmered in the mental light cast by the vortex of Flow. In one second,

his Shell extended to fifteen times the height of a man and touched that Shield; in the next second, he had grasped its harmonic and tuned his Shell to it. Resonating perfectly, his Shell slid through the Shield's arc and touched an argent ribbon in the vortex above. In the next second, the lights went out.

Darkness fell like a hammer.

The sudden absence of those myriad colored lights stunned the crowd to an immobile silence, likewise the footmen, even the horses that drew the carriages-it was like being struck blind. For a second that stretched toward infinity, the street was utterly dark, utterly silent, held like the breath of a child looking for the monster under his bed.

Then Deliann burst into flame.

He burned like a torch, like a bonfire, like a thousand magnesium flares struck in a single instant; he burned as though every last foot-candle of the light that had blazed like the sun around Alien Games had become fire that roared from his flesh. The two stonebender footmen howled and staggered back from him, smoke billowing from the seared flesh of their palms. The primal in formal wear covered his face with his arms and screamed like a terrified child.

Deliann's ragged clothes burned to cinders in an instant, a puff of ash that whirled up into the night. His hair sizzled away. His bare flesh bore scars of recent wounds, badly healed: a curving scab crossed his scalp, like a shallow sword cut. One of his thighs was swollen, inflamed half again the size of the other, and the shin of the other leg had a slight bend in the middle; at the bend grew a knot on the bone the size of an apple.

Naked, bald, engulfed in flame, he paced the purple carpet to the entrance, trailing burning footprints.

Everyone gave way before him except one of the ogres, braver or more stupid than the rest: it made a tentative jab at him with its halberd. At the first touch of the flames that howled around Deliann, the blade melted and dripped to a pool of white-hot metal at his feet, and half the shaft flashed to broken coals.

The firelight reflected from their eyes came back the color of fear.

"I'm here to see Kierendal," Deliann said. "I don't have time to be polite."

A beige shimmer gathered in the air before him, and then a tall feya stepped sideways from nowhere, as though an invisible door had opened edge-on in the air.

Taller than Deliann and even thinner, draped in an evening gown that glittered as though woven of diamond, she was graceful as a soaring hawk. Her platinum hair coiled high above her upswept ears in an extravagantly complex coif, and her eyes glinted with flat reflections the color of money, like silver coins set in her skull. The teeth that showed behind her thin bloodless smile were long and needle-sharp, and the nail of the forefinger that she stretched toward him was filed and painted to resemble a raptor's talon made of steel. "You," she said, "really know how to make an entrance. Want a job?"

For a blank moment, Deliann could only stare through the flames; then he began, "Kierendal-"

"I beg your pardon, as an inconsiderate hostess," she interrupted him blithely. "How embarrassing; I've overdressed." And without so much as a hitch of her shoulders, her gown slid down her slender form and piled on the carpet. She stepped out of it toward him, as naked as he, perfectly at ease, opening her arms. "Is this better?"

Deliann's mouth dropped open. Her nipples were painted the same color as her eyes, and they looked as hard as the metal they mimicked. In that second of utter astonishment, the fire that sheathed him faded and winked out.

He hadn't even seen a flicker from her Shell, and in one sickening second, he realized why: She had never been here in the first place. What he'd seen had been a Fantasy, projected from some place of safety, probably into his mind alone. And while he'd gawked, she'd returned the Shield overhead and cut him off.

He started to think he might have made a mistake.

Even as he began to extend his Shell, reaching in a new direction, someone threw a heavy net over his head; the weaving was thick and metallic, and as it closed around him, the image of Kierendal and her gown vanished as though wiped from existence by an invisible hand. A heavy fist knocked him to the porch, and he couldn't even pull enough Flow to enhance his strength and rip free of the net—some kind of scarlet counterforce flared over the net, blocking his best attempt. An ogre grabbed him by the ankles and yanked him off the floor, gathering the net around him to make a sack.

The ogre lifted him like a bagged kitten. "Guezz you don' really keep up with the latez zztuff from the zity, when you're ou' in the forezz, eh there, woodzie?"

3

The chair was heavy, very sturdily constructed of hard maple, and bolted to the floor. The manacles that attached Deliann's left wrist to his right ankle were threaded through the support bars that connected the chair's legs.

It took the ogre something less than five minutes, after it unbagged Deliann within this tiny room, to demonstrate to him conclusively that he couldn't pull enough Flow in here to light a candle; some unknown quality of the room's construction cut him off as absolutely as had the weave of that net. The ogre had made this point by knotting its great horned fists and beating him into semiconsciousness with swift, passionless efficiency. Then it had affixed the manacles, and left.

The chair faced a blankgrey wall that was stippled with faint brownish smears: probably old, haphazardly wiped blood. By twisting uncomfortably in the seat, Deliann could watch the door behind him, but his battered body swiftly stiffened into knots of bruise. He surrendered with a sigh and turned his face back toward the wall. The room was cold; the manacles were like ice against his wrist and ankle, and gooseflesh bunched his bare skin all over his body. For a long time, he did nothing but shiver and listen to himself breathe.

Finally, the door behind him opened. Twisting to watch Kierendal enter the room cost him a stifled groan. She appeared exactly as she had in the Fantasy; the way she moved wasn't quite gliding, but it was decidedly more stylish than an ordinary walk. At her side paced a thick-muscled ogrillo bitch dressed in loose-fitting coveralls, slapping her palm with a sort of flexible club made of tightly braided leather. The club was as long as Deliann's forearm and as thick as his wrist.

Kierendal had something small and roundish in her hand, like a nut, that she pretended to be interested in rolling back and forth between her fingers. "Didn't anyone ever tell you," she murmured distractedly, "what happens to little elves who play with fire?"

"Don't call me *elf*" Deliann said slowly. "I've taken that name from humans, and from ogrilloi. I don't have to take it from you."

"That," Kierendal said, "is not an answer to my question."

An invisible hand with talons of ice reached into his stomach and twisted his guts into a ball of agony. Pain drove a gasp past his lips, and a red haze descended across his vision but he was not without resources, even here. With an ease that belied the snarl of pain on his face, he tuned his Shell to hers, tapping into the shaft of brilliant green that poured power from her aureate Shell into his guts; he took some of that power for himself and used it to weave a shunt for the energy she threw at him—a mental chute that funneled her power into his Shell instead of his body.

The knots eased, and he prepared to strike back. She could no more pull inside this room than he could; the little nutlike thing in her hand could only be a griffinstone. Deliann tuned his Shell to an octave that Kierendal shouldn't be able to see and reached a tendril toward it

"Thought you'd try that," she said. She glanced at the ogrillo bitch, who slapped the braided leather club against the side of Deliann's head sharply enough to shower a galaxy of stars across the inside of his eyes. He lost mindview.

Kierendal bared her teeth.

Steel claws hooked under his ribs and wrenched his stomach inside out. He doubled over, heaved between his knees, and vomited convulsively, retching, splashing puke across his bare ankles. Kierendal stepped back crisply to keep it from soiling her spike-heeled formal sandals.

When he could control his head enough to lift it once again, Kierendal looked down at him, and her starkly chiseled face bent into a mask of friendliness. She didn't seem to mind the smell. "Now you understand your position. I want you to understand mine. In just less than one hour, the curtain goes up on a show I have been preparing to mount for more than a year. I have performers from all over the Empire, from Lipke, from fucking *Ch'rranth*; I have seventy-eight *thousand* royals of my own money on the line, and I have partners who put in more—the kind of partners who don't believe in taking losses. If they don't turn a profit, they will collectively fuck my ass until I bleed to death."

She pronounced each crudity with a certain satisfied precision, as though she enjoyed being in this place where she could use whatever language pleased her. "And now, I also have some scary freak who claims to be the Changeling Prince throwing around fire magick like a human thaumaturge's worst nightmare, and *I need to know what's going on. You're a Cainist, aren't you?*"

Deliann shook his head. "I don't know what that is."

"Don't shit me, cock. I have two, bishops and a pig-fucking *Archdeacon* of the Church of the Beloved Children in the house tonight. I knew it—*Iknew* some crazy Cainist bastard would try something stupid."

"I'm no Cainist. I don't know why people keep telling me I am."

Kierendal snorted. "That just makes it worse. It's this simple, cock: I need to know who you really are, who sent you, and what you're really after, and I don't have much time to figure it out. So I'm going to hurt you until I like the answers you give me. Understand?"

Deliann said, "I need your help."

She clenched her fist around the griffinstone until scarlet power leaked between her fingers like smoke. "You have a peculiar way of asking for it," she said through her teeth.

"I didn't come here to ask," he said flatly. "I would not presume on our relationship. I am Deliann Mithondionne, Youngest of the Twilight King, and by the fealty you owe my father, I demand your service."

"Who do you think you're *retalking to*, cock?" Kierendal said disbelievingly. She paced around him, staring, as though his bald, scorched nakedness might look different from another side. "You can bluff the woodsies, but you're in the big city now. I have sources all over this fucking *continent*. First: Prince Deliann is *dead*. He probably died years ago. An *Aktir* had taken his place, an imposter-and don't try telling me the *Aktiri* aren't real; I know better. And the *Aktir*, the imposter, was killed two weeks ago, on the far side of the God's Teeth. One of the Mithondion princes figured out what he was, and the *Aktir* attacked him. The prince's retainers killed him."

"Torroneil," Deliann supplied, and his scalded features twisted with some pain that was not physical. "It's all true-almost."

"Almost?"

Deliann smiled, just a little. "I'm no imposter, and I'm not dead."

Kierendal snorted. "And here's the nut-cutter, cock *Iknew* the Changeling. He worked for me, doing security over at the Exotic Love, almost twenty-five years ago, before his Adoption into House Mithondionne. He worked for me for nearly a year, and I got to know him *well*, if you follow my meaning. And you're not him."

"Are you so sure, Kier?" Deliann asked sadly. "Put hair back on me, and eyebrows, and have I really changed so much?"

She looked at him truly closely for the first time, and she frowned. Her lips pulled back over her teeth as though she saw something that frightened her. "There's a resemblance," she admitted, slowly, as though it hurt her. "But you've aged-aged like *ahuman* ..."

"I am human," Deliann said simply. "I always was. I am also Deliann."

Kierendal straightened, and she shook her head, denying what she saw, denying whatever she might feel. "Even if you were the Changeling, I wouldn't help you. I don't owe that bastard shit. Or his fucking Twilight King. What did they ever do for me?" Colors roiled across her Shell without mixing, like those on a soap bubble in the sun. "I still haven't heard a reason I shouldn't have Tchako here kill you and dump your body in the river."

Deliann knew this was no idle threat. He could see it in her fists, clenched so tightly that her long sharpened fingernails had drawn blood from her wrists. She was not thinking clearly, was not susceptible to reason, and was as dangerous as a wounded bear. He understood her easily, perfectly.

He felt exactly the same way.

He'd always seen himself as one of the good guys, one of the heroes, someone who has a certain moral center that he could hold against the world, someone who had drawn a line that nothing could force him

to cross. He would willingly die before doing what he was about to do; that was a choice he could make. But if he chose death before dishonor, he'd be making that choice not only for himself, but for millions: millions who wouldn't get a choice at all.

"If you fail in your duty to my father," he said, "the death of the First Folk will be on your head, Kierendal. Within two years, we will be extinct"

But he was only stalling, only delaying the inevitable; he already knew he wouldn't be able to reach her with words.

"I don't have *time* for this *shit*." She gestured to Tchako, and again the leather club slapped across Deliann's skull, blowing a spark shower across his vision.

When he lifted his head again, a warm trickle down the side of his neck told him his scalp had split under the blow. He wondered idly if this was the sword cut reopened, or if the leather had torn a new wound. He said softly, "Nothing you do to me will change the truth."

"I haven't *heard* any truth yet," she snarled, lifting the griffinstone: a threat.

"You've heard nothing but."

Her snarl thinned to a whine of frustration and her fist tightened around the griffinstone. Agony seized Deliann's guts. He doubled over, retching, his stomach afire as though he'd swallowed burning coals, but he made no effort to tap her Shell and defend himself. This was what he'd been waiting for.

He tuned his mind to the link she had created between their Shells. He opened himself to the pain, accepted it, anchored it to the center of his being, even though doing so caused it to swell to a hurricane of anguish that threatened to snuff him like a candle; this was the only penance he could make for what he did next.

At the last instant, some premonition warned her of what he was doing, and the shades of horror bloomed across her Shell. She fought him then, wildly, as an animal fights when backed into the deepest corner of its own den. She screamed-one thin despairing wail

Through the link that bridged them, he poured himself into her.

4

Images cascade in roiling, fractal turbulence, unpredictable, incomprehensible, inconceivable: dual views, inside and outside, feeling and watching together, vomit splattering over bare ankles, too near spike-heeled sandals, gut-pain and the heart-pain of inflicting pain, a burning man-shape out-side on a darkened portico, and yet again, peering out with eyes of flame at a halberd's blade as it melts and drips to a puddle that sets an echoing blaze in the carpet

WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO ME?

Shh, hush now, it's too late to stop it. Ride it out.

The images begin to organize, to sequentialize: walking through a mutated, horribly half-familiar Allentown, words with the Patrol, a kick from a pickpocket. Faster now: a dive from the bow of a riverbarge, the silky stroke of the water parting around their short brush of hair, flames and shouting, the

fierce grip of the ogrillo deck officer--

What is this?

This is my life.

Days of deck swabbing, brush cutting, clearing jams of tangled flotsam-the dangerous, backbreaking passage-work of a decker on the Great Chambaygen. More days, limping down out of the God's Teeth alone, each step a new adventure in pain, through the forest, following a stream for water, pulling Flow for energy, mindholding rabbits and squirrels until they can be taken by hands that break their necks. At first, they sear the scraps of flesh with the fire from their mind, but as days pass and their resources dwindle, they need the Flow they gather for other things, and the bloody tang of raw flesh is sharp on their tongue.

This is our lives?

Our life.

We are Deliann.

And hours wasted in agony, weaker and weaker; days lost to mindview, fighting exposure and shock with Flow, layering new calcium across broken ends of bone in his legs, wishing he understood healing more completely, wishing he had the strength to splint the bones straight-botching the job, leaving a pocket of infection in the bone of his left thigh, fusing his right shin crooked-using his disciplined concentration to fight back the despair, the black fist that crushed his heart

We don't understand.

Patience. This won't take long.

Coming awake on the broken scree at the foot of the cliff, surprised to be alive, feeling the jagged ends of bone grind together within each leg, looking up to see, high above, one last glimpse of his brother's face, haloed for an instant against the translucent blue-white brush strokes of high cirrus cloud. As I watch, the face pulls back from the brink, emptying the cliff's crisp, indifferent skyline

Leaving me here to die.

We still do not understand.

There is no-we.

I understand.

This is my life.

I am Deliann.

5

I stand on the high cliff, overlooking the mines, while Kyllanni and Finnall sing the Song of War.

Far, far below, vanishing into the clear afternoon distance, the earth is pocked like the surface of the moon, a wasteland of craters and broken rock; the mountains are scarred, whole chunks missing as though bitten off by a god. Within this moonscape, tiny figurines move and work, black dots moving earth and directing sluice pipes, biting into the ground and belching black smoke until the crystal mountain air seems to come to a halt outside their dominion: a dome of smoke and dust enclosing Hell.

Closer below is the fence that L'jannella described, a wire and steel monstrosity, decorated with the dim silhouettes of corpses, outlined against the dust behind.

This is worse than I'd feared, worse than I could have imagined. In five short days, my world has crumbled, rotted: eaten from within as though injected with acid. Everything I thought was strong and sure has turned to paper and spun glass.

"It's the Blind God," Torronell mutters harshly, softly enough that at first only I can hear him; but then he repeats it, louder, and his gesture takes in not only the wrack of Diamondwell and Transdeia, but everything that has happened since we left the Northwest Road. "This is *all* the work of the Blind God. The *dil-T'llann* has been breached, and the Blind God has followed us from the Quiet Land."

Of us all, I'm the only one who realizes that Rroni isn't speaking metaphorically.

Torronell begins to pace in a tight circle, and his face twists with dark thoughts; his scalp is only now showing signs of stubble, only now growing back the hair I burned from him in my effort to save his life. I move with him, keeping between him and our three companions-whether he's well or not, I have to treat him like he's infected.

Even ordering us to come here, to this cliff, shows his judgment is becoming erratic. I'd like to think this is only a sign of the stress we've been through this past week, but I'm losing hope. I think I'm going to have to kill him.

Kyllanni and Finnall chant on, but I can't take any more.

This has to be stopped before it begins, and there is no one else who can stop it. "No," I say hoarsely. "No war. I don't care what they've done. There will be no war."

Kyllanni and Finnall fall silent; they and L'jannella do not respond to me at all. They turn from me, and look at Torronell.

His eyes blaze with feverish triumph. "Don't you understand?" he says. "I can tell you why he will not *cry war* against these humans. Join the Meld."

"But the curse-" L'jannella protests.

"A lie," Torronell spits. "Another of Deliann's lies. Join the Meld."

Oh god, oh god he's really sick, after all this, he's sick after all and I'm going to have to do this. I slide my hand into my rapier's basket hilt, and wish I could jam this sword into my own heart, instead. The worst of it is, that's not an answer: my death solves nothing.

His death saves the world.

I try to draw but there is no strength in my arm. How have I come to this? How could I have arrived

here?

Why does it have to *beme*?

There is no one else. There is no other answer.

I pull the sword, the silver of its blade flashing fire in the afternoon sun. The brilliant life-green of the Meld plays around their mingled Shells, and they all stare at me: L'jannella, Kyllanni, and Finnall with shock and disbelief, Torronell with acid triumph. "You see?" he screeches. "These *Artans* are not of this world-they're *Aktiri*! He's one of them! He's a damned *Aktir*!"

He will have already spoken this mind to mind, in the Meld; there can be no denial. In the Meld, lies are impossible. They have heard the truth of me, and they all know it.

"He wants to kill me! *He wants to kill us all!*"

This he believes, too; it's even half true. The virus destroying his mind supplies more than enough conviction to carry the other half. The only reply I can make is my fencer's lunge, the razor tip of my rapier reaching for his heart.

Finnall is faster, throwing herself in front of her prince. My sword takes her just below the arch of the ribs; it slides easily through muscle and liver until the point grates on the back curve of her ribs. She shudders with the cold discomfort that is still too fresh to be pain and grabs the blade with both hands as she falls, ripping it from my loosening fingers.

Oh *Finnan*, oh god

But I can't stop now. My people, my world-they have no one else to defend them.

Training more than a quarter century old, from the Studio Conservatory, reminds me how to kill with my empty hands; I leap at Torronell, and he falls back from me, screeching-and he is still Rroni, still my brother, and the one second's hesitation this gives me is too long.

Kyllanni's sword flashes toward me; I see it from the corner of my eye just in time to leap to one side and face him. I can still hear my tutor's voice: *When you're unarmed and the other guy's got a sword, run like a bastard.*

That's not an option.

Move out of the line of attack and disable his arm. Don't fight the sword; fight the man.

Kyllanni lifts his sword and springs at me; I slip aside, but even as I reach for his arm, something strikes me on the head with a humorous metal-on-wood *bonk*. My vision vanishes in a white glare, and my knees turn to cloth. I stagger back, covering my head, trying to keep moving so they can't take my vitals.

Torronell holds a bloodied sword.

He hit me, in the head, with a sword.

I stagger back another step, and my foot touches only air.

Bottomless air, I find as my body follows it--and I'm flying, flying, flying, and of course it's not bottomless, it just feels that way, like I'm never going to land as the cliff face rushes upward past me. I hit an outcrop and bounce, and another one; I hear something break, loud enough that it might be my leg.

My final impact comes as a burst of colorless fire, and then darkness.

6

L'jannella crouches on the far side of the clearing, away from the embers of last night's fire. She hugs herself, trembling, though the morning is not cold. Denied the Meld by *my* order-by my lie-she uses mere words to describe her horror. Language was never designed to carry such freight, but her pale shivering hoarseness is eloquent enough. My best memories of L'jannella all see her giggling with joy at some practical joke, even when it was on her; to see her sickened and so very, very frightened is as painful as the story she tells.

The long silence from the Diamondwell stonebenders is now explained, as is the fate of the legates my father sent to enquire of them. I can barely hear her words over the thunder of blood in my ears, but the sense is clear enough.

The tiny, sleepy, sparsely settled human duchy of Transdeia, formerly a peaceful agricultural land-its only other industry being hospitality for travelers on the Northwest Road-has metastasized into a giant landhungry termite hill of a nation. Now under the control of a mysterious folk who all themselves *Artans*, it has swallowed Diamondwell as though the millennium-old stonebender freehold had never existed; the mountains that the stonebenders once cherished have become a blasted wasteland of open-pit mines and giant hydraulic slurries that chew away cliff sides, taking daily bites measured in hundreds of long tons.

The news gets worse: suffocating déjà vu closes around my throat as L'jannella describes the machines in the mining pits: huge hulking metal scoops that belch black smoke and roar with hunger, plows on wheels connected by linked metal treads. I can see them in my head, more clearly probably than she can. I grew up with these machines.

My father-my first father, my birth father-runs a corporation that builds machines like these, and so I know, instinctively, who the Artans are.

And she tells of the fence that surrounds them, a fence supported on steel posts, built of interlocking vertical zigzags of wire; she traces the shape in the air with her finger and tells of the wire coils that top it, coils with sharp blades sticking out along their curves. This, as well, I can imagine too clearly: chain-link fence, topped with razor wire.

Torronell catches my gaze, and accusation glares through the pale sweat that coats his face; he has guessed the truth. His mouth opens as though he would speak, but then closes; he pretends to look away, sneaking a crafty glance at me from the corner of his bloodshot eye.

Oh, god-all gods, human gods, any who will listen-please let that sweat be from fear and disgust, and not from fever. Let his crafty glance bespeak mere hatred.

L'jannella continues mercilessly. At intervals along the miles of that fence, bodies hang-corpses, skeletons, some still in scraps of clothing, mostly stonebenders, some primals, even a few tiny treetoppers-their feet off the ground, arms wide, wired to the fence by their wrists. Crucified.

Crucified by the Artans.

I can't face Torronell now; if I even glance at him, so much as glimpse his face, I might start to explain, words might start to tumble from my mouth no matter how hard I try to stop them. *But those aren't my people, I want to cry. Its not my people who have done this. It's someone else, someone alien, someone who does not partake of my blood, of my world.* Even now, old enough to know better, I find myself stunned with astonished revulsion at the horrors of which we are capable.

After twenty-seven years as a primal mage, I can still hate myself for being human.

But I must not show any of this before L'jannella. The secret of my heritage belongs to House Mithondionne, to T'farrell Ravenlock himself, as it has since the day of my Adoption; it is not mine to reveal.

My mind has wandered on these matters, but now L'jannella recaptures my full attention. I gather that she is now relating *why* she returned alone to make this report, why Kyllanni and Finnall remained behind: "They watch, and wait for us to join them. While they watch, they compose a Song of War."

I can feel Torronell's glare burning against the side of my head; I dare not face him. "They can't do that."

Torronell speaks for the first time, a harsh throat-scuffing rasp. "How can they *not*?"

"This Song will not be sung without leave of House Mithondionne," L'jannella says, "but Changeling, Diamondwell has been under the protection of your House for more than a thousand years, since the days of Panchasell Luckless. The Diamondwell stonebenders are our cousins; isn't this rape of their land alone a strong enough theme for a Song of War?"

"That's not the point."

"What is the point, then?" Torronell rasps bitterly. "What? Tell us."

L'jannella goes on before I can find the words. "Changeling, the humans of Transdeia make war on us already. The legates your father sent—did you not hear me? *Their bodies hang on that fence!* Finnall's *brother* hangs on that fence: Quelliar. Murdered. Can you recall the sound of his laughter, and *not* burn for war?"

It doesn't matter. A grinding pain in my chest threatens to close my throat and choke off these words, but I get them out anyway. "No war. There will be no war."

Torronell stands. "That is not for you to say. I am Eldest, here. We will go and hear their Song."

"Rroni, *no*, dammit! You don't know what you're getting into." "And you do? How is this? Do you want to *explain*?"

He knows I can't, not in front of L'jannella; is he really sick? Is that why he's baiting me like this?

Am I going to have to kill him?

He looks at me as though my thoughts are written on my forehead. He's waiting for me to decide.

I know already: I'm going to cave. What choice do I have?

"All right," I say, defeated. "Let's go hear their Song."

7

"I feel fine," Rroni says thinly. He licks his lips and stares into the flames, and I let myself believe that the flush in his face comes from sitting too close to the campfire. "It's been four days. If I have it, I'd be feverish by now, wouldn't I?" His eyes are raw with dread. "Wouldn't I?"

Our clothes are new, spares from the saddlepacks of the two horses that stand hobbled nearby. We squat on fallen logs around our tiny fire. My hair has begun to grow back, a pale stubble that makes my scalp feel like warm sandpaper; Rroni is still bald and scorched.

Rroni's lip is split, his face swollen with purple bruise where I hit him. Ever since he woke up he has resisted, more and more, opening himself to the comfort of the Meld; we've used our voices in conversation more over these four days than we have in the past ten years.

I miss the Meld, miss the closeness I shared with my brother. I wish, pointlessly, that I could use it now, but I don't even bring it up. I can't. A sick pain that pools in the hollow of my stomach tells me that I don't really want to share the feelings that Torronell conceals. So I can only nod uncertainly, trusting to the night and the campfire's flicker to conceal my expression. "Yes, four days, I think so. I'm not sure."

"*How can you not be sure?*" Rroni hisses.

It's not like I can flick on a wallscreen and look it up.

I can't say that Rroni's in too much pain.

I have no secrets from my brother. Rroni knew the truth twenty-five years ago, even before my Adoption. These things could not be spoken of, in front of our companions; my true heritage remains a closely guarded secret of House Mithondionne. Everybody-nearly everybody, at least, our companions included-knows I have a secret, but they have never suspected the truth. Everyone thinks I'm a Mule, one of those rare and pitiful creatures born from a human rape of a primal female. It is generally supposed that *Changeling* is a polite euphemism.

The truth is worse.

I have to face it now: with everything that has happened, I can't run from it, can't deny it. I am an *Aktir*.

Not an Actor, no: my sense experiences have never been transmitted to Earth to be sold by the Studio as entertainment. But an *Aktir*, yes: I was born on Earth. Born human. Surgically altered at the Studio Conservatory on Naxos to pass for primal.

My name was Soren Kristiaan Hansen. I lived as a human for twenty-two years, long enough to graduate from the Studio's College of Battle Magick, long enough to make the freemod transfer to Overworld, ostensibly for training-and then I shed my human skin like the dried husk of a butterfly's chrysalis, and spread my elvish wings.

In my first few years as Deliann, I could barely even think my former name, let alone say it; but the conditioning imposed by the Studio fades over time, if it is not renewed. For dozens of years I have been free to speak the truth of myself, but I never have.

I'm not sure what my truth might be.

I barely remember Soren Kristiaan Hansen: he exists solely as a recollection of a boy who passed his childhood pretending to be the bastard son of *Frey*, Lord of the *lios* alfar—a boy who'd never wanted anything so much as to be a primal mage. I've been Deliann the Changeling for twenty-seven years, more than half my life—have been Prince Deliann Mithondionne, adopted son of T'farrell Ravenlock, for nearly twenty-five.

My human family will have given me up for dead long ago, and shed few tears. There were other Hansen sons, and in a prominent Business family like the Hansens of Ilmarinen MachineWorks, Soren Kristiaan had been as much a marketable commodity as he had been a son and brother.

I don't miss them. I didn't *like* being human, being Business. I am incapable of the kind of nostalgic illusion that would make me homesick for the shallow, narrow-minded world of privilege and profit in which my abandoned family lives. I left Earth behind, shook it off like a nightmare, and have lived my dream for more than half my life. I never expected that quarter-century-old nightmare to reach out, grab me, and crush my heart.

Ah, my heart, Rroni . you can't do this to me. You can't die.

Torronell is the next-youngest prince of House Mithondionne. He was born three hundred and seventy-three years ago, and from my forty-nine-year-old perspective, anything that old should be indestructible. For the love of god—he was born the same year Darwin sailed on the *Beagle* how can he be dying?

"I told you," I say, "it's not like I learned about it in school; HRVP was wiped out a hundred years before I was born."

"Supposedly," Rroni supplies bitterly.

I nod. "All I know about it comes from Plague Years novels I read when I was a boy. Novels are like ... like epics. You know a lot about Jereth's Revolt, say, but you can't quote the actual text of the Covenant of Pirichanthe."

Rroni looks *away*. "That's a human story."

"So the best I can remember is that HRVP incubates in something like four days. It could be ten, or two weeks, or a month. I just don't know. Novelists aren't always too careful with their facts—and this might not even be the same strain. Viruses mutate—ah, they change characteristics, and symptoms, and effects. That's how *they* say HRVP happened in the first place."

We've been over this a dozen times in the past four days. Each time, I repeat what I know, and detail what I don't know, with identical slow, patient precision. It's become a bitter ritual, but it seems to help Rroni, to ease his mind somehow, to let him believe that I might be wrong. I have no other comfort to offer.

"How can I die of a human disease?" Rroni has asked, again and again. "We're not even the same species!"

I have always the same answer. "I don't know."

All I can say is that rabies-the naturally occurring, original baseline of HRVP-was infectious in all mammals. And, once the infection has developed, it's fatal. No percentages, no treatments, no appeals. HRVP is worse: vastly faster, vastly more contagious. HRVP is persistent in the environment; in the absence of a warm-blooded host it sporulates, remaining potentially lethal for months.

Andairborne.

I can only pray that I acted fast enough.

The primal male I killed in the village haunts the back of my mind, asleep and awake; I can't stop thinking about the days-long progress of the disease. How much longer would he have lived in agony? Days? A week? I can't imagine a more hideous death. Sometimes, in my head, the male has Rroni's face.

Sometimes he looks like the Twilight King himself.

I remember standing in line, five years old, with a dozen other Business children. I remember the pressure of the airgun against my hip, and the sudden sharp sting of the inoculation. Tears welled in my eyes, but I had blinked them back, and I had not made a sound. It was a solemn occasion, a rite of passage of my Business caste; the inoculation was my passport to the world, and I had accepted it as a Businessman should. I never dreamed that now, after more than forty years have passed, the fate of a world might hinge on that brief pain.

"And so," Rroni mutters, lacing his fingers into white-knuckled knots, "how long must we wait? How long before we decide whether I shall die, or live? The others will be back from their scout at any moment they should have been back by yesterday's dusk. Then what? What shall we tell them? How shall we prevent their exposure?"

He nods miserably toward the horses. "If I am infected, then even Nylla and Passi must be destroyed, as you destroyed the village."

Rroni and his horses-he often liked to comment that the horse was the perfect expression of T'nallarann: strong, swift, loyal, fierce in defense, faithful beyond the limits of its strength. Now the gaze he turns upon them is freighted with the anticipation of their deaths.

"Any living thing might carry this disease into our villages, and our cities. So we must kill, and kill, and kill. We must make a wasteland of this place, for your HRVP may spread through any creature alive in this land-except you," he finishes bitterly.

I look at the ground. "We'll stick to the curse story."

"They will know we lie."

"They know that already," I remind him. "But they don't know what we're lying about."

In the time crunch after I burned the village, the story I came up with had been embarrassingly weak; I'm not a gifted liar. I shouted to my friends a confused tale of a potent curse laid on the village-a curse that had slain the villagers one and all-a curse that had now fallen upon Rroni and me as soon as we walked in; I told them I was afraid that the magick of the curse might be able to bridge through the magickal link of the Meld, and so I refused all contact, mental or physical.

I ordered them to continue northeast into the mountains and complete the reconnaissance. Remember

the mission, I told them; nothing was more important than the mission; we have to find out what happened to Diamondwell. Rroni and I would stay here and investigate the action of the curse, and see what might be done to counter it. They could not argue. Improbable as it sounded, the story *could* have been true, and I am, after all, their prince.

"I don't like it," Rroni says. "They are our friends. They deserve the truth."

I shake my head, still looking at the ground; I can't face him. "This isn't about what they deserve. We tell the truth about HRVP, we'll have to tell them how we know. We'll have to tell them why I'm immune. And once that's out, they'll forget the rest. All they'll be able to think about is how we've betrayed them."

Rroni turns away, offering me only the back of his bare, scorched skull, and his voice is low and hoarse. "Perhaps we have."

I stare into the fire. I don't trust myself to answer, and I'm afraid to meet my brother's eyes.

"It's your people *who* have done this," Rroni goes on. The words leak out like drops of gall, slow and bitter, as though forced from his lips by pressure that gradually builds inside his head.

"Rroni, don't. *You* are my people--"

"Your people ...*made* this horror. The ignorant say that *Aktiri* rape and slaughter and defile everything they touch, for each other's *samusement*; and perhaps they *who* say such Things are not so ignorant, after all. How else can this be explained? Why else have you done this to me?"

My heart thuds painfully once, then again. "Is that what you think, Rroni? Do you really think I did this to you?"

Torronell turns his face silently away from the fire, toward the night; he has no answer that I can bear to hear.

Many, many years ago, when I rejected both my Business heritage and the prospect of an Acting career, I liked to tell myself that I did so from some unexpected nobility of spirit, because I couldn't bear to profit by inflicting harm on others--I was, after all, very young.

I saw the use of cyborged Workers in Ilmarinen's heavy-machinery factories as being morally equivalent to the brutal violence against Overworld natives that drove all successful Acting careers, because both required a certain objectification of the people they exploited. Ilmarinen MachineWorks used its cyborg Assemblers as replaceable, easily programmed robots; Actors, even those usually considered "heroes," had to cultivate a similar disregard toward the native Overworlders they inevitably killed and maimed during their Adventures. Expendable-replaceable--"bad guys" were the staple of Studio success.

As years passed, though, I came to understand myself somewhat more precisely, and I realized that my decision had had little to do with morality, and less to do with nobility; that it was really, in the end, a matter of taste.

I hate killing. I cannot bear to inflict pain, or even to know that pain is inflicted on my behalf. Perhaps this comes from the gift I have, the ability to flash into another's life; perhaps my empathy has become so acute that I feel each hurt in advance. The reason, finally, is irrelevant. The fact remains: I am not, have never been, could never be a killer.

The First Folk do not pray. We do not have gods in the human sense. Our spirituality springs from our inextricable, ineradicable place in the interconnected web of life itself. We touch the source of the Flow, and we find that source within ourselves; the fundamental breath of the world breathes through us, as it does through all living things. We do not ask favors of life, we participate in it.

But I was born human, and in ultimate distress I can't help returning to the ways of my childhood.

In the depths of night that follow the dying of the campfire's embers, I find myself praying desperately to T'nallarann that I will not be forced to kill my brother.

8

The scent of blood hangs in the silver dusk.

I balance on tiptoe at the edge of the dead village, long hair the color of moonlight floating free in a translucent halo around my ears. As T'ffar sinks toward the western horizon and day fades from the sky, my surgically enhanced eyes respond, bringing the sagging, skeletal hulks of the rude shanties before me into relief as bright and sharp as a chromed knife.

This is a bad idea. This is a stupid thing to do.

But I send, in the octave of the Meld, an image of my companions remaining hidden in the forest, and an image of me being very careful as I enter the dead village: *Stay here. I'm going in.*

The backflow from the Meld, in response, is primarily echoes of alarm and disapproval from L'jannella, Kyllanni, and Finnall, strong enough to make the horses uneasy, overlaid with the acerbic vinegar flavor of my brother Torronell's contribution: a dead ape with my face, rotting for a season on a pile of oil-soaked logs: *Don't expect me to light the pyre when your manblood finally gets you killed, monkey boy.*

I grin sourly. My answering image is of Rroni holding the reins of a horse while I streak from the village like a cat with its tail on fire: *Be ready. I might come out of here a lot faster than I'm going in.*

The faintest of breezes stirs the forest around me, shifting the canopy of branches and making the green aural Shells of the living trees pulse like shadows cast by candlelight. The village swarms with the smaller, brighter Shells of forest animals, many of them fading now with the day, shading to the earth tones of sleep. Small birds flutter to their nests among the branches; ground squirrels and field mice and their numerous cousins burrow snugly into the earth to hide from the silent swoop of awakening owls. The forest is alive, but this village is dead.

In a living village of the First Folk, these shelters, roughly constructed of woodland scraps, would appear to the eye and hand to be shaped of living trees, polished with rich oils, filigreed with delicate spirals of platinum and beaten gold. In a living village, the air would carry the scents of mushrooms simmering in butter, of fine beer foaming as it spills from oaken casks, of rich wood-smoke from hearths alight with mistletoe and ash. In a living village, even the silences would shiver with the almost-heard laughter of children.

The silences in this village have vanished behind the croaks of ravens, squabbling over carrion.

This village reeks of old meat.

I repeat: This is a bad idea. This is a stupid thing to do.

But I am a prince, and these had been my folk. If I don't go in, Rroni will; though Rroni is far more the sarcastic society wit than he is a warrior, he is equally a prince. This is my job. I have vastly greater faith in my own ability to survive the unexpected. And let's face it: I have less to lose.

Poised at the village edge, I set the frog of my recurved bow on the top of my boot, bend the bow and string it. I slide a silver-bladed broadhead from the quiver at my belt and fit its nock to the string. I slip into the village as quietly as a shadow lengthens in the twilight; this is one of the things I do almost as well as a true primal.

The shelters rise around the boles of forest giants in the deepwood, letting the shade of the towering trees do the work of keeping underbrush clear. Needing no more than primal skill with Fantasy for defense, these villages are as open as the forest itself. I drift from tree to tree, letting my nose gather information that my eyes, enhanced or not, just can't; the shadows within the crude shelters are too dark.

Each window exhales a miasma of rotting blood.

Beyond the splintery gaps in the corner of one collapsing shanty, a squawking pile of black wings and curved beaks shudders in a span of well-trodden earth. I approach, reaching out with a tendril of my Shell to flick the scarlet radiances of theirs. The ravens scatter, some taking wing clumsily, some only waddling away, too fat and gorged with flesh to fly.

What they had fed upon is the corpse of a little feyal, lying carelessly splayed on the earth like a cast-off doll. This feyal had been very young, six or seven years old, and the bright colors of his kirtle have not yet faded in the sun. Loving hands had woven this kirtle, thread by thread, and loving hands had embossed the broad leather belt that girdled it, had made the wooden toy sword and the bow of bundled rushes that lie beside him.

I squat by the corpse, holding my bow and nocked arrow in my left hand, parallel to the earth. I turn the feyal's face delicately up to catch the last of the day's light. Maggots squirm in one empty eye socket, and inside the nose and open mouth, yet the other eye still stares from the skull like a dusty opal. The ravens have torn off only the tongue and parts of the lips; even the tender flesh below the jaw is still unmarked.

My heart kicks into a gallop. From the size of these maggots, this child has been dead at least three days; the ravens should have stripped his face near to the bone by now. They should be working on his liver and lungs, unless some larger scavenger has been driving them off-and his corpse shows no sign that anything other than birds has been at him. Something has been chasing off the ravens.

Something in this village still lives.

Get out of there, Kyllanni sends in words. Of the four that wait outside the village, she's the best hunter, and she understands perfectly what this child's corpse signifies. This feyal had been left in the open deliberately: bait.

Yes: me, too.

I drop one knee to the earth and pretend that my full attention is engaged in examining the corpse. The faint scrape of a stealthy footfall comes from not far behind me, along with a muffled rasp of breath, labored and harsh.

Changeling come on! Get out of there! Now! Ljannella and Finnall weigh in, adding their urgencies to Kyllanni's, imagery of a shadowy, monstrous shape looming behind my shoulder. *Come on!*

I hunch over the child a little more. I can't help it—it's an instinctive urge to present a smaller target.

Let him be, Torronell offers, sending a picture of the Deliann-faced ape industriously tinkering with some impossibly complicated puzzle: *Let the monkey boy play his game. He occasionally knows what he's doing.*

Please, kind gods, let this be one of those times.

I gently shift the feyal's body, but find nothing that resembles a death wound. The earth on which it lies is scuffed and printed with countless raven tracks, and so tells no useful tale. The child's hands have twisted into rictal talons, still stiff as stone though rigor had long passed for the rest of his limp corpse. Fluid has leaked from his partially eaten mouth and soaked into the ground—and has left a crust of its trail on his cheek, rimmed with flaking blood. This crust has a strange, fractal, *bubbled* look, like dried soap scum.

A sudden coat of sand grows on my tongue and a chilly sickness gathers in my stomach. I peer closely at this crusted streak, holding my breath and cursing the growing darkness.

Sweet shivering *fuck*.

Oh, fuck, fuck me, god. Please let me be wrong.

It could be any number of things. *It could.* The kid could have gotten a mouthful of raw *writh* leaves, for example; he could have been chewing soapbark for the tingle, and had a stroke.

But I don't really believe it; some childhood bogymen are fixed too firmly in one's dreams to ever be mistaken. Dried foam on the face, the clawed hands with earth caked under the fingernails, dirt scraped up in the final convulsions

If the corpse were fresher, I could tell for sure: The tongue would be black, dried and cracked like a mudflat at the end of a summer's drought; the throat would be so swollen that the head could not be turned.

Again a footfall scrapes behind me, and another. I barely hear them; I'm buried in a fantasy of cracking open the feyal's skull, of excising some tissue at the base of the brain, of improvising some kind of magickal lenses to make a microscope powerful enough to search for Negri bodies in the nerve cells--

The stealthy footfalls become a sudden rush, and now the shout that comes through the Meld is my brother's: *DELIANN!*

I throw myself to the right, the edge of *my* hand striking the ground to begin a shoulder-roll that brings me to a crouch as my attacker blunders past me. The bow in my left stays parallel to the ground; I stroke the arrow's nock to my chest and release it without aiming, allowing my body to target without the intervention of my mind.

The silver broadhead punches through the ribs of a youthful, powerful-looking *fey*. He twists, snarling and clawing at the shaft like a wounded cougar. The shaft snaps, and its splintered end slashes blood from his hand. He croaks, "Murderer--murderer," in a harsh and rasping whisper, then springs at me, empty hands outstretched, fingers hooked like a raptor's talons.

I drop my bow and slip aside once again, ducking beneath his wide-flung arm. I draw my rapier from the scabbard that rides my left hip; it chimes like a silver bell as it comes free. As he whirls to charge again, I lunge and drive my blade through the side of his thigh just above the knee, twisting it so that the razor edge slashes out through his hamstring.

His leg springs straight, pitching him sideways to the earth; he writhes there, growling wordlessly, and claws the earth with spastic talons, dragging himself toward me a bloody inch at a time.

He might not be alone, Rroni sends. I'm coming in.

NO! My roar into the Meld spikes a backflow of startled pain from all four of my companions. *STAY WHERE YOU ARE!*

Don't shout at us, monkey boy. Being loud doesn't make you immortal. You need someone at your back

How can I possibly explain? *Rroni, I swear by the honor of our House that you can't come in here. Come into this village, and you die. Believe me. Is this some manblood thing, little brother?*

Ah, yes, that's it... I have to force the phrase; the Meld makes untruths difficult to share, impossible to conceal. My friends' sharp orange sting at my lie stabs like a needle into my heart. *Please, Rroni. Now I'm asking you. Stay out.*

I am Eldest here, Deliann. It was my risk to take from the first. This means trouble-Rroni never calls me by my right name unless he's too upset to be insulting, and years have passed since the last time he pulled rank. *Either come out, or I shall come in and get you.*

Don't. Just don't.

This exchange takes only a second. I crouch in the wounded fey's path and extend my Shell to touch the aura, crimson shot through with crackling violet, that pulses around his form like cold flame. As I delicately tune my own Shell to match the bloody hue and the jagged violet discharge of his, my perception of the Meld trickles away. Now, for the first time since the five of us set out from Mithondion, I am truly alone.

Once my Shell harmonizes fully to his, I open myself to the liquid swirl of the Flow. With the energy of the forest around me channeled through my mind, I gently take control of his muscles and hold him shivering in place.

He fights me, but as an animal fights, or a human, pitting the strength of his will against my mindhold; he refuses to believe his limbs will not obey him, and fuels his struggle with his rage. I'm not an accomplished mindwrestler-any of my brothers can beat me-but no one can match my raw power. My brothers like to sneer that I'm as graceful as a mudslide, but like a mudslide, I cannot be overcome by mere strength.

I play him like a puppet, using his own muscles to roll him onto his back and lift his face for examination.

Both his eyes are ringed with swollen, purplish-black flesh, and crusted with pale yellow scurf that clings in chunks to his eyelashes and forms a trail down his cheeks. Pink foam bubbles from his mouth, streaked with deeper scarlet that swells from the gaping cracks in his blackened lips. His tongue is black and cracked and leaking blood thick as mucus, and the flesh beneath his chin is swollen until his skin is tight as melon rind.

The cold sickness that birthed in my stomach as I examined the child now freezes into a solid brick of ice.

This is not supposed to be possible.

I would speak my silent *ah, shit, holy ship* but my chest squeezes itself until I can't even whisper.

T'ffar sinks into the west, his rosy bloom replaced by the sheen of T'llan rising over the eastern mountains. I get up, and stand over the *fey* I hold helpless at my feet, watching his blood fade to black. I lift my slim blade, following with my eyes the moonsilver that ripples over it like water, and imagine the slow, raw-meat rip of thrusting this blade into his belly, probing with the point to find the pulse of his heart, to slash that muscle and drain the life from his *eyes*.

It's the only medicine I can offer.

I wasn't born a primal prince. I could have refused the honor, and the duty. I knew, even on that day when T'farrell Ravenlock spoke the formula of Adoption before the assembled House Mithondionne, that the kind of obligation I face now could become part of my life.

I chose this. It's too late to take it back.

I lower the point of my moonsilvered blade and touch it to the vault of the helpless *fey's* rib cage. Current surges through that physical connection, deeper and more intimate than the mingling of our attuned Shells; he rolls his crusted eyes to meet mine, and I flash on him.

In that second, I become the wounded *fey*

Immobile on the cooling earth, trapped inside a body that will not obey me, feeling the stiff *scrrrt* of my broken rib scraping the arrow shaft that punctures my lung, feeling the hot pool of blood thicken beneath my hamstrung leg. But these are nothing, not even a distraction, behind the agony of my throat.

Someone took a burning log from a bonfire and jammed it into my mouth; now they are pounding it down my throat in time with the erratic thunder of my heart. A thirst is on me, a savage lust for the faintest touch of moisture, that hurts even more than the broken glass that fills my throat. I have dreamed only of water for four nights now, of cool clear forest springs that could ease my throat and quench the blaze of my fever. My face burns with it, roasting slowly in its internal heat, scorching my lips to bloody charcoal, cooking my tongue to blackened leather within the oven of my mouth; water is my only hope of relief. But even the morning dew, sopped from the hanging sheets of moss that drape the trees nearby, seared my throat like boiling acid. It has been two days since I was last able to swallow.

The flash ends a bare instant after it began, but it leaves me shaken and trembling, greasy sweat seeping over my forehead. It could have been worse: I could have sunk fully into his past, experienced the nervous hypersensitivity, the way the faintest whisper stabs like a needle into the eardrum, the dimmest candle becomes a knife in the eye, the unendurable itching, the insatiate hunger and convulsive vomiting, the growing homicidal paranoia that transforms your wife, your children, even your parents into leering monsters that tear at your mind

I know these symptoms by heart; they form shadow-shapes in the back of my mind, always lurking, sniffing around the fringes of my consciousness, wondering when *they* might finally match my experience.

Today, I am grateful for the flash that is my gift, because it makes my duty easier: makes it purely merry.

I hold the fey motionless while I lean on my sword. The blade enters his belly, with a frictive skidding on the muscle that clenches spastically around it. I twist the blade upward until I find his heart, and slash into and through it, the point grating on his spine.

It takes a minute or two for him to die. Even as his heart spasms and blood floods his abdominal cavity, he's still alive, still awake, still staring up at me with maddened, hungry eyes as his body shuts down piecemeal, blood flow cutting off first to his limbs, then to his guts and chest, trying to keep that last spark of consciousness aflame.

I watch it smolder, and wink out.

I wipe my blade, but instead of returning it to its scabbard, I drive its point into the knot of a tree root that sticks up above the earth and leave it there to gently sway in the moonlight. I yank the broken arrow from the corpse's side and do the same with it.

Slowly, I untie the braided leather belt that holds my scabbard and quiver. I take it from around my waist and *hang* it from the hilt of my rapier. My shirt and breeches come next, and my stockings, and boots. All these I pile on the knotted root beside my sword and the broken arrow. I collect my bow from where it lies on the earth, a few paces away; with solemn, ceremonial care, I place it on the pile.

"What in the world are you *doing*?" Rroni's voice sounds rusty-it's been days since he's spoken aloud-and its accustomed mocking edge is conspicuously absent. "*Clothe* yourself, Deliann! Are you mad?"

He's there, behind me; I turn to face him, and meet his eyes. My brother: my best friend. Rroni stands over the dead child, revulsion and horror twisting his delicate features, and for the wrenching eternity between one heartbeat and the next, I can only stare. I can't move, can't breathe, can't blink. I am entirely consumed by the agonizing wish that my brother had been born a coward.

A coward would never have come into this village; a coward would never have left Mithondion on a dangerous, useless quest with his half-mad, manblood-tainted brother.

A coward would have lived through it.

I settle into myself, compressing somehow, barely perceptibly, as though the world has become a smaller place and I shrink with it.

"What have you done here? Deliann, answer me! What have they done to you?"

I can't get my mind around it, not yet-maybe not ever.

Rroni is probably already dead.

He steps closer, a tendril of his Shell questing out, its shade cycling through the spectrum as he tunes it for a mindhold. In the instant it drops out of the octave of the Meld, I snatch my rapier from the root and lunge at my brother. One advantage of my mortal birth is a strength of body that no primal can hope to equal; when the basket hilt of my rapier hits the side of Rroni's head, he drops like a stone.

I stand over him, breathless at the fierce ache within my chest.

After a moment, I return the rapier to its place on the root's knuckle, then I kneel beside Rroni and swiftly strip him. I bundle Rroni's clothing on top of mine, and place Rroni's boots alongside. Naked, barefoot, and unarmed, I pace the perimeter of the dead village, gathering Flow within a fiery image I hold in my mind, clear as a dream; from my footsteps, the earth sprouts flame.

At the first hint of smoke, our friends call in alarm from the deepwood, using their voices when they find no answers within the Meld. I brush the Meld for one instant: *Patience*.

I turn to the center of the village, fire skipping at my heels like a faithful puppy. At the knotted root, I take my brother into my arms and turn my face to the indifferent stars.

The death of my entire people dances in this ring of flame around me. I swear-T'nallarann, Lifemind, are you listening?-I swear that this death will not work through me.

With a silent shout of power, I draw the cleansing flame in upon us, a thunderclap cautery that flares like the sun upon the forest floor. A toad stool of smoke rolls toward the moon; it grows from a fairy ring of cinders that smolders like countless eyes in the darkness around us.

I stand at the center, Rroni in my arms, both of us now panting harshly in the smoke-thickened air. His platinum hair has become a reeking tangle-melt of char; his flesh is covered with a fine grey ash, the remnants of its outermost layer. I imagine I look even worse.

"Now," I mutter, my voice as bleak and colorless as the ashes of my heart, "all I need is a good lie to tell the others, and everything might still be all right."

9

The connection shattered in a blast of white fire across Deliann's vision, from the slap of Tchako's leather club.

"*What are you doing?*" the ogrillo howled, lifting her braided club for another blow. "You murdering motherfucker, I'll beat you to death! *What did you do to her?*"

Kierendal lay on the floor in front of him, her face white as though painted with ash. The club hissed through the air and banged his skull again; blood sprayed across the brown-spattered wall, and the room darkened.

The entire flash had happened in the time it took the ogrillo to raise her club.

Deliann tried to lift his free hand up to shield his head and neck, but he couldn't make his arm work, couldn't even hold up his head. "If you've hurt her, you mother-"

"Tchako," Kierendal said from the floor, her voice weak and shaken but strong enough to save Deliann's life. "Don't. Don't hit him. Help me up."

The ogrillo's coarse features twisted in a caricature of puzzlement, but she lowered the club and went to Kierendal's side, extending a scaly hand to help her mistress rise. Kierendal leaned heavily on her for a moment, and passed a hand over her eyes. "Get the keys. Unlock his manacles."

"Kier, you're not well-"

"Go, damn you!" the feya snapped, and Tchako could not bear her displeasure. She left, trailing a murderous glare at Deliann.

The door closed behind her.

Kierendal swayed, deprived of the ogrillo's support. She touched her face again, as though assessing a fever, and then she sank to her knees beside Deliann, heedless of the damage to her exquisite gown.

She placed her hands upon his lap in the ancient gesture of fealty. "I-I can't believe ... Deliann, I-"

"It's all right, Kier," he said kindly. "I know it's overwhelming. I've had two weeks to get used to the idea, and it still makes me want to scream and never stop."

She lowered her eyes, bending her long, graceful neck before him. "I am yours, my prince. What would you have me do?"

Deliann took a deep breath, and let himself believe that between the two of them, some lives might still be saved.

"First," he said slowly, "we need to catch an *Aktir*."

And each had his own role to play: the crooked knight defended the part-time goddess; the part-time goddess served the land; the acolytes of dust and ashes fed their master's hunger.

The dark angel made war.

He answered the call of the crooked knight; he used the part-time goddess to work his will; he named the god of dust and ashes his enemy. On that day, the dark angel broke his chains and went forth to battle.

FIVE

Hari sat motionless in his uncomfortable chair, the pain in his back forgotten, listening so hard he barely breathed around the knot in his guts. He knew the voice.

This weirdass-looking fey he didn't recognize, but he still had an Actor's ear for voices. This voice stirred old memories, half buried in passing years; he eased back in his chair and closed his eyes, shutting out the unfamiliar face, concentrating on the familiar voice.

"...but this is what you don't know. At least, I hope you don't know. By all I hold sacred, I pray that even the monsters who control the Studio are not so evil that you would inflict HRVP on us intentionally . . ."

HRVP? On Overworld? His eyes jerked open and he jolted upright, staring at his deskscreen. He couldn't seem to get his breath.

"Remember that HRVP once came within an inch of destroying civilization, even with vaccines and quarantines and the finest medical technology that Earth could muster.

"Remember that here, on Overworld, the primary method of healing is the laying on of hands.

"Resist the Blind God. The greed of your worst should not be allowed to triumph over the conscience of your best. Fight it.

"You are our only hope.

"We are at your mercy.

"Save us."

Hari forgot about the voice; a tornado howled inside his head, and its silent roar drowned out every thought, save one nerveless whisper:*HRVP*.

It had to be a mistake. It had to be an accident. He must have heard wrong-*hemust* have. On a nontechnological world, HRVP was the perfect weapon. It could wipe out every warm-blooded creature on the planet.

Except for us, Hari thought.

HRVP had been eradicated on Earth, brought to extinction by quarantine and vaccination, more than fifty years ago. The final outbreak had come somewhere in Indonesia, when a strain that had been preserved in an immunological laboratory had escaped. Someone had leaked news of the strain's existence to the local press, and the story sparked riots in which the laboratory had been destroyed, burned to the ground-but not quite thoroughly enough.

Worldwide, more than two million people died, roughly five hundred thousand of HRVP itself; the other million and a half were victims of the victims. The standard ratio, which had held roughly true for this one as it had for each large HRVP outbreak since the beginning of the twenty-first century, was that an HRVP sufferer killed an average of 2.8 people before either succumbing to the disease or being killed himself. The Leisure Congress in Geneva had acted with extraordinary swiftness: less than twelve hours after the outbreak was confirmed, the island had been sterilized by a series of minimum-residue neutron bombs. The deaths of one hundred and twenty-seven thousand islanders were buried in the disaster's total-and they died for nothing.

Before the worldwide network of slavelanes had gone online, it wasn't possible to quarantine any large area, even an island; thousands of people had fled in their cars at the first word of the outbreak. Within hours, the disease had reached every continent. This was why there remained a mandate of universal vaccination, even today.

Hari, like many of his generation, had grown up with occasional nightmares of seeing that neutron fireball blossom over his own head-but that was less terrifying than the disease itself. The bald elf with the weirdly familiar voice had said that HRVP came within an inch of destroying civilization;*My father*, Hari thought mordantly,*would argue with that*.

Duncan would say the inch was imaginary.

Everything Duncan cherished in the history of human thought, from the democratic franchise to those individual "rights" he so often insisted upon, had been marched up the chute in the slaughterhouse of the Plague Years and had taken the hammer square between the eyes.

The regional and national governments, who were the sole guarantors of those rights, had been completely helpless. A few nations adopted rational, progressive HRVP policies, but they could enforce them only within their own borders-what gains were made could be wiped out by an unlucky shift of the wind. The national militaries became a dangerous, unfunny joke; chain of command is a tricky thing, when one slip of an anti-infection protocol could transform a competent commander into a raving homicidal paranoid. Twenty years after the first outbreak of HRVP, there was no longer even the illusion of a sovereign nation left on Earth-but there was still government.

For centuries-dating back to the Dutch traders and the British East India Company-multinational corporations had pursued their interests globally, as opposed to the provincialism that made national governments so vulnerable. Even before the Plague Years, many of the *zaibatsus* and the megacorps had maintained private military forces, to protect their employees and interests in places where the local governments were unwilling or unable to do so; these giant corporations often had more claim on the loyalty of their employees than did the nations in which these employees chanced to live. After all, the corporation provided the employee's education, housing, child care, health care, income, and finally, as nation after nation collapsed during the Plague Years, the corporation also provided police and military defense. They had no choice; corporations that failed in any of these fundamental responsibilities swiftly found themselves unable to attract the high-quality workers they needed to remain competitive in the unregulated, purely Darwinian jungle of international business. When the nations collapsed, the corporations were already in place, holding the gap.

They were able to act with the ruthlessness that the ongoing crisis required, to act in ways that the merely national governments could not. A national government rules, finally, by consent of the governed; a corporation rules by consent of the *stockholders*.

By the time an effective, mass-producible HRVP vaccine was developed, the three pillars of the current society-the caste system, the tech laws, and the Social Police-were solidly in place.

The caste system, the rigidly enforced social code that forbade cross-caste personal contact, ensured that any outbreaks of HRVP would spread laterally instead of reaching up to the really important people: the business directors, the investment managers, and the majority stockholders-later to become Businessmen, Investors, and Leisurefolk.

HRVP was thought to have been a partially developed bioweapon that escaped from a private laboratory; the tech laws, a loosely bound series of intercorporate treaties, were designed to prevent precisely that kind of dangerous research.

The Social Police enforced the caste laws; violation of a caste law was considered *prima facie* evidence of HRVP infection. Minimum punishment was isolation quarantine; more usually, violators were summarily executed.

Over the years, caste violation penalties had been relaxed, but the scope of the Social Police's mandate had expanded to include the defense of the social order in the broadest terms, from monitoring compliance with the tech laws to enforcing intercorporate contracts. Lower-priority crimes such as robbery, assault, and murder were handled by the understaffed, underpaid, and overworked CID.

Hari wasn't naive enough to long for the vanished pre-HRVP days; due to his semieducation under Duncan's direction, he was more aware than most that what had seemed to be the convulsive transformation of the Plague Years had, in truth, only codified and rigidified trends that had been evolving for centuries.

It would not be so on Overworld.

The elf had said, *Remember that here, on Overworld, the primary method of healing is the laying on of hands.*

The trends of centuries would be irrelevant; no one would survive to continue them. If HRVP could infect primals, it could probably kill stonebenders, treetoppers, ogrilloi-given HRVP's ability to mutate and adapt to new hosts, it could be a mass extinction on the scale of the Cretaceous die-off. Twenty years from now, there might not be a warm-blooded creature alive on Overworld-and the ripple effect on the ecosystem would destroy reptiles, insects, plants

The prospect crushed air from his lungs as though stones were piled upon his chest. No more lancers on lumbering destriers with armor shining in the sun; no wizards; no cheery innkeepers and gap-toothed stableboys; no primals or stonebenders; no treetoppers, griffins, trolls; no more Korish shamans raising dust devils in the Grippen Desert; no ogrillo tribals marauding the fringes of the Boedecken Waste; no more lonely wails of *seniiane* calling the faithful to prayer in the dusk of Seven Wells; no Warrengangs And the numberless creatures now extinct on Earth, but surviving in the wilds of Overworld: no more otters playing in sparkling streams, no more wolves pursuing elk on the high plains, no whales singing to each other from oceans on opposite sides of the world, no condors wheeling on mountain thermals, no coughs of stalking cougars.

This can't be happening.

It made him want to stand up and howl.

Suddenly he comprehended Tan'elKoth utterly: he was being smothered. Choked to death. Earth had forced itself down his throat, and he was strangling on it. Overworld was the only place he'd ever been happy. Overworld was freedom. Overworld was life.

It was home.

This had to be some kind of mistake.

Viceroy Garrette was ruthless, a stone motherfucker, but he wasn't a monster

Hari recalled a story Duncan had pulled from a two-hundred-year-old hardbound book of Western history: a story of European colonists who'd deliberately infected natives on the American continent with a lethal disease called smallpox.

The monsters who control the Studio, the elf had said.

I'm one of the monsters he was talking about.

"Bastards," Hari snarled through his teeth. "Motherfucking *bastards*-" "Administrator? I'm sorry?"

He leaned toward the pickup beside his screen. "You're sure he's not an Actor?"

Actors can now speak English on Overworld, if they choose; they can even speak of being Actors. The crusade that Toa-Sytell had led to rid the Empire of Actors in the wake of *For Love of Pallas Ril* had turned the Studio conditioning, which once had prevented Actors from betraying themselves or each

other, into the very means of that betrayal. Toa-Sytell had discovered that Actors could always be identified by what they were *unable* to say; the Studio's response had been to progressively decondition the Actors. Not a single conditioned Actor was now on Overworld.

And the elf thing-very, very few Actors had ever successfully played an elf, but Hari was pretty sure there were five or six currently active, out of other Studios.

"Pretty, uh, pretty sure he's not an Actor, Administrator," one of the techs answered him hesitantly. "We're running a transponder autoscan, but so far all we're getting from Rossi's vicinity is Rossi."

Hari nodded to himself. What the elf was doing was brilliant, in a pathetic sort of way. Somehow this elf understood that Actors are the Overworld eyes and ears of the wealthiest and most influential people on Earth. Faced with a crisis that could not be met by anyone on Overworld, he turned to the soft hearts of Earth's romantics. A few thousand Leisurefolk-a few *hundred-seeing* this, could pressure the Studio, even the Leisure Congress itself, to mount a relief operation, to find a way to distribute vaccine, to save at least some of the billions of lives that would otherwise be lost. Brilliant.

What made it pathetic was that he'd picked the wrong Actor. Rossi had no audience. No one who mattered was watching this-no one at all. *Well, no*, Hari admitted to himself. *That's not quite true.*

Rossi had an audience of one.

And just that simply, Hari knew who it was, the bald and sickly looking elf with the queerly familiar voice. How does an elf learn English? There's only one answer, curious as it was: he doesn't.

He's not an elf. But he's also not an Actor. A motto percolated up from the depths of some story Duncan had made him read as a boy: *When one eliminates the impossible, whatever remains-however improbable-must be the truth.*

Hari whispered, "...oh, my god ..."

He looked through the image on his deskscreen, out through Rossi's eyes, into golden eyes he had not seen in nearly thirty years. He remembered-He remembered the white plastic surgical mask, worn to protect the progress of the elving. He remembered the gift for intuitive solutions-He remembered the cold courage--He

He remembered the debt he owed.

He murmured, "Kris"

Kris Hansen looked into him now through Frank Rossi's eyes. Kris Hansen asked him, without even knowing it, for his help.

Hari felt something crack inside his chest; something broke and released a nameless flood that surged fiery and humming into his arms, into his head. *You want my help, Kris?*

"You'll fucking well get it," he muttered.

"Administrator? Is something wrong?"

Hari hissed softly through his teeth, gathering scattered thoughts into a semicoherent plan of action.

"Don't do anything," he said. "I'm on my way down."

"What about his audience?"

"Fuck his audience, *technician*." He leaned on the word to remind the tech of their relative ranks. "Keep feeding to my desk until you hear otherwise."

"Acknowledged."

He pitched his voice to the screen's command tone and said: "Iris: initiate telecommunication. Screen-in-screen. Execute." A screen-in-screen box popped up that overlaid Rossi's POV feed. He began to enter the connection code for Businessman Westfield Turner, the Studio President, already rehearsing in his head what he would say. *Listen, Wes, this is urgent. We need to get on this right away, I have an idea*

He hesitated, fingers hovering above the keypad, one stroke away from completing the call.

The President wasn't known for his decisiveness. He might stall; he might kick the decision upstairs to the Board of Governors in Geneva. Days might pass before Hari got the authority to act as he knew he needed to act. Authority might never be granted at all.

Sometimes it's easier to get forgiveness than permission.

He hit the cancel, then keyed in a new code. Another box popped up in a corner of his deskscreen, overlaying a close-up of maggots crawling from a blackened mouth. Within the box grinned the permanently youthful, professionally cheerful, recorded face of Jed Clearlake, managing producer and star of *Adventure Update*, the "Only Worldwide Twenty-Four-Hour Source for Studio News"-the number one rated news site in the history of the net.

The recording said, "Hi! I'm Jed Clearlake, and this is my personal message site. Begin recording at any time by pressing Return or clicking on the radio button below."

Hari hit the key and said, "Real time AV. Command code *Caine's here*." The image in the box wiped to a solid black screen. White letters scrolled across it:

PRESENT SAMPLE FOR MATCHING.

"He who lives by the sword shall die by my knife," Hari said softly. "That's prophecy, if you like."

CONFIRMED.

The image that came up now within the box had the grainy 1024 x 780 resolution of palmpad video, but Clearlake's smile was brilliant as ever. *"Yeah, Hari, what's up? I'm in a meeting."*

"I've got a hot one for you, Jed. A full POV from one of my ISP Actors."

"What, too hot to blip to my site? I mean, come on, Hari, there's only so many hours in the day, and I'm with a seven figure advertiser right now."

"This isn't something I can leave lying around in your message dump. I'm going to load it straight to your palmpad. Don't lose this, Jed. You'll understand when you see it."

"Hari, Jesus Christ, what did I just tell you?"

"And who are you talking to? If it wasn't for me you'd still be working for that Underwood buttrag as the fucking Ankhanan Affairs Correspondent. Whatever happened to `God bless you, Administrator Michaelson, I owe you my career, you goddamn weasel? You ever want to get another tip out of this Studio as long as you live?"

Clearlake looked like he had suddenly developed a terrific headache. *"How long is it?"*

"Five minutes, tops. You won't be sorry."

"I hope you're right."

Hari pulled up the call file from his deskscreen's memory core, selected CURRENT and INCOMING: CAVEA, and dragged the icon onto Clearlake's box on the screen. A progress bar popped up, slowly filling as the file began to upload.

It had reached only 7 percent completion when it self-terminated. Hari frowned. "What the fuck?"

"Hari, what is this crap? Some funny-looking bald elf yapping like a monkey, this is your hot story?"

"Give me a second," he muttered, but when he went to reselect INCOMING: CAVEA, a dialog box popped up on his screen.

THE SELECTED FILE CONTAINS MATERIAL THAT IS RATED CLASSIFICATION RED.
UPLOAD OF RED-RATED MATERIAL CONSTITUTES FELONY CORPORATE ESPIONAGE.
PENALTIES FOR FELONY CORPORATE ESPIONAGE
INCLUDE UP TO TEN YEARS IN PRISON, FINES OF UP TO TEN MILLION MARKS,
AND/OR PERMANENT DOWNGRADE TO WORKER STATUS.
CLICK OK TO ACKNOWLEDGE.

Hari moved the cursor to the radio button marked OK, and clicked it.

Another progress bar popped up, labeled DELETING RED-RATED FILES; it filled swiftly. Before he could even move the cursor to save the current feed to a new file, the feed wiped to black.

"Jed?" Hari said grimly. "I'm gonna have to get back to you on this."

He stabbed the cancel, and the box went blank. He sat very, very still for a long silent moment, thinking hard. Some netmonitor program must have been set for this; it wasn't hard to program a script to capture and respond to specific words or phrases on a netwide basis-that technology was almost two hundred years old. This one must have been set to capture references to HRVP on Overworld. That meant somebody knew this was going to happen.

That also meant he could guess who that somebody had to be. He was already in the shit. In deep.

He keyed the Security switchboard. "This is Michaelson. Put two guys in riot gear on the door of the Cavea techbooth. No, don't-specials, make them specials. Two specials in full gear. No one goes in or out until I get there."

"Acknowledged."

He punched a new code. The screen swirled into an image of Tan'elKoth's face. "I am otherwise engaged," the image told him. "Leave a message."

Hari entered his override sequence. "Tan'elKoth, acknowledge," he said. "Acknowledge, dammit. One goddamn question, all right?"

The screen cross-faded into a real-time image: Tan'elKoth scowled at him. "*I am teaching,*" he said testily. "*These are the hours that you, Caine, yourself assigned to my seminar. You should know better than to interrupt.*"

"Yeah, whatever. What do you know about HRVP?"

His scowl deepened, and he lowered his voice. "*I am no physician,*" he murmured, "*but I have read widely in the history of your civilization. Why?*"

"No time for a long story. Got an Actor here who might've been exposed. What are the chances he could be infectious?"

"Exposed? How could this Actor have been exposed? And when? And to which strain?"

"If I wanted a bunch of useless fucking questions that I don't know the answers to," Hari said, "I would've called *areal doctor.*"

"Mm, just so. Well. I would say-based upon my understanding that several strains of HRVP are capable of remaining potent in the environment for weeks-that yes, this Actor could possibly be infectious. He should certainly be isolated and undergo an antiviral regime before being allowed to make a transfer."

"Yeah," Hari said heavily. "It's a little bit late for that."

"*What do you mean?*" Tan'elKoth's eyes widened. "*Caine? What do you mean, it's too late?*"

"No time. Listen: I'm on my way over right now. Start pulling; I'm gonna need a little of your on-the-net magick."

"Caine, I am teach-"

"Dismiss the class. This is more important. Believe me. Get your shit together, Tan'elKoth. I'll explain

everything when we get there." *"We? Caine-*"

He hit the cancel and rapidly entered one last code: his personal contact code for Shanna.

The look of annoyance fixed on her face when she answered would have stung him at any other time; right now he had bigger problems. "Shanna," he said. "Where are you right now?"

"I'm in the car," she said, *in aif you weren't such an idiot you'd already know it tone. "I'm taking Faith to Fancon in Los Angeles this morning, remember? You coded the travel permit yourself"*

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, right. Shit," he said tiredly. Faith loved conventions, loved meeting her parents' devoted fans-loved getting the day off school at the Admacademy. *Too bad,* he thought. "She's with you now?"

Faith leaned into the video pickup's field wearing a sunny smile. *"Hi, Daddy."*

"Hi, honey. Listen, I'm really sorry, but we have to change your plans." Her face fell; watching disappointment gather in her sky-blue eyes cut Hari like a slow knife. *"But we're going to Fancon-*"

"Change plans?" Shanna said. *"What are you talking about?"* "Turn the car around. I need you here right away. Right now." *"Hari, is this really important? I have a panel at 1400-*"

"Yes, goddammit, this is important. People's lives are at stake. How fast can you get here?"

Her brows drew together. *"It's that bad?"*

"You can't even imagine," he said feelingly.

She glanced away from the screen, checking the car's position on the GPS map. *"Fifteen minutes."*

"But," Faith protested, her lower lip threatening tears, *"but Fancon ..."*

"Yeah, and uh, listen-" Hari scrubbed his face with the palms of his hands, trying to wipe away the sick dread that gathered in his throat. "Don't bring Faith. Drop her at home, and get your Pallas gear, all right?"

He refused to let himself be hurt by the spark of anticipation that danced in Shanna's eyes. *"It's that kind of problem?"* she asked slowly, like she was trying not to sound eager.

Faith, too, suddenly brightened. *"Mommy's going back to the river?"* "Yeah," Hari said.

"Wow," Faith said happily. *"I thought we had to wait almost another month before we got to be together again. A month is a long time!"*

"Then you're all right about not going to the con?" Hari made himself ask.

"Uh-huh." She nodded brightly. *"I get to have the river in my head instead. And you and Mommy won't be fighting all the time."*

Shanna made a little grimace of apology through the screen; Hari waved it off. "Meet me at the Curioseum," he said. "At Tan'elKoth's place." He gave her a frown that asked her not to press for an

explanation.

She nodded, that spark of anticipation now colored by a breath of wariness. *"I'm on my way. Give me an extra fifteen to drop off Faith and get my gear. Take care of the permit."*

"Yeah. See you."

He canceled the call and accessed the San Francisco travel site. It took him only seconds to register her new destination; as Chairman, he had the authority to code and alter travel permits for any Studio contractee.

It took him one more thoughtful moment to accidentally reinitialize his deskscreen's memory core. "Oops," he muttered flatly, as a keystroke erased all traces of his communications.

"Damn," he said. "I hate it when that happens."

He rose, and stretched to force blood into muscles stiff with long inactivity. *Hey, how about that?* he thought.

My fucking back doesn't hurt.

2

On his way out, Hari stopped at the desk of his assistant. "Gayle," he said, "there's something wrong with my deskscreen. I think I lost some data. Can you look at it for me?"

Gayle Keller peered up at him and blinked; he had a round face, close-set eyes, and a long nose that made him look like a nearsighted rat. Keller had been Arturo Kollberg's assistant; Hari had despised him for years, and six years of closer association had only intensified the feeling. He was pretty sure Keller supplemented his Studio paycheck by keeping the Social Police up to date on Hari's activities, and it wasn't even a secret that Keller filed regular confidential reports with the Studio's Board of Governors. Shortly after becoming Chairman, Hari had begun proceedings to have Keller replaced-until he'd received a call from Westfield Turner himself, who'd reminded him heavy-handedly just how *difficult it is to find a quality assistant, after all*. Keller was, in Hari's clinically unbiased opinion, an unctuous lying little fuck.

"Administrator?" he said, looking politely puzzled. "Perhaps I should calla tech?"

"Aw, come on, Gayle." Hari forced a grin, looking as good-natured as he could manage. "You've been working with this system for twenty years. Where are you gonna find a tech who knows it better than you do? Just have a look, huh? If you can't fix it, go ahead and call MIS."

Keller pushed himself back from his desk with an irritated little sigh, got up, and went into Hari's office. As soon as he was out of sight within, Hari started fiddling with the keypad to Keller's deskscreen. "See, all I did was something like this-"

"Don't touch that!" Keller suddenly appeared in the doorway. "I mean, please, Administrator-"

"Oops," Hari said. "Guess I know what *not* to do, huh?"

"Here, let me-"

"No, no problem," Hari said. "Here, all you have to do is-" and another couple of keystrokes reloaded the previous day's backup. Modern lasergel-core memory has none of the flaws of the antique magnetic media that it had replaced. Core data is 100 percent stable, but it's also nonpersistent: reinitialization physically scrambles the gel medium. Once the core was overwritten by the intersecting UV lasers, no data-recovery software on Earth could recreate whatever Keller had recorded of Hari's communications.

Keller glared at him, his piggy little eyes gleaming with suspicion. "You did that on purpose," he said tightly.

Hari shrugged. "I can't seem to get the hang of this new software."

"I don't believe that. I don't believe that for one second. I don't know what you're up to, but I have a duty to the Board-"

"Hey, my fault. I'm sorry," Hari said easily, stepping close to look down into the little man's eyes. "I screwed up. When you make your report, I guess you should remind the Board that the only thing I was *everreally* good at is killing people with my bare hands."

He looked long and deeply into Keller's eyes, until he saw the threat settle there and begin to work its magic on his attitude.

Hari left while Keller was still trying to come up with some kind of reply.

3

Rover waited with gleaming patience at the open door of Hari's private lift. It was a five-minute walk from the lift to the Cavea's techbooth. Rover whirred precisely two paces behind his left heel.

He stopped outside the door. The two Security specials stood motion-less to either side like a pair of caryatid columns, power rifles held diagonally across their chests at parade rest. Hari stood for a moment, taking a deep breath.

"I am Chairman Administrator Hari Khapur Michaelson," he said. The specials replied in flat unison, "*You are recognized.*"

The back of his neck always tingled when he came close to a special; he remembered too well the time one of these cyborged bastards shot him in the head. He could still feel the hammer of gelslugs against his skull every time he looked at one. The cyborg yokes around their necks overrode their higher cognitive functions, making them incorruptible, robotically faithful in the performance of their duties, and incapable of disobeying an order.

"Allow no one except myself to enter or leave this room without my express authorization."

"Acknowledged."

Walking between them still gave him a twinge.

Inside the booth, the two techs stared at him like nervous puppies, wondering if they were in trouble; they rose as he entered, respectfully silent.

Hari nodded to them. He glanced through the glass reflexively, into the Cavea; the thousand or so empty first-handers out there tied a brief knot in the pit of his stomach; shit, Caine had sold out the Cavea every Adventure for ten years-now he had ten Actors at once working out of SF's main hall and *they* could only pull four thousand between them. And god only knew how many of the private boxes that climbed the walls were empty.

He shook it off. None of that counted right now.

He scanned the curving bank of POV screens until he found Rossi's. The show was still going on: now each time Rossi's gaze settled upon a body, shadowy ghost-images of that person's living days played around it. Translucent mothers cradled half-seen infants; cloudy children skipped and laughed and threw apple cores at each other; youths spun of smoke and cobwebs played plaintive love songs, wrote poetry, and stole away together among the blasted, dying trees.

And through each shape, as through half-melted glass, could be seen the bloated, raven-picked corpse, blackened with decay, that was the end of each bright smile and mother's kiss.

"You've guessed by now that what you are seeing is a Fantasy-what humans call illusion. There will be those who will try to tell you that Fantasy is the opposite of reality, that it is the same as lies, that what you have seen is impossible-that it is a lie because it is a Fantasy. I tell you this is not so.

"It is the greatest gift of my people, that we can bring our dreams to life for other eyes. Fantasy is a tool; like any tool, it may be used poorly or well. At its best Fantasy reveals truths that cannot be shown any other way."

"This is a Fantasy of what I'm asking you to fight. This is a Fantasy of the Blind God."

Hari frowned at the screen and made a faint, thoughtful hissing noise between his teeth. This was the second time Hansen had mentioned this blind god-or was it the Blind God? He'd heard about this before, somewhere, or maybe read it ... One of his father's books? Maybe. He'd ask Duncan about it when he got the chance; he might know the reference.

Hari nodded toward the screen. "Get ready to pull him. On my mark"

"Pull him-?" The techs exchanged worried frowns. "What for? He doesn't even have an audience."

"Just do it, Technician. That's an order."

"Administrator, we can't do that not with the native there. It's an exposed transfer-the Kollberg Rule-"

"Fuck the Kollberg Rule," Hari said distinctly. He thought of one of Duncan's dicta: *All authority, political or otherwise, is ultimately a cloak for naked force-and sometimes you have to remind people of that.* "I'll give you a choice. You can pull him because it's a direct order, or-"

"But the rule-"

"Or," Hari overrode him, "you can pull him because one of those specials outside has a power rifle jammed against the back of *your* head. Any questions?"

The tech squinted like a kid flinching away from his father's fist. "No, sir," he said, and turned back to his

board.

Hari looked at the other. "And you?"

"Me? I, I, I didn't say *nothing*. Sir."

"All right, then."

He stared expressionlessly into the tech's eyes until this one, too, turned to his board.

Now on the POV screen, the elf was back in view.

"And I, at least, am no Fantasy."

The elf reached toward Rossi's face, his hand vanishing below the Actor's peripheral vision.

"I am real. Feel my touch. I am here. In the name of all that both our peoples hold sacred, I ask for your help."

Hari listened with only half his attention; with the elf's voice to cover any small noises he might make, he thumbed the reject on one of the dual gravers that recorded Rossi's Adventure. When the cube popped up, he palmed it and swiftly replaced it with a blank from the rack below.

His teeth showed through a particular variety of grin he hadn't used in nearly seven years. "Y'know what?" he said. "I think you're right about that exposed transfer."

The techs flicked brief glances at each other, afraid to be caught looking away from their screens.

"Sir?" one of them said.

"Yeah. It's not worth the risk. Pull him at your first opportunity, and then get his ass back into his storyline ASAP. Call Scripting and have them work out the transition; have a faxpack ready for him. Then we can just forget any of this ever happened, huh?"

4

The screen showed the animated image of the friendly stenographer that indicated an open channel to the automated recording function of the Report Center. With what he imagined to be cool, professional competence, Gayle Keller made his report.

"At 1017 this morning, visual transmission resumed from J'Than aka Francis Allen Rossi," he said, reading from his notes. He pitched his voice toward his best imitation of the smooth tones of a professional broadcaster; he liked to imagine that occasionally the Board of Governors themselves played his recordings, and in his fond imaginings he saw a dozen Leisurefolk, faceless With absolute power, listening intently around a long oval table—they would nod to each other, favorably impressed with the skill of his delivery and his rich, round vocal tones

"In what was later determined to be an illusion, J'Than aka Rossi appeared to be in an elven village, which had been destroyed by what was claimed to be an outbreak of HRVP on Overworld. This was reported directly to Chairman Michaelson from the techbooth; immediately on learning of the supposed HRVP outbreak, Chairman Michaelson undertook several real-time communications. Following this, he

forcibly erased all record of his transactions from his own desk's memory core, and from that of this reporter. He also threatened this reporter with bodily injury or death."

There, Keller thought smugly. The Board would make certain Michaelson couldn't escape the consequences of such behavior.

"Chairman Michaelson then proceeded to the Cavea's techbooth, where-once again under the threat of bodily injury or death-he ordered the duty tech to perform a transfer that may have been exposed, in violation of the Kollberg Rule-"

He was interrupted by an attention chime from the speaker on his deskscreen.

"Artisan Gayle Keller. You are instructed to remain at your current screen. Hold for voice communication from the Adventures Unlimited Board of Governors."

Keller gagged, then coughed convulsively, spraying spit across his deskscreen. In sudden panic, seeing in his head an irrational vision of the Board staring out at him, knowing they had just been spit upon, he wiped frantically at the screen with the sleeve of his jumpsuit and nearly put his elbow right through it. He had imagined this event so many times that even now, he wasn't sure it was actually happening-but he guessed this must be real.

In his daydreams, he was never this frightened.

He placed his hands on the desk in front of him and tried not to notice how they trembled. He breathed deeply, in and out, in and out, until he became quite light-headed-but still, when the Report Center's friendly stenographer dissolved into the armored knight on the back of the winged horse, rampant, that was the official logo of the Studio, he knew that all the deep breathing in the world wouldn't melt the ball of ice that grew in the bottom of his throat.

"Artisan Keller. Expand upon this transfer that Michaelson ordered by threat of force."

That simply, that coldly, with that precise lack of ceremony or pre-amble, Gayle Keller found himself in the telepresence of the Board of Governors.

Chairman Michaelson had spoken, now and again, of the digitized, electronically neutral voice that represented the Board of Governors, so that one never knows precisely who's talking or whom one is talking to. One never even knows who is on the Board at any given time, only that there are between seven and fifteen of them, drawn always from the Hundred Families, the elite of the elite of the Leisure caste. Their identities are carefully protected, so that the Studio System as a whole maintains its status as an unbreathable public trust-no private pressure can be brought to influence the Board members' decisions if no one knows who they are. It was rumored that even the Board members were unaware of each other's identities, that the entire Board met only in virtual space, each member participating from his own private screen.

To Keller, this had always seemed a sensible, full explanation of the blank anonymity of the Board. Only now, faced with the static logo on the screen and the passionless neutrality of the voice, did he gather a glimmering of some larger truth. The absolute impersonality of the Board had a power of its own.

"The, hrm, the, the transfer?" Keller stammered. "Mmm, yes-" He made the tale as concise as he could manage; rather than becoming more *easy* as he spoke, he found his fright inching toward blank terror. Without any of the visual cues-no nods of the head, no smiles, no frowns, no hint of posture or

demeanor, none of the encouraging *Mmm-hmm* or *Yes, go on* of ordinary conversation, he couldn't tell if his report was being received with warm paternal indulgence, lethal fury, or somewhere inbetween.

"Do you have any analysis?"

"Uh, analysis? I, uh-

"Do you know, or are you able to guess, why Chairman Michaelson was determined to make this transfer, to the point of threatening physical force, and then arbitrarily changed his mind?"

He rubbed his palms together below his desk, trying to wipe away their thick slimy coating of sweat. "I, uh, no, I guess ... I mean, I can't guess, I haven't really thought-

"These real-time communications. With whom did he speak?"

"I don't, I can't, ah-" He stopped himself and forced a deep breath. "Ordinarily I, ah, copy the Chairman's communications files from his deskscreen while he's out of the office, but ... well, the data cores, you know-

"Do you have any evidence, documentary or otherwise, that the data erasure was an intentional act of sabotage?"

Did they think he was lying? Or did they want something they could hold over the Chairman's head? How much trouble was he in?

"I, uh, I, well-no, not directly. B-but, why would he have threatened me, if he wasn't trying to hide something?"

His voice trailed off; his face green in the light cast from that still logo. The motionless knight on the winged horse stared back at him for an unreasonably long moment.

Then, finally, blessedly, he heard, "*Artisan Keller. You are dismissed. Return to your duties.*"

Keller stared at the blank grey rectangle of his deskscreen for a long time, then jerked as though he'd started from a doze and jumped to his feet. He really, really needed to use the toilet.

5

The lift opened onto a service hallway of blank white walls, steel-colored doors, and nondescript carpet. There was age here, mold tracks on the walls and dust in the semicirculated air, a sharp contrast to the immaculate public areas of the Studio. Hari marched some distance along its wide curve, Rover whirring at his heels. A palmlocked security door let him onto the skywalk.

The skywalk between the Studio and the Curioseum was little more than a transparent tube a half-klick long with all-weather polyester carpeting laid along its narrow floor. A low grey overcast spat drizzle that rippled the view through the armorglass, and the whisper of atmosphere control was barely audible above the patter of raindrops. Hari walked fast over the honeycombed car hive twenty-odd meters below, over the ten-meter-high security fence that ringed it.

He reached the Curioseum's security door and pitched his voice to his chair's command tone. "Rover: Stay." The chair settled in place and locked its brakes; Hari sat down, shifting his weight from side to

side, grimacing-it was bad enough, using this thing when he needed it; he couldn't get comfortable, couldn't make himself settle into this chair, with a pair of working legs.

He reached up and flattened his hand against the palmlock's screen. The security program's voder replied, "*Access denied. Persons dependent upon bioelectronic implants may not enter this facility pursuant to the Liability Reduction Act of-*"

"Michaelson one override."

"Please present sample for matching."

"Then it's Tommy this and Tommy that and "Tommy, 'ow's yer soul?" " Hari said with flat dispassion. "But it's "Thin red line of 'eroes" when the drums begin to roll. "

The door hissed aside, revealing a small airlock-type compartment, just large enough for three or four people to stand in comfortably. On the far side was a steel door secured with a large drop-latch instead of a palmlock. "*Welcome to the Curiozeum, Administrator Michaelson.*"

Hari made a face; he hated this part. The boundary effect was murder.

He took a deep breath and rolled across the threshold. As soon as the skywalk door hissed shut behind him, his legs began to jerk and twist like the galvanic response in a dissected frog muscle. He snarled under his breath as he maneuvered the chair around so he could swing up the bar on the inside door; his legs knotted into cramps that felt like somebody had sunk dry ice meat hooks into his thighs.

Crossing the boundary between Earth physics and the Overworld-normal field of the Curiozeum was always a race between his hands and his asshole: he had to get that inner door open before he lost control of his bowels. In the boundary, the ON field sort of mingles with Earth physics, and the goddamn bypass just goes berserk. Once he was all the way into the ON field, the bypass just surrendered.

After what felt like an hour, he managed to lift the drop-latch and push open the door. Instantly all the feeling drained out of his legs. He thumped his thighs a couple of times with his fists to make sure *they* weren't still cramping. They seemed to be relaxed; the muscle jiggled slackly under his hands.

Just meat, now.

Like having a couple dead dogs strapped to my ass, he thought. Except I can't eat them.

He rolled on along the hallway; heading for the balcony that ringed the Hall of Fame. When he rolled out onto the balcony, the immense exhibition hall suddenly blazed with light. Hanging in the center of the hall, suspended from thin, almost invisible guy wires, was a dragon.

Thirty-five meters of sinuous power, her titanic wings spread a translucent pavilion over the entire hall, and her scales shone iridescent diamond. Her long saurian neck arched high, her titanic mouth gaped with hooked teeth as long as Hari's forearm, and from that mouth gouted flame like a solar flare, scarlet and orange and yellow bursting from eyesearing white at its core. At the center of that unimaginable fire, on a small circular dais twenty meters below, a figure in shining armor knelt in an attitude of prayer, hands folded upon the hilt of a broadsword. A Shield of shimmering blue warded the flames that melted the very stone on which he kneeled.

Hari gave the scene just the barest glance. The armor there was real; it had belonged to Jhubbar

Tekanal-the Actor Raymond Story. The dragon was real, too, most of her; he'd sent the expedition himself to the site of the battle and salvaged her scales. He wondered briefly if Kris Hansen had ever watched the recording of Story's legendary three-day battle against Sha-Rikkintaer. He had a vague recollection that Story had been Hansen's favorite Actor.

He rolled on, faster, scowling.

He hated this fucking place. He'd fought the whole idea of a Hall of Fame, but he'd been overruled by president Turner with the support of the Board of Governors. Turner had said it would be a valuable tourist attraction, and the Bog had agreed, and Hari had to admit they were right: the Hall of Fame was less than a fifth of the Curioseum, but it was the primary draw for 90 percent of the visitors.

He turned the chair and pumped its wheels, rolling along the balcony toward a long spiral ramp that led down to the ground floor. He had to keep his ass moving: this place would open at noon, and he had a lot to get done before it filled up with tourists. He pushed the wheels harder, gaining speed even before he swung onto the ramp. He coasted all the way down, half braking with his palms against the wheel rims. He rolled off the ramp and bled velocity in a long, slow curve that brought him to a stop in the middle of the gallery that led to the Caine Hall.

Small in the distance, waiting for him at the far end of the gallery, was Berne.

Inside a large case of armorglass in the middle of an archway, he was posed in a fighting crouch. He wore clothes of close-fitting serge, once red but now faded to strawberry-the same clothes he'd had on when Caine killed him. He had a snarl on his face and both hands on the hilt of Kosall, the wide-bladed bastard sword angled before him as though he guarded the arch against a fierce enemy.

Hari forced himself to roll the chair forward. *I always think I can cruise right past here, not even think about it, just roll on by*

And I am always dead fucking wrong.

The armorglass case was overpressured with some kind of preservative gas-a faint chemical stench always lingered in the air around it. Taxidermy was a very efficient art these days: the Curioseum staff had simply cleaned him up, patched the slices in the clothes, covered the hole in his skull with a wig, posed his corpse, and shot him full of something to rigidify the muscles.

And there he was: the real Berne. The real Kosall.

The most popular single exhibit in the whole Curioseum.

Hari stopped beside the case and forced himself not to read the plaque. He knew it by heart, anyway. He stared up into Berne's glittering eyes.

Sometimes I have trouble remembering that you lost, and I won. He set his teeth in a silent snarl and pushed on.

6

The broad mission door that fronted Tan'elKoth's apartment stood open, and Hari rolled through the arched doorway without knocking, without even slowing.

The apartment was huge and open, converted from one of the Curioseum's exhibition halls. Smaller than the titanic halls devoted to Jhubbar and Caine, it nonetheless towered a full three stories to the thick skylight of armorglass. On the ground floor was an immense entertainment area scattered with furniture custom-designed for Tan'elKoth's enormous body, arranged to create the feeling of separate rooms: a living room, a kitchen, a den. A simple sweep of staircase would take one up through the open light well to the second floor, which held Tan'elKoth's bed and personal spaces; a second sweep would take one to the third floor, where Tan'elKoth maintained his studio. On that third floor, in the full sun that streamed through the skylight, he sculpted the statuary that dotted the apartment-and that also graced the homes of fashionable Leisurefolk around the world; a Tan'elKoth original had become a hallmark of good taste.

At least that's what Tan'elKoth*said* was up there. With no ramps in the apartment, Hari had never been above the ground floor. He'd never had a reason to go up urgent enough to make it worth the humiliation of asking Tan'elKoth to carry him.

Tan'elKoth's kettledrum rumble echoed hollowly through the cavernous space, though he was at the farthest corner of the apartment. "No, Nicholas, green. Not chartreuse. *Green*. The green of young oak leaves in April."

He knelt *inseiza* on the carpet in the den area, at the head of a small oval of two men and three women in similar posture. He wore precisely faded dungarees and a polo shirt that stretched like latex over his enormous chest and shoulders, looking every inch the casually stylish Professional. The other five in the oval wore the short-sleeved white shirts, neckties, and chinos of junior Professionals; none of the five looked very much at ease, and a couple were openly sweating.

This was Tan'elKoth's graduate seminar in Applied Magick. Every year, the top five Battle Magick students from the Conservatory were awarded the opportunity to come here and do advanced study under Tan'elKoth. The Studio was not in the business of giving out free rides, even to political prisoners. In the mornings, he taught; in the afternoons, he did two matinee lecture/demonstrations per day for the crowds in the Curioseum.

He conducted his seminar in his home, because the Overworld-normal field that sustained his phase-match with Earth also allowed the use of Flow. Only the most minuscule amount was available here-generated by the plants in the arboretum and the animals in the bestiary, as well as the tiny energy traces left behind by the Curioseum's innumerable tourists-but it was enough for tiny, basic effects.

"I, I, uh, haven't, I mean, I've seen *pictures* of an oak-" the pale student began.

"Less yellow, then. Can you not see the color your classmates project?" "But sir, this is the color that I've always-"

"And that is why you are last in this class, Nicholas. Any fool can enchant a bit of herb; to master the molding of life itself, one must use *green!* *This* green. If you cannot summon the hue for yourself, at least try to open your blurred and misty consciousness long enough to perceive mine."

"Why can't I just memorize the spell?"

"Spells are for fools, Nicholas. They are a crutch for adepts who lack the discipline of a true thaumaturge. The true master of magick forms his intention and charges it with Flow by the pure action of his will: make it real within, and the Flow will mirror your reality without. *That is* true-"

"Hey," Hari said flatly. "Didn't I tell you to dismiss your fucking class?"

Tan'elKoth's leonine head turned with ponderous, inhuman deliberation: a temple guardian of stone coming slowly to life. He gathered a cavernous breath and unfolded smoothly to his feet. "Students. Rise for the Chairman."

The students scrambled upright, four of them blinking at being so suddenly roused from their meditation. All five stood at attention, their faces reflecting various degrees of awe and dread. "Class dismissed," Hari said. "Beat it. All of you."

The only movement any of them made was to cast dubious glances toward Tan'elKoth. Tan'elKoth stood with arms folded across his ogre-sized chest. "This is my home," he said. "These are my students. I fulfill the task that you have given me. Chairman or no, do not presume to give orders here."

"Here's a fucking order," Hari said sharply, leaning forward in his chair. "Sit down and shut up. This is too important for us to waste time on your shit."

Tan'elKoth didn't move. "You cannot comprehend how offensive this is." "Yeah, maybe not. You've known me how long? And you still expect me to have manners?"

"Manners? Hardly. Thoughtfulness, perhaps; consideration of the few shreds of dignity that you have allowed me to-"

"Drop it," Hari said flatly.

"I can only hope that you bring me glad news: perhaps this HRVP of yours has broken out among the elves, and you have come to help me celebrate."

Fuck it, Hari thought. He wants it standing up, he'll goddamn well take it standing up. "That's right," he said. "There's been an HRVP outbreak among the elves. And you know what? That Actor I was asking about, the one who might be exposed? He's in *Ankhana*."

Tan'elKoth's eyes went wide and blank, and his breath escaped in a fading hiss. He groped for the back of a chair into which he could lower himself, missed it, and stumbled like a drunk.

"I told you," Hari said. "You should have sat down."

He looked at the students. "Last chance. Beat it."

Again they glanced at Tan'elKoth; he covered his eyes with one hand and waved them away. They scattered without a word, gathering up their belongings and hustling out the door.

"Caine ..." Tan'elKoth said weakly. "Please say this is but a cruel jest." "Yeah, sure," Hari said. "I'm famous for my sparkling sense of humor. Pull yourself together. We have work to do."

7

The keys to Tan'elKoth's deskpad felt alien under Hari's fingertips: a strange mechanical resistance, as though the pad itself fought back against his touch. Instead of an electronic pad, Tan'elKoth's was a mechanical rod-and-lever linkage, like an antique typewriter. The rods sank through the well cut in the center of Tan'elKoth's immense rolltop desk, down into the shielded receptacle in the floor where the actual electronics lay, protected from the effect of the Curioseum's ON field.

Hari stared at the angled mirror propped on the desktop by an ornate stand of wrought brass. The mirror reflected a rectified image of a screen that actually sat beneath his feet in the subfloor receptacle.

Tan'elKoth lay flat on the floor beside Hari's sandals, one massive arm stretched downward into the receptacle, his forefinger lightly brushing the cube in the screen's socket. The cube held the recording of Hansen's performance with J'Than.

The unfamiliar feel screwed up Hari's typing; it took him a couple tries to key in Clearlake's priority access code. And the speaking tube down to the audio pickup altered his voice enough that he had to repeat the Caine quote three times before the security program recognized him. The mirror finally assembled an image of Clearlake's face.

"Hey, Jed," Hari said with a tight smile. "Ready for this?"

"For that story you were talking about? I did a little analysis on what you sent me already from some of the bodies, I'm seeing signs-

"Don't say it," Hari interrupted. "We can't talk about it on an open line. Just tell me if you're ready for an upload."

"Hari, I'm as ready as it gets," Clearlake answered with a smile of his own. *"I'm just wondering what's taking so long."*

"All right. Now listen: this is important. What I'm about to send you? You need to review *it off-line*. There's a security capture keyed to a couple words in here-I've got a countermeasure, but it's ablative. Save it for the broadcast."

"Security captures and countermeasures-just how big is this?" "As big as it gets, Jed."

"You sure I'll want to broadcast?"

Hari nodded. "I'm thinking special edition; I'm thinking prime-time preempt. I'm thinking license fees for clips from this report should run into eight figures, easy."

"Bring it on then, Hari. You've always been good luck"

Hari leaned over to glance down at Tan'elKoth. "Ready?" he said softly. Tan'elKoth's *reply* had the hollow distance of mindview. "I am."

It's going to work Hari thought. His fingers trembled, just a little bit. Not nerves, though, no: fuck nerves. This was *fun*.

Maybe not a whole lot of fun, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd had any at all.

Hari stroked the final key.

As the file uploaded, Tan'elKoth channeled the tenuous Flow that obtained within the Curioseum's Overworld-normal field into the net. A living nervous system is the natural interface between Flow and the material world; Tan'elKoth could gather Flow here and funnel the energy across the boundary by touch. He couldn't do much-the power he could exert in terrestrial physics was just one hair this side of

nonexistent-but a surge of a few microvolts in the right place is all it takes to burn out a molecular circuit or randomize a couple lines of code. He didn't even need to know exactly what he was affecting-hardware, software, it didn't matter. Tan'elKoth had put it this way: "A thing is what it does. My power becomes a needle that will prick any hand which attempts to seize the dream within this cube."

Five seconds of burst-feed later, it was done.

"Got it," Clearlake said. "Confirmed."

"All right. Signing off, Jed-miles to go before I sleep, that kind of thing."

"You want your finder's percentage? If you're right about that eight figures, it could run into a substantial chunk."

"Put it in escrow," Hari said. "If this gets my ass fired, I'll need it""*Will do. Later.*"

"Yeah."

Hari hit the cancel and folded down the screen. Tan'elKoth rose and stretched until his shoulder joints popped with a pair of meaty squelches. "Success."

"You're sure?"

"I am Tan'elKoth." This he said without even a ghost of a smile. Hari took a deep breath.*So far, so good.*

This was an improved version of what Hansen had been trying to do by capturing Rossi in the first place-he'd been trying to get through to a group of first-handers, in hopes of finding some Leisurefolk with big enough bleeding hearts to get involved. But that was because he didn't understand first-handers. Hari did. He'd built his life understanding first-handers.

Rossi's first-handers could. have experienced everything on that cube and thought it was nothing more than part of the story. For them, it'd be nothing*they* need to do anything about, except sit back and watch how J'Than and the rest of the ISP cast handle it. Hari's way, it would go onto the net, out of context.

Instead of being part of a story, it*was* the story.

Instead of watching the hero in place do something about it, each Leisureman and Leisurewoman becomes the hero for their own little story: they see the problem, they see they have the power to do something about it, and they make the choice to do it or not, all on their own.*Not too fucking bad*, he thought.*We 're off to a running start.*

Tan'elKoth cracked his enormous knuckles. "Now: I have done as you asked, and it is time to move on. There is only one course of action, and we both know it: You must return me to Ankhana without delay."

Hari shook his head. "Not gonna happen."

Tan'elKoth looked as though he might spit on the floor. "You waste all this effort, all this thought, in *persuasion*. It is ultimately futile. Childish. You depend upon your Leisure caste as surrogate parents, to act for you; thus shall you inevitably fail."

Hari's smile tightened. "We use what tools we have."

"Bah. Useless tools produce nothing of use. Call upon me, Caine. I will help your cause."

"You have already."

"Of course. And I will continue to do what you ask of me, *everything* you ask of me-until and including the moment when you realize that all these plans are useless. Your sole remaining choice is to *send me home*."

Hari sighed. "It's not gonna happen," he repeated.

"Caine, *it must*. Direct action is my world's only hope. Exposing this crime is a worthy stroke, but it will not win the war. My people-my very world-is bent beneath the axe. You must let me save it."

"Yeah, sure," Hari said with a bitter smile. "Save the world, my ass." "Why do you resist the inevitable?"

That's the main question of my life, Hari thought, but he said, "Because I can't fucking trust you."

The ex-Emperor stiffened. "You doubt that I would save my Children?"

"Oh, yeah, sure, your Children," Hari said. "But what about the elves? Shit, Tan'elKoth, how stupid do you think I am? You think I forgot why the Monasteries were supporting your government? Your policy on the other humanoid races wasn't exactly a secret. Once your *Aktir-tokar* consolidated your power over the nobles, you were gonna fire up your own personal genocide. I have a feeling this primal friend of mine wouldn't be too happy to see you back."

"Yet I am his only hope."

"If you were still Emperor, you'd be the number one *suspect*"

Tan'elKoth came to Hari's side, towering over him, forbidding, unassailable. "The power of a god is required, to avert this disaster. I am that god."

"No, you're not"

"I am. The gods of my world cannot intervene, bound as they are by the Covenant of Pirichanthe. And even if they could-no god of my world has the faintest understanding of virology, let alone the specifics of HRVP: the minds of those gods are merely the sums of the minds of their worshipers. My world's only hope lies in the action of a god who has both comprehension of HRVP and the power to do something about it."

"Okay, sure," Hari allowed, "But you're not the god."

Tan'elKoth's rumble dripped sarcasm. "And which god, then, did you have in mind?"

"You know her," Hari said. "She'll be here in about five minutes."

With his comprehension, Tan'elKoth's expression twisted into one of distaste. "She is unworthy of this task."

"Don't start with me," Hari said through his teeth. "You know better." "She is unworthy of *you*, Caine."

"Drop it."

"She is weak. Prissy. She holds herself removed from the realities of deity; I have never understood why you tolerate her manifest frailties."

"Not so weak," he said, heating up. "Not so weak she couldn't kick *your* ass

"Perhaps not; but so weak that she *didn't*. Not even to *save your life*, Caine."

Hari lowered his eyes and turned his face away, struggling with his temper. Finally he said, "You're not going back. You're never going back. Knowing what you know about the Studio, Actors, what you know about Earth, with the kinds of power you can throw around over there? No chance."

"You would take the side of the Studio against me? Against my *world*? Caine, who do you think has *done* this? Whom do you think you are *fighting*?"

"There's fighting and then there's fighting," Hari said. "Send you back on my own authority? They'd shoot me down like a dog. The Bog would blow up this whole Studio to keep you off Overworld; shit, they'd nuke the *city*."

"And even if your Board of Governors--the Bog, as you say--should be so rash, one city is a small price to pay for an entire world."

"Yeah?" Hari said flatly. "What if it's *your* city?"

Muscle bulged around the corners of Tan'elKoth's jaw. "I am willing to take that risk."

"Yeah, well, I'm not. Once this story hits the nets, people are going to be all over the Studio *todo something* about it; the Bog, all virtuous, will have to point at me and say, 'Through the swift and decisive action of Chairman Hari Michaelson, and the power of the great Pallas Ril, the situation is already under control: They're gonna have to *thank* me, don't you get it? When Shanna gets back, Wes Turner will probably be giving her a *medal*.'"

Tan'elKoth took a step back; with a slow breath, he drew himself up to his full height. He seemed to change, somehow, inhaling some new reality along with his breath, transforming his polo shirt and dungarees into a costume, and his tired, aging face into a mask.

"You are a brilliant tactician," he said slowly; remotely, with that quality of performance as though he spoke once more for that audience inside his head, "perhaps the most brilliant I have ever known. But tactics win only battles; one can win every battle and still lose the war. Remember, in your hour of darkness, that you were offered this chance, and you refused it."

Hari squinted at him. "Y'know, I wouldn't swear to it, but that kind of sounded like a threat."

Tan'elKoth looked away, over Hari's head; his eyes drifted closed as though tired with a familiar pain. "Your-" He seemed to search for the proper word. "-*wife* . . . has arrived."

In the empty silence left behind by the departure of Caine and his pet goddess, minutes passed like days for the man who had once been a god. They had watched their cube-trapped dream, made their plans, and left to save the world; now he sat alone in the tenebrous gloom.

Silence enfolded him, enwrapped his heart, soaked through his pores: silence so deep it screamed with imaginary echoes. Silence was the fertile earth from which sprouts of possibility budded within his far-ranging mind; these sprouts grew to mighty fractal trees of world-paths, blossomed, and died, only to sprout again in new variations for the future. Like a gardener, he sought ways to guide this growth with gentle efficiency; like a gardener, he would use the course of nature to his advantage.

Thus, the thought, finding a branch upon which the weight of his finger could curve the entire tree toward his desire; and thus, another spot where his breath upon its bark would color the blooms of this new curve; and finally, thus.

And the tree of the future had the shape of his dreams.

He had watched her-the mock-deity, the make-believe avatar of Chambaraya-watched her review the captured dream, had watched the lust of her river sparkling within her eyes. He had read there the joy of leaving behind this sterile hell of concrete and steel; he had read that she had been only waiting for an excuse.

I can get you there right away, Caine had told her, slowly, as though it hurt him to say the words. We'll do it freemod, just like your regular shift-no audience, so we don't need approval from the Scheduling Board. How long will it take?

Four days, she had said. Maybe five. Creating a new life-form is a complicated thing, even for a god; it'll take at least that long to make sure my cure doesn't turn out to be worse than the disease. Four or five days on Overworld, and I should have a safe countervirus.

And thus did she pronounce her doom. Three days would be the measure of her life.

He must act now; to wait until she had won his battle would cost him his war. Her power would suffice against HRVP; but the true threat to his people came not from the disease itself, but from the forces gathered behind it. Against those, she had no hope; thinking her war won, she would return to Earth, and be destroyed.

If his people were to be saved, Ma'elKoth must live again.

The men within him clamored for his attention; he opened the gates of his mind to release them. He stood before them as a giant, and he regarded them coldly. First among them, as he had ever been, was the fading palimpsestic remnant of the contemptible weakling he'd once been: Hannto the Scythe.

Hannto of Ptreia-Hannto the Scythe, the bent-backed asthmatic necromancer-had been nearsighted, slight, and nervous, the lonely child of a journeyman scribe. Hannto now begged for caution, cringing against the imagined humiliation of failure. To Hannto, he said:*I am more than you were. I am Tan'elKoth. Failure is impossible.*

At Hannto's side stood a more recent tenant of Tan'elKoth's mind: Lamorak-Karl Shanks-whose life had been etched permanently into Tan'elKoth's brain by magick nearly seven years ago. Lamorak-who'd been terrorized by his older, tougher brothers, who'd been beaten and nearly raped by Berne in the

Imperial Donjon, who'd lain helpless under Master Arkadeil's knives in the Theater of Truth-haunted the darkest chambers of Tan'elKoth's mind, whispering surrender.

Lamorak feared and hated Caine. His most potent memory was of that brilliant noon on the arena sand, when Caine had drawn his neck against Kosall's irresistible edge and tossed his head like a child's ball into Ma'elKoth's lap. Lamorak regarded Pallas Ril with mingled lust and fury; his deepest desire was to fuck her to death, yet his spirit was bound with chains of helplessness and despair. Lamorak forever whispered that all is random, mere chance, that life is an accident at the mercy of the universe's whim: since all is meaningless, it is better to survive in safety, here as he was, than to engage in the pain and risk of futile struggle. To Lamorak, he said, *Life is mere chance only when one allows it to be. I am more than you were.*

Behind Lamorak crowded ghosts of the many others consumed over his years as Ma'elKoth: faceless, nearly shapeless shades, lives too small to remain distinct even in this mock afterlife. Their voices blended together into an oceanic murmur, begging that he remember them, that he love them, that he care for their children. To the crowd, he said, *Fear not, for I am with you.*

He marshaled his strength and pushed them all back within the gates, and locked the gates against them. One figure alone remained to face him. Ma'elKoth.

Towering in his strength, majestic in his armor of polished obsidian, his beard long and bristling, his hair a pelagic cascade past his shoulders, his eyes black diamonds. To Ma'elKoth, he said, *I am coming. You shall live again.*

And the silent god within his mind lifted an omnipotent hand in benediction.

Tan'elKoth breached once more the surface of his consciousness, to regard the wider world. He typed a code into his deskpad. Each keystroke fell with a measured, echoic cadence: the drumroll of an execution.

The mirror of his screen lit with an animated image of a cheerful stenographic clerk, sitting at a desk, and a pleasant voice told him that he could now record a message for the Adventures Unlimited Board of Governors.

"I am the Emperor-in-exile Tan'elKoth," he said with slow precision. "Tell your Board of Governors this: in exchange for certain considerations, I shall undertake to solve their Michaelson problem."

He stroked the disconnect, and sighed.

Soon now, he said to the god within. *Soon.*

9

Hari stood on the techdeck. On the laser scale, beyond a transparent wall of armorglass, lay the dull grey ceramic lozenge of Shanna's freemod coffin. He tried not to imagine how happy she must be, lying there right now. The freemod techdeck was a busy place, these days. Formerly, it had only been used twice a year, to transfer the most recent graduates of the Studio Conservatory to Overworld for their two-year freemod tour; this was the oldest Studio in the system, and was the only Earthside freemod site. On Overworld, there were twenty-five scattered freemod sites-not counting the Railhead in Thorncleft-all in remote locations, all disguised as temples to a particularly forbidding spider god.

The Overworld sites did not require extensive equipment; all they needed was a small transfer pump to drive an Earth-normal field-for data storage and communications-and some exceptionally sophisticated mechanical scales. The freemod process is essentially a swap, an even trade of mass-energy between the universes, and thus requires extreme precision in the weighing of materials to be exchanged. The closer the mass-energy ratio to 1:1, the less energy was required. Even the air inside the coffin was controlled to a nicety.

This was the primary factor that had kept the San Francisco Studio afloat these past few years. Once the studio had formed the Overworld Company and gone into full-scale exploitation of Overworld resources, San Francisco had been the only Studio with freemod technology already in place.

On the far side of the techdeck, beyond another, larger window of armorglass, lay the docks: an immense cavern of a room crowded with sealed crates, each labeled in Westerling with their destinations. Off to another side were titanic slag canisters the size of freight cars; when there were no supplies of equipment to be sent, incoming shipments of ore were balanced by returning to Overworld the waste products left after valuable metals had been refined out. The docks were always loud with the rumble of heavy turbines; an endless stream of freightliners landed and lifted off again outside.

But Hari had no eyes for that now; he could only stare at Shanna's coffin, and listen to the tech at his side mutter low-voiced corrections to another tech a universe away.

Yeah, better not fuck with Caine, he thought, helplessly bitter.*If he gets really pissed, he'll tell his wife on you.*

He shook his head sharply.*Fucking cut it out,* he snarled at himself.*I don't have to do everything myself Don't be such a suckass.* Yet how was he supposed to stand here and watch her go, and not ache with envy?

She'd promised to look in on Kris. Hari knew Hansen was in for a bad time; a word of hope from the goddess should do him wonders. She wouldn't have any trouble finding him; once joined with Chambaraya, she became aware of every living creature that partook of its waters. She'd said the recording had given her a good enough sense of him that she would know his touch, even among the hundreds of thousands of people in Ankhana, and she should make contact with him,*anyway*: if he was carrying HRVP, he'd be her most convenient source for a sample of the virus.

He could still taste her lips. Just a little kiss, a little *see ya later* peck; he couldn't have taken more.

For a few minutes there, it had been almost like old times-he'd almost felt like he could *do* things. For the brief span they'd spent walking from the Curioseum, planning together, anticipating a little action, he'd almost felt like they were a team again. Like they'd briefly been, back all those years ago.

Before they were married.

Be careful, he'd told her, trying-really trying to keep it light.*You get in trouble over there this time, I can't come and bail you out.*

It hadn't raised even the faintest of smiles.*Keep your eye on Tan'elKoth,* she'd said.*Don't ever let yourself forget who he is.*

He'd answered,*He better not forget who I am.*

It had been a pretty good line, but it was only a line.

Her coffin began to shimmer around the edges as it interposed with the nearly identical one coming through from Overworld. It took on a faint translucency; the other resolved into a more solid existence; within a second or so, Shanna's coffin was only a ghost shape, and the new one-roughly half-full of water-became solid, fully *here*. Shanna was gone.

Now, somewhere in another universe, there appeared a goddess named Pallas Ril.

Hari thanked the technician and walked out of the techdeck. Outside, near the elevator that would return him to the public areas of the Studio, Rover waited with electronic patience. Hari scowled at it-but after a moment he sighed, shrugged, and sat down. As he rolled into the elevator, he dug out his palmpad and keyed the code for the Abbey. When Bradlee answered, Hari asked him to put Faith on.

Her smile nearly filled the tiny screen. *"Hi, Daddy. Mommy's with the river now,"* she reported.

"Yeah, I know, honey, " Hari told her. "I was just with her. Listen-

"She's pretty worried," she said, her smile fading and her golden brows wrinkling. The familiar glazed, eldritch dissociation gathered in her eyes. When Pallas Ril walked the lands of Overworld, half of Faith walked with her.

Hari nodded. "It's a pretty serious thing she's doing over there." Faith said solemnly, *"She's worried about you."*

"Listen," he said, "since you're off school today anyway, I was thinking I might take the rest of the day off and go down to Fancon. Maybe even a couple of days off. You want to come along?"

"Really? Really for real?"

"Sure, really for real. How about it? Still in your con clothes?" *"Sure. Uh, Mommy's happy I get to go to the con."*

"Yeah, I'll bet. Me, too. One other thing, honey: before Mommy left, we were real busy and in a big hurry, and I forgot something I need to tell her, okay?"

"Okay"

"Just tell her I said I love her."

"Uh-huh. She loves you, too," Faith said with simple, serene matter-of-factness. *"But I don't really tell her things. It's not like that. She just knows."*

"I just wanted to make sure," Hari said. "I just wanted to make sure she knows."

The crooked knight laid himself down to rest. There was no battle left for him to fight. He had fulfilled his mission, succeeded in *his* quest. His war was won.

But her remained, nonetheless, the crooked knight.

In winning, he had lost.

SIX

"Changeling?" The high, thin voice sounded like a breathy piccolo, and a hand like a coin-sized grapnel tugged at his ear. "Changeling, wake up!"

Deliann rolled over. He didn't want to open his eyes; he couldn't remember exactly, but he was moderately sure that waking up would hurt, somehow-and he was so warm, so comfortable, and the bed was so soft...

"Changeling!" Something poked him hard in the neck; he couldn't be sure, but it might have been a kick from a very small bare foot. "Kier says she needs you."

Justaswell, he thought, rubbing at his gummy eyelids until he could part them. *If I sleep any longer, I'll probably start to dream.*

The heavy brocade curtains drawn across the windows in Kierendal's bedchamber were outlined by the yellow glare of the afternoon outside. Standing on the mattress next to his shoulder was an extraordinarily beautiful treetopper, her diaphanous wings a transparent shimmer in the gloom. She looked like a twenty-inch human female of extravagantly sensual proportion: long elegant legs, a tiny wasp waist, outrageously high firm breasts. She wore a minuscule shift, belted at the waist, barely long enough to cover the swell of her ass and revealing a dangerous amount of cleavage.

"Tup ..." he said thickly. "H'long . . . Timezit?"

"It's about four," Tup said. "You've been asleep for five hours or so. You have to get up, now-Kier sent me to get you."

"Yes, all right," he made himself say, and sat up.

He had only a fuzzy recollection of coming into this room; Kierendal had led him here after they'd let the *Aktir go*; at the end of his performance for the people who were watching through that man's eyes, Deliann had nearly collapsed. He had barely kept his head up long enough to eat some of the soup that Kierendal fed him. He remembered being led in here ... he remembered Kierendal's lips, soft against his ear: "*Do you know, you are the only human who's ever had me for free?*"

He remembered her mouth against his, and that's when he realized he was naked.

He pulled the sheet around his hips. "Urh, Tup? You wouldn't happen to know where my pants are?"

"On the chair. Come on, hurry up."

He felt as if his whole body were turning red. He had some hazy impression that Tup was-or used to be-Kierendal's lover. Had he done something with Kierendal? What had happened between them? He would remember if he'd had sex

Wouldn't he?

He gathered the sheet higher around his waist. "Tup, please. If you wouldn't mind-?"

Tup put her hands on her hips. "Changeling, I live in a whorehouse. You think I've never seen a dick before? Please. I've seen *yours*; I was here when Kier undressed you."

He closed his eyes, sighed, and opened them again. *Well, at least that means I didn't have sex.* He glanced at Tup, who glared at him impatiently. *Probably.*

"All right," he said. "All right, I'm coming--I mean, I'm getting ready." He climbed out of bed and into the pants Kierendal had given him. "Better hurry," Tup said. "She's pretty upset."

"About what?" Deliann asked dully, pulling the shirt on over his head. "And what does she need me for? She has plenty of security."

"She didn't say, exactly. Some snarl with a roger, up in the suites. He's got a hostage. She said to tell you this roger's sweaty and feverish--he's claiming his dolly was trying to poison him."

Deliann went still, half into the shirt, while a jagged ball of ice congealed in his stomach. *That's it,* he thought. *That's why I didn't want to wake up. That's exactly it.*

A slow weight gathered on his shoulders, crushing him toward the floor, but he just shook his head and slipped on the pair of sandals beside the chair.

"Show me the way," he said.

2

Tup looped through the stairwell above him, circling and doubling back to maintain airspeed while she led him up toward the Yellow Suites, in the east wing of the fifth floor. Deliann struggled to keep pace, gasping with the pain each step brought his maimed legs.

Kierendal paced back and forth in the corridor, waiting for them. She wore her afternoon business attire--loose pants and shirt of shimmering black silk set off with a single string of gleaming pearls--and her silver hair was drawn back in a bun so tight it brought an extra slant to her eyes. A spot of blood showed at the corner of her mouth, where she'd been chewing her lower lip with her needle-sharp canines. She had a pair of her overt guards with her, ogres each nearly nine feet tall and five feet wide, dressed in heavy calf-length hauberks and carrying morningstars the size of Deliann's head. "Deliann," she said shortly, nodding him toward an open door beside her. "In here."

When Tup started to flutter in with them, Kierendal shook her head. "You stay out of here. Go back down to my chambers, wait for me there." "Aww, Kier--"

Kierendal bared her sharp and bloody teeth. "Go. Now."

Tup went.

Within the room, a tearstained human girl of about twenty sat on the edge of the bed. A stonebender knelt on the bed beside her, holding a bloody towel against the girl's cheek. As Deliann entered, the stonebender drew back the towel, revealing an ugly gaping wound on the girl's face. Instead of a cheek, the side of her face was a pair of raw-meat flaps that didn't quite join up; she looked like somebody had stuck a knife in her mouth and sliced through her cheek all the way back to the hinge of her jaw.

Deliann winced; his stomach wasn't steady enough for this.

"Bleed's almost stop," the stonebender said kindly. "Good girl, brave girl. Fix you good, no worry."

Deliann could see that she used to be beautiful.

Dully, through the wall, he could hear the sound of someone pacing back and forth, heavily, like he was stomping cockroaches with big boots. "Whaddaya fuckin' think?" someone was saying in the adjoining room. "Whaddaya fuckin' think? What was I s'poza do?"

The stonebender began to stitch the girl up with his blunt, nimble fingers, using a long curved leather-working needle; the stitches would hold the skin and muscle in place while his magick accelerated the natural healing process. Probably wouldn't scar-not much, anyway-but it had to hurt. She whimpered, and tears leaked from her eyes, and Deliann had to look away.

"Her roger's still next door," Kierendal said. "Near as I can tell, he started acting up out of nowhere, and Tessa cried the carp. He only had time to cut her once; she made the door in a scramble when the guards broke in."

"Tup said something about a hostage?"

She shook her head grimly and nodded at a small spy gate set into the adjoining wall. "Have a look, if you want. The bastard knifed one of my boys and coldcocked the other. I don't want to send in anyone else. It's not just that he might kill Endy; I'm a little worried about letting *any* more of my people get close to him."

Deliann nodded. "Not just him-if he's sick, she has it, too. We shouldn't be in here. Let the healer stay with her."

Might as well; if the whore was infected, the healer was already dead.

He took Kierendal's arm and drew her back out into the corridor. He lowered his voice, leaning dose to her to keep his words private. "Did you touch the girl? Has *anyone* else touched her, or been close to her or the, er, the roger?"

"I don't think so."

"All right. Tup said something about poison?"

"Yes. I can't be sure-you can guess that *she's* not talking too well," Kierendal said with a nod toward the wounded girl. "I'm only going on what I've overheard from next door. He's been saying something about poison in her mouth-crazy talking, like her kiss would kill him and he had to cut off her lips to save his life, like that. That's why I thought you should have a look at him. You ... showed me ... more than I want to know about this disease of yours, but you're the expert."

"I'm no expert," Deliann told her gloomily.

"You're the closest I have."

"All right. First, it's pretty unlikely that anyone in Ankhana could be infected-this is probably some kind of drug reaction. The disease broke out all the way up beyond Khryl's Saddle-"

"It's not worth taking a chance," Kierendal said grimly. "You give me a yes, I'll burn down this whole fucking wing. You put me through that fey's death. You made me know what it*feels* like. I won't watch my people die like that. I'll kill her myself."

Deliann's golden gaze met Kierendal's silver for a long moment; he saw how much it hurt her even to say such a thing. He also saw that she'd do it, no matter how much it hurt.

But it's not HRVP, he told himself. It can't be. It's some kind of drug reaction, that's all. Like I said.

The hall door also had a spy gate in it. Deliann stepped over and slid it open; he'd take a quick look, glance at the guy to set Kierendal's mind at ease, then tell her everything was all right. Simple. Easy.

Through the gate he could see a fey on the floor in an enormous pool of blood, his head twisted awkwardly, one side of his neck slashed into a ragged mockery of lips. A fly settled onto his face and walked across his open eye.

Scarlet bootprints stained the floor, where someone had tracked through the blood and walked off out of sight.

On the bed was a thick-muscled stonebender, wrists and ankles tied together with a twisted bedsheet, a wadded pillowcase stuffed in his mouth. With small, slow movements, the stonebender rotated his wrists and worked his ankles against each other, surreptitiously loosening the knots that held him.

"Whaddameye s'poza do? Huh? She'd*akilt* me. Whaddaya fuckin'*think* I'm gonna do?" The voice came more clearly through the spy gate; no longer muffled by the intervening wall, it sounded sickeningly familiar.

Then the speaker stomped into view: a huge, broad-shouldered ogrillo, his grey-leather face dripping sweat and one eye glaring feverishly. He wore gaudy, new-looking clothes of garishly dyed linen; now drenched with blood down his right side. He carried no weapon, but the razor-sharp fighting claw on his right wrist was fully extended and bright with blood.

One of his undershot tusks was a broken stump; the ivory of the other was blackened and scorched.

Deliann sagged against the wall.

Better I had died in the mountains, he thought. The pain in his chest wouldn't let him speak, wouldn't let him even breathe. Oh, Rroni, why couldn't you have been a better swordsman? Why couldn't you have opened my skull right then?

Oh, god, god, I would give anything if only I had died . . .

The murderous ogrillo in the suite was the foredeck second.

"What is it?" Kierendal said. "It's bad, isn't it? I can see it on your face." "It's bad," Deliann echoed.

Kierendal turned to her ogre guards, her face bleak with harsh necessity. "Evacuate this wing. I want everybody out of here within five minutes. Get all the available security and sweep every room. Anybody still in here, five minutes from now? They'll die in the fire."

One of the ogres twitched his enormous morningstar at the door where Deliann stood. "Whad about thhem? Whad about Endy? How you gonna ged him oud?"

"We're not," Kier said. "Endy, Tessa, Parkk-they're all staying." The ogres exchanged dimly dismayed glances. "Bud you said-"

"You don't have to understand," Kierendal said. "Just do what I tell you."

"You're the one who doesn't understand," Deliann said.

He pushed himself away from the wall, wondering numbly that he still moved. How could he stand, under this weight? How could he speak? How could he still live, with his heart rotting inside him? "You don't understand," he repeated slowly, painfully. "I know that 'rillo." "You do?" Kierendal blinked. "Small world. But that doesn't change anything"

"Yes, it does. It changes everything. He's infected. There's only one way he could have been infected, to be showing symptoms right now."

Deliann spread his hands in absolute surrender; agony like this could not be fought, and could not possibly be endured. "I'm immune. I don't get sick. But he must have somehow caught it from me."

Kierendal's eyes went wide and blank.

Slowly, numbly, she lifted a nerveless hand to her face, staring sightlessly past him. She pressed her lips with her fingers, as though remembering her mouth against his-as though trying to calculate the infinite cost of that one kiss.

3

Deliann lay in the darkness, twisted into a fetal knot of pain. Pain paralyzed him, left him helpless, shuddering on the cold, hard floor. He was only one stride from a couch, half a room away from a bed where he could lie, but the only motion his limbs would make was an intermittent nerveless twitch, a racking convulsion halfway between a lung-rotted cough and a dry sob.

He had never imagined there was this much pain in the world.

Lying at the bottom of the cliff in the God's Teeth with both legs broken had been nothing; it was as though his legs had some kind of a circuit breaker, a transformer that stepped down the pain. His heart, though

Eaten by acid, it left a smoking hole in his chest, a sucking emptiness that screamed regret. This pain only grew. Long ago it had passed unendurable; he would howl, but the hole in his chest had eaten too much of his strength. He could not even whimper. He could only lie on the cold floor, and suffer.

He had brought madness and death to this whole city.

His stupidity-his simple thoughtless foolishness-had murdered Kierendal, and Tup, and her houseboy Zakke, and the pretty human whore with the slashed face, and the stonebender healer Parkk, and the ogre guards--

and-

and

and . . .

Kierendal's first thought had been to seal the building—to save the city by burning down Alien Games with herself and everyone else inside it. She knew what she was in for; he'd made her feel every inch of the death of the young fey at the village outside Diamondwell. A shrieking death in fire, going down to darkness with the smell of your own roasting flesh in your nostrils, was far kinder than what that young fey had endured.

But even that would be useless; she'd given up any hope of slowing the infection. She could save nothing.

Alien Games was a brothel, a casino, an attraction for tourists from all corners of the Empire. The infection that he had carried here would have spread already into the city, and would be creeping outward into the Empire along the arteries of the Great Chambaygen like blood poisoning up a wounded leg.

How could he have been *sobblind*?

In a minute or two, he'd get up. He'd go into the bedchamber next door, where Kierendal sat in darkness with Tup and Zakke and Pischu, her floor boss. He'd take a cup, and fill it with the wine that they were drinking even now.

He thought of Socrates, taking the hemlock and pacing his prison, walking back and forth to bring it on the quicker; he doubted he could do that. He wasn't entirely sure he could stand at all. Kierendal, she was stronger: she had marched into the bedchamber as though she'd left doubt and fear behind on another world.

On the other hand, only her brief future weighed down on her. Deliann had been crushed by the past.

He hoped that all he would find, on the far side of the cup of wine that waited for him next door, was darkness and an end to pain—but if not, if he was to face some judgment for his crimes, he did not fear it. Even the most brutal hell could not hurt him worse than this.

A small cool hand laid itself along his cheek, fingertips brushing his neck as though feeling for his pulse. Just that simple touch was so comforting, so calming, that he could not pull away from it. That cool touch seemed to draw some of his hurt as a moist towel draws fever. He shuddered as it went out from him, as though something inside him clung involuntarily to the pain, the way muscle clamps tight around a wounding arrow shaft if it's pulled too slowly.

"Shh, it's all right" a woman's voice told him softly. "It's all right, I'm here." Her breath smelled of green leaves turning toward the sun, of grain ripening in fields freshly swept by rain.

"No," Deliann said. She had taken enough of his pain that he now found he could move, could speak. He pulled away from her hand. "No, it's not all right. You've touched me. Now you're going to die."

"I am not so easily slain," the woman's voice told him gently. "Open your eyes, Kris Hansen. I bring glad tidings."

"What?" Deliann said. "What did you call me?"

When he did open his eyes, her face stole his voice.

She glowed in the darkened room with a light of her own, as though a single sunbeam framed itself precisely to her form: a small, slight human woman in ordinary clothing, a spray of dark hair framing an oval face rather ordinarily pretty, features unremarkable save for the serene power that shone forth from them: a shimmering halo of life so refined and concentrated that the sight of her burned away Deliann's previous experience of beauty like ice in a furnace. Looking on her, he could not even imagine another woman's face.

Awe compressed his chest. "Who ..." he gasped breathlessly. "Who *are* you?"

"I am called Pallas Ril."

"The *Aktir* Queen?" he said involuntarily; Pallas Ril was the name of the ruler of demons in the elKothan pantheon, the bride of the evil Prince of Chaos-but none of the elKothan woodcuts or story windows had shown a woman such as this.

"If you wish," she said.

Electrified, Deliann scrambled to his feet; he made a warding gesture and breathed himself into mindview. "I want nothing to do with the human gods," he said warily.

Slowly, sadly, she straightened, and on her face was a small quiet smile. Her Shell filled the room, and more; he could not see its limit, and it blazed like the midsummer sun. "I am human, and a god but I am not a human god. Know this: I am your friend, Kris Hansen-"

"Why do you keep *calling* me that?"

"-and I am the answer to your cry for help."

Deliann stopped, stunned, swaying in place, helpless against the flood of pain and need that thundered back into his chest-forgotten for one moment, it returned with overpowering force.

"How-? Who-?"

"I am called by many names. The First Folk call MeEyyallarann."

Her Shell surrounded him, enveloped him, enwrapped him in effortless comfort; for half a single second, he relaxed

And flashed on her.

She roared into him; in an instant he was filled to bursting, filled beyond pain, but there was more, infinitely more, as though some cruel giant poured the ocean down his throat. From the scream of an eagle wheeling above Khryl's Saddle to the slow squirm of a newt spawning in the mud of the Teranese Delta, from the creak of ancient branches in the wind of the Larrikaal Deepwood to the hush of a rivulet washing a mossy stone below Ankhana's Commons' Beach, she entered him with power that would burst his skull and scatter smoking gobbets of brain throughout the room

"That's enough," she said, and the flood cut off as though a door had been slammed within his brain. "Be careful what you touch, Kris; there are dangers here for such as you."

Deliann stepped back from her, gasping, his hands pressing against his face until the room halted its dizzy whirl; then he lowered himself slowly and reverently to his knees.

"Your pardon, My Lady," he said formally in Primal, his head bent before her. "I did not know Thee."

"Your reverence betrays your human birth," she replied gravely in the same tongue. "The First Folk do not kneel to Me; I am properly greeted with a kiss, for I am your mother, and your sister, and your child."

Deliann rose and embraced her; he was, astonishingly, taller than she, and she felt frail in his arms. "What would you have me do?" he asked.

"Hold on to hope," she said. "Within days, a new disease will strike this city, and the entire land. Whoever it touches need never fear HRVP."

"I don't understand."

"It is how I will defeat this plague. A new plague, that confers immunity to the other."

"You can do this?"

"I can. That is why you must hold on to hope."

"Hope?" he repeated. "Immunity-oh, my heart!*Kierendal!* Kierendal,*stop!*!"

He dashed from the room into the bedchamber next door.

What he found there might have been the aftermath of a cheerful party: bodies sprawled across a wide bed and settled at seeming ease into comfortable chairs, all in the boneless relaxation that might have been sleep

Zakke reclined in a broad sitting chair, his beard spilling down his chest. Pischu lay on the bed, his hands folded peacefully across his chest. Tup was curled up on a pillow on the vanity table.

Kierendal had crumpled to the floor like a broken doll. She lay on the rug at the foot of the bed, and Deliann dropped to his knees beside her. Her long, almost fleshless legs were twisted beneath her; they looked like *they* would hurt, if she woke up.

He touched her splash of silver hair. "If only you could have waited," he whispered.

The room brightened to the gentle glow of a forest moonset. The goddess stood at his back.

"She was afraid," Deliann said, absently stroking Kierendal's hair. His voice was empty as a raided tomb. "They all were. She knew what it was going to be like. She couldn't face that kind of death-she couldn't watch *them* face it ..."

"Do you think she would want to live, if she could?"

"Do I? Would-?" Deliann turned, wide-eyed, gasping with sudden hope. "Are you asking me?"

"Those who still live need not die of this poison," the goddess said. "Can you bear the burden of having called them back?"

"I-yes! Yes, anything-anything--"

"This is not a fairy tale, Kris," the goddess said severely. "I do not take you at your word, when you do not know what you are saying. Any who survive this poison will be infected still. I cannot cure them directly."

"You-you can't? Why not?"

"HRVP is not, exactly, alive. My powers of healing are great, but they are no different in kind than any other: I can only spur the body's natural processes. HRVP is not a natural disease; it is a *genengineered bioweapon*-" She used, astonishingly, the English words. "-and the body's natural resistance system is no defense. To spur the body's processes would bring only a swifter death."

"But I

The goddess lifted a restraining hand. "The *vaccine* you received as a child is another *genengineered virus*." She continued to sprinkle English into her Westering. "This is how I will stop the infection, in the end: I will create a *countervirus* that will block the *receptor sites* to which HRVP binds. If your friends are exposed to it soon enough, it may save their sanity and their lives." "May?"

The goddess nodded. "They will have a chance, but only that. You might call them back from this gentle death to an unbearable one." "How ... how long? How long before-"

"I believe I will have the *countervirus* prepared within four days."

"So they would have a chance. That's a chance I can take," Deliann said, rising. "So? What's the catch?"

The goddess shook her head sadly. "This is the catch, Kris." She gestured toward the bodies. "Two of these four have yet enough strength to be saved; if I strengthen their hearts, and speed the work of their livers to break down the poison, it will wash from them before it can kill them."

"Two?" Deliann said. "Only two?"

She nodded. "That man-" Pischu, on the bed. "-had a weak heart. He is already dead. And this treetopper-"

Tup ... Oh, Kierendal, how will you stand it?

"-her metabolism was too fast; she died only a moment after she drank. So, Kris Hansen: your friend may not thank you for calling her back from death. Can you help her live with what she has done?"

Deliann looked down at Kierendal.

If I'm wrong there's plenty of poison left. Once she understands what's going on, she can make her own choice.

He nodded: to the goddess, and to himself. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I can.

"Then it is done," the goddess said.

That simply: without a gesture, without even the faintest flicker of the light around them. Kierendal's shallow hitching breath deepened toward the slow rhythm of sleep.

Now he found that he had recovered the strength to cry.

"My father ..." he murmured painfully. "My family-Mithondion ... When you have the countervirus-all of Mithondion will be infected by now ..

"Mithondion is beyond my reach," the goddess said. "My power is that of the river-beyond the bound of my watershed, I am blind and deaf, and largely powerless. If they are to be saved, the cure must be carried to them, even as was the disease."

"How did you-I mean, when did-"*Torronell*, his heart whispered, breaking.*If she had come two weeks ago, even a week ...* "I mean, where have you been?" His heart cried his real question:*Why did you wait so long?*

"I was on Earth," she said simply. "As you named me, I am also the *Aktir* Queen. You called, and I came."

"I . . . *called?* You mean, with J'Than? The *Aktir?*"

Her luminous, liquid eyes gazed deeply into his. "Hari Michaelson asked to be remembered to you," she said.

She stepped sideways, and reality warped around her: in the barest blink of an eye, perspective distorted so that it seemed she had moved half a mile away while still remaining within the room; with another step, she was gone.

Deliann stood rooted to the carpet, shaken, gasping.

Hari...*Michaelson?*

At his feet Kierendal stirred, whimpering; Deliann instantly knelt beside her and cradled her head on his knees. "Shh," he whispered. "Shh. It's all right. I'm here. It's all right."

And for a time, he believed he might be telling the truth.

There was, in those days, a man who had been a god. Though a god no longer, he still saw with a more than mortal eye, shaped with a more than mortal hand, and thought with a more than mortal mind. He saw the war made by the dark angel, and he saw the acolytes of dust and ashes, but he did not see the god who lay behind them both. To save his onetime chil-dren from this war, he shaped himself a new destiny.

But he was a god no longer; even' his more than mortal mind could not guess the limits of his vision, his strength, and his wisdom. Thus did he open the tale of his own destruction.

Others had brought war against the god of dust and ashes, many others, more than can be counted on worlds beyond number. Among its enemies on this world had been Jereth Godslaughterer, Panchasell the Luckless, and Kiel Burchardt. Among its enemies on the other had been Friedrich Nietzsche, John Brown, and Crazy Horse.

Each had fallen to its patient, infinite hunger. It had killed them in its sleep.

On the day the dark angel went forth to war, the man who had been a god took counsel with the acolytes of dust and ashes

And persuaded them to wake it up.

SEVEN

Tan'elKoth sat alone in the stony gloom of the Curioseum. Motionless, his eyes glittered in the flickering glow from the mirror that served him as a deskscreen. His fingers were steepled before his impassive face. The ground floor of his apartment had no windows; though it was late afternoon outside the Curioseum, black shadows crowded dose around him. He was consumed with the task of waiting.

He had been waiting for this moment for nearly seven years.

The mirror on his desk glowed with a special edition of *Adventure Update*. Tan'elKoth had watched the recording that Clearlake played for a worldwide audience. With his usual canny political touch for self-preservation, Clearlake had seamlessly edited the recording to eliminate every suggestion that the Studio itself might be somehow responsible for the outbreak, thus protecting himself from any charge of corporate slander; other than that, the recording ran uncensored, and unrelievedly gruesome. Tan'elKoth stabbed the cutoff. He'd seen enough.

"One supposes the Bog has, as well," he murmured.

He composed himself to wait.

Seconds ticked by more swiftly than the beating of his heart. He waited.

Then he waited longer.

And longer.

Still no chime from his annunciator.

Those fractal tree branch world-paths replayed within his mind. No new flowering, no unexpected crook or twist presented itself: this sprouting future was precisely as it had been, in the moment he laid his will upon it.

But still they did not call.

That he had miscalculated was impossible. Even an idiot could now see how easily they had been outmaneuvered; even an idiot could now see that they had only one choice. Even the stupidest fish can feel the hook when it's lodged in its throat.

He thrust himself to his feet and prowled the limits of his cage. He paced up the broad curve of stairs that led through the light trap to his personal quarters, humming distractedly to himself. The voices of the men within him murmured that there was something he'd overlooked.

He climbed the final flight, up to his studio. The skylight showed only the low bloodlit gloom of night clouds over the city. This was where he'd spent most of the past six years-now nearly seven-molding in clay and casting in bronze the interior shapes of his private reality.

It had been a brutal, bitter, soul-searing struggle, teaching his hands to bring forth the shapes within his heart; every time a casting cooled unevenly and cracked, every time he scraped thin grey curls of clay from beneath his fingernails, every time he so much as touched a-knife or a trowel, he was forced to confront memories of being Ma'elKoth, of constructing His Great Work: memories of ordering reality with nothing more than the power of his mind. Memories of how far he had fallen

And yet, working with his hands had taught him things that working only with his mind could never have: had taught him that materials are not infinitely malleable, nor should they be-that to overwork a piece is to destroy it. Materials have shapes of their own. True art is a negotiation, a struggle, even a dance, between the will of the artist and the intrinsic form-the physical properties of strength and balance, the fundamental*possibility-that* defines his chosen medium.

He passed a study for his most famous sculpture,*The Passion of Lovers*. *Passion* was not his best work; it was merely the most accessible to the limited tastes of his audience. Cast in monumental bronze, two men stand tangled in an intimate embrace, their forms stylized, abstracted into the essence of their desire for each other until they flow together and join as one. One holds a sword that pierces the other through the groin, its blade emerging from that one's back; the sword-pierced figure holds smaller blades in each hand, one seeking his lover's heart, the other buried in the top of his lover's skull.

Obvious. Even trite.

He turned aside from*Passion* and pulled the shroud from his current work, his*David*. He had finally allowed himself to attempt a full figure in marble, a material far more exacting than bronze. Larger than life-size, to the same scale as Michelangelo's, the half-completed sculpture rested on a large reinforced dolly with swivel-mounted wheels-locked now-so that he could at need shift the tons of stone to examine it in differing angles of sunlight.

The figure had begun to emerge from its prison of creamy stone. Tan'elKoth surveyed it critically, walking around it, sighing; he struggled to live through his eyes, to forget his tension, his frustration. Even to pick up a chisel in his current emotional turmoil would be an invitation to disaster. He was not unmindful of what historians termed Michelangelo's*Struggle* series-each tortured and twisted figure abandoned after a single flawed stroke.

Tan'elKoth's*David* would be greater than Buonarroti's; instead of the perfection of masculine beauty sought by the Earth artist, Tan'elKoth had taken for his model an older, more seasoned man, a man on the descending curve of his life-a man whose face and form would show in every line the soul-crushing burden of being the Beloved of God, and yet would also show pride, tempered strength, unbendable will. One would see the beauty of the youth he had been, and see that the scars etched by time's acid had made him more beautiful still.

But now, as he examined the emerging figure, he could see that it would develop not precisely as he had envisioned it. Already the gestural line of its stance had diverged from his intention, as though its form was becoming a vector of two convergent images. *Astthough there is already at work here a will that is*

not my own.

Tan'elKoth's eyes went wide and round, and he lost a moment in sheer marvel. Somewhere, somewhere within this revelation was the fault line that had shifted beneath his certainty

He had always been a composite entity. Any memories of having but a single mind had been relegated to the ghost-forms that peopled his inner world. From the moment of Ma'elKoth's self-creation in a flare of power from the crown of Dal'kannith, he had been the master of a choir of interior voices. Through the years that choir had swelled to a symphony, of which he was the conductor: many voices, many minds, many lives, but a single organizing will.

He was Ma'elKoth no longer; his latest act of self-creation had reduced the god he had once been to merely the greatest of the shades in his internal Tartarus. Despite the self-deprecation of his new name, Tan'elKoth knew that he was more than even Ma'elKoth had been: more human, more connected to the currents of time and flesh that rule the lives of mortals. And a better artist--which may, in the end, have been the most important difference.

Art had always been his ruling passion.

Hannto the Scythe had been an obsessive collector from his earliest years; he had in truth become a necromancer in service to this obsession. The skill of necromancy consists primarily in coaxing forth the remnants of the patterns that consciousness imprints upon the Shells of corpses--capturing the fading echoes of the mind that had once been expressed by the meat. A skilled necromancer can temporarily tune his own mind, his own Shell, closely enough to these residual vibrations that he can access the occasional tatter of the memories they represent.

Many artists conceal works that they do not feel are up to their personal standards; many of these works may be lost forever if the artist leaves behind no record. Hannto had used his power to summon forth memories from the very bones of the great, and eventually his personal collection had swelled with uncataloged works by major artists. He could provide no provenance for any of them, and thus could never receive the full value of a painting or sculpture in a sale, but what mattered that?

He had never intended to sell them.

Hannto had his own feelings about art. Art was not merely the creation of beauty, for him; neither was it merely a reflection of reality. It was not even the depiction of truth.

Art was the *creation* of truth.

It is a truism that when one is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. The glory of art is that it can show this proverbial hammer how everything looks to a screwdriver--and to a plowshare, and to an earthenware pot. If reality is the sum of our perceptions, to acquire more varying points of view is to acquire, *literally*, more reality.

Hannto had wanted to own the universe.

The precise point where he had passed from collector to creator was a mystery. Perhaps truly passionate collectors are always *artistes manqués*: perhaps they choose to buy what they have not the gifts to create. Perhaps touching the minds of all those countless artists had molded him in some way; perhaps seeing the world through the dream-eyes of artists had given him, over time, some vision of his own.

Tan'elKoth was more than the sum of his experiences; he was the grand total of the sums that were the men who lived within his mind. For fifteen years and more he had lived by his absolute control of these self-created shades. What will could possibly have touched this sculpture, other than his own? What will could have altered the curve of his *David's* stance, could have angled the line of his *David's* jaw down toward resignation and defeat? What will could possibly drive his mallet to his chisel without his consent-without even his *awareness*?

Faintly, distantly, muffled in the depths of his apartment below, the annunciator on his deskscreen chimed.

2

Tan'elKoth fairly flew down both flights of stairs into the darkness of the ground floor; he skidded to a halt. in front of the desk, then spent a bare moment to order the lights on and straighten his clothing.

The Adventures Unlimited logo flashed in the message box of his screen.

With ponderous dignity, he lowered himself into his chair. "Iris: Acknowledge," he murmured. "Audiovisual."

"Professional Tan'elKoth. You are instructed to remain at your current screen. Hold for voice communication from the Adventures Unlimited Board ° of Governors."

The screen wiped to the Adventures Unlimited logo: the armored knight upon the winged horse, rampant.

"Professional Tan'elKoth." A subtle change in the voice: where before it had been purely mechanical, now it had the faintest hint of self-awareness, the consciousness of power.

There came next from the speakers deep in the floor beneath his desk a recording of Tan'elKoth's own voice. *"Tell your Board of Governors this: in exchange for certain considerations, I shall undertake to solve their Michaelson problem."*

Tan'elKoth smiled.

The voice of the Board of Governors said, *"What considerations?"*

So: no preamble, no throat-clearing. Clean and direct without a wasted word. Tan'elKoth nodded to himself. He could do business with men such as these. "An alliance, gentlefolk. Return me to my land. Leave the Empire and my people to me; you may use the rest of my world as you desire. Within the Imperial bound, your interests will be better served by the power of Ma'elKoth than by the weak minds and wills of your Earth-bred satraps. We have a common goal, do we not? To ensure the future of humanity, both here and on my world."

"And in exchange?"

Tan'elKoth shrugged. "As I said: I shall undertake to solve your Michaelson problem."

"Our Michaelson problem is hardly worth such a price."

He snorted. "Come, gentlefolk. This protest is fatuous; were the problem in question so insignificant, we would not be having this conversation."

"Michaelson is no one. We created him. He is exactly what we made him: nothing. A cripple, wholly owned by the Studio."

Tan'elKoth let a smile creep into his voice. "And yet, within a handful of hours, this wholly owned cripple has ripped your plans asunder and cast their shreds to the winds of the Abyss."

"You are overdramatizing. This is no more than a public-relations gaffe,"

"You," Tan'elKoth replied with clinical exactitude, "are fools."

Only silence greeted this pronouncement; apparently, the Board of Governors was unused to hearing the truth. "Caine is against you, now," Tan'elKoth said. "Without my help, you are lost."

"You fear Michaelson so much?"

"Bah." How do men of vision so limited come to wield power so vast? "I fear Michaelson not at all. Michaelson is a fiction, you fools. The truth of him is Caine. You do not comprehend the distinction; and so he will destroy you."

"We are gratified by your concern for our welfare,"

"I care nothing for your welfare," he said through his teeth. "I want my Empire back."

"This seems a steep price for so small a service: to crush a powerless cripple."

"Doubly fools," Tan'elKoth said. They were repeating themselves; redundancy is the hallmark of muddled thinking. "He does have power. *One* power: the power to devote himself absolutely to a single goal, to be ruthless with himself and all else in its pursuit. It is the only power he needs—because, unlike the great mass of men, he is aware of this power, and he is willing, even happy, to use it."

Tan'elKoth leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers before his face; he had been a professor for enough years that he fell into his lecture mode without thinking. "Men like Caine—and, if I may say so, myself—exert a certain pressure upon history; when we set ourselves a goal and extend our energies to achieve it, the force of history itself organizes into a current at our backs. You might call it destiny, though that is an inadequate word for a power of this magnitude. On Overworld, one can even see it: a dark stream in the Flow that organizes the interplay of historical necessities—the interplay which the ignorant call *chance*."

"Then we need do nothing at all; he is one, we are ... several; if what you say is true, we can think him to death."

Tan'elKoth clenched his jaw. Could they possibly guess how this sophistic jabber wore on his nerves? "Will without action is mere daydreaming; it is as useless as the blind spastic twitching that is action without will—which, I might add, accurately sums your efforts so far."

He leaned toward the screen and lowered his voice as though sharing a friendly confidence. "You are helpless before him. He demonstrates this even as we speak. You would have stopped that broadcast if you could; I know that your machines monitor the net, and intercept even private messages that might so

much as hint at what that recording explicitly spells out. How, then, did you come to fail? Do you think that recording reached a worldwide audience *by chance?*"

"Coincidence. A meaningless blip of probability"

Tan'elKoth forebore to point out that *coincidence* is only another name for *bad luck* the eternal excuse of the loser. "You may scoff at the power of Caine," he said, "but there is one whose power demands your respect: one who can stop you with a mere gesture. I speak, of course, of Pallas Ril."

"Pallas Ril-Shanna Michaelson-is merely a woman, while here on Earth. She can be easily dealt with."

"Mmm, true," Tan'elKoth said slowly. "And you could have done so, had you not awakened Caine. Pray, tell me now: Where is this *mere woman* at this moment, as we speak?"

"She is appearing at a convention in Los Angeles."

"Is she? Are you certain?"

"*What are you saying?*" For the first time, Tan'elKoth thought he might even be able to detect a hint of expression in the digitized voice-and the emotion thus expressed warmed him inside. "*She is on Overworld? Impossible. Her next shift isn't until September twenty-first.*"

In answer, Tan'elKoth gave them only a tiny smug smile.

"She must be found. She must be stopped."

"And how, precisely, will you do this? She is already beyond your reach; there, she is a goddess, and as near to omnipotent as any living creature has ever been, including myself. You have been completely out-fought," Tan'elKoth said. "Caine is too fast for you; your corporate group-think is slow and innately predictable. But your difficulty is by no means insoluble."

"What solution do you propose?",

He straightened again, and let a gleam of his passion flash into his eye. "You must submit yourselves to a single organizing will-give over the direction of your campaign to one lightning mind. To put it bluntly: Your only hope is to call upon me."

"Why you?"

"I am, false modesty aside, Earth's leading expert on Caine and Pallas Ril. I have in my library every cube either of them has ever recorded; the primary use of my ammod harness is to allow me to leave the Curioseum long enough to review their Adventures. I daresay I know more about their abilities-and their psychologies-than they do themselves."

"Knowledge is meaningless without power."

Tan'elKoth sat silently for a long moment, staring fixedly at the mirror as though some message could be read between the reflected pixels. Finally he said, "Indeed."

He shifted his weight and allowed some of the fire in his heart to reach his eyes. "To amend my previous statement: Pallas Ril is beyond your reach-but not yet beyond mine. I can stop her for you, gentlefolk.

Give me the opportunity, and I shall."

"At what price?"

"Her I would kill for free; I despise her. Breaking Caine, however-that will be expensive. Caine's innate ruthlessness makes him extremely dangerous. In his limited fashion, he is frighteningly resourceful, and an exceptionally flexible thinker. In any situation that he can frame in terms of combat, he will not lose."

"A substantial claim."

"Is it? Let me provide a salutary example: one that is--I think pardonably--still fresh in my heart. Once, not so long ago, he set his will upon the life of Pallas Ril. Though a living god stood against him on one side--" He modestly placed his palm against his chest, then opened it toward the screen. "--and the most powerful bureaucracy this world has ever known stood against him on the other, he--one single, solitary man--overcame us both."

"There were special circumstances--"

"Puffery. Mere details. When saving the life he willed to save required that he defeat *in single combat* the greatest warrior of his time, he did so. Forget that this man was Caine's master in every form of battle; forget that Berne, even unarmed, could have killed him in his sleep without breaking the rhythm of his snoring. Remember that Berne wielded a weapon that was *legendary*: Kosall, the unstoppable blade. Remember that Berne was Gifted with Strength far beyond human, and defenses that could make his skin impervious as steel. Remember that when Caine faced him he was bruised, and battered, half crippled--and poisoned--and still ..." Tan'elKoth let his voice trail away significantly.

"Luck"

"*Luck*" Tan'elKoth spat the word with vehemence surprising even to himself. "*Luck* is a word the ignorant use to define their ignorance. They are blind to the patterns of force that drive the universe, and *they* name their blindness *science*, or *clear-headedness*, or *pragmatism*; when they stumble into walls or fall off cliffs, *they* name their clumsiness *luck*"

"We can settle for removing Pallas Ril, perhaps a median price can be negotiated."

Tan'elKoth snorted. "Clearly, you surmise that killing her will save you and your plans--but the truth is precisely opposite. I stand before you as a testament to this. You wish to interfere with Pallas Ril? Destroy Caine *first*" "*And again, why do we need you for this?*"

Surely even men--as dense as these should see a simple truth, when it is painted before their eyes. "Because," he said patiently, "there is no one else who truly understands *what Caine is*. Without me, you will learn, but too late. He himself will teach you--but it is knowledge you will carry to your graves. You will die cursing your own foolishness, should you reject my offer. Hmp. You wish to understand the fate of those who set themselves against Caine? Ask Arturo Kollberg."

"*Arturo Kollberg?*" There came a long, long considering pause--far too long in response to a rhetorical question.

"*The perfect choice*," his interlocutor said. "*We will.*"

Arturo Kollberg clutched the melamine surface of his work space, sweat trickling from the scars that pitted the remains of his hairline. His skin had gone to paper, these past years: age-yellowed pulp, dry and crumpled over the bones of his face. Only his spoiled-liver lips retained their rubbery thickness, and the teeth around which they tightened were traced with carious brown.

I am dreaming, he thought. This can only be a dream.

A shining disk blinked in the mailbox corner of his screen. Within the disk, an armored knight rode a winged horse, rampant. A message from the Studio.

This must be a dream.

But it didn't seem like a dream. The cubicles here-in Patient Processing-were crystal clear, and bitterly familiar. The moaning of patients in the examining rooms came thinly through the walls, and some-one sobbed with endless psychotic monotony in the lobby. A pair of enormous houseflies, grown fat and clumsy on a diet of blood, buzzed lazily across the fluorescent bands of ceiling lights.

He risked a glance to either side, after first checking that his supervisor wouldn't catch him looking away from his work. At their adjoining cubicles, the clerks beside him hunched over their keyboards, ticking frantically away. Here in the Mission District Labor Clinic, the data entrants were paid by piecework: one-tenth of a mark for each completed form. They stared with manic fixity at their screens, and the room reeked with their acid, frightened sweat.

His years in the Temp ghetto had sucked the meat from his dead-stick arms and twisted his once-nimble fingers into arthritic claws; he barely recognized the hand that *he* moved to shift the cursor into his mailbox, because for this single, long, achingly sweet moment, *he* remembered what he had once been.

What he had once been

He remembered sitting in Corporate Court, watching the evidence mount against him, watching the parade of Actors and technicians, Social Police and rival Administrators as they each came to throw their handful of earth into his living grave. He remembered watching Ma'elKoth testify against him; he remembered the imperious disdain, the impenetrable dignity, the thundering moral righteousness of the ex-Emperor's denunciation.

During those endless hours of humiliation, Kollberg had been able to do nothing save sit at the defense table, numb and hopeless. He'd known full well he would be destroyed: the Studio-the power that could have saved him, that could have stood by his side, could have rewarded his devotion and selfless service-had turned against him. To save itself, it had savaged him. Raped *him*. Gutted his life. It had stripped away everything that gave his existence meaning, and had cast him into the gutters of a Temp slum.

He keyed the icon, and a dialog box unfolded in the center of his screen.

LABORER ARTURO KOLLBERG:
YOU ARE INSTRUCTED TO REMAIN AT YOUR CURRENT SCREEN.
HOLD FOR COMMUNICATION FROM THE
ADVENTURES UNLIMITED BOARD OF GOVERNORS.

Kollberg could no longer breathe.

They remember. They've come for me, after all these years. A progress bar flicked into existence in the center of his desktop, filling slowly from left to right as something large downloaded from the net. They've come for me at last.

Six years-nearly seven-on the Temp boards. Six years.

Six years of standing in line at a public access terminal, begging for work, lucky to get four or five days a month; six years of standing in line at slop kitchens, to act grateful as his bowl was filled with his daily share of the befouled swill that he must choke down quickly or gag on the taste of rot; six years of being shoved and jostled and pawed by people whose breaths reeked of cheap liquor and tooth decay, whose clothes had the barnyard odor of days-old sweat and imperfectly wiped assholes; six years of hot-bunking at a Temp flophouse, time-sharing a single bed in eight-hour shifts with two other Laborers, sleeping on sheets damp with their polluted sweat and the stains of their diseased bodily fluids.

Kollberg's ragged fingernail scratched across his work space, and his lips curled into knots against his teeth.

The progress bar was nearly full.

If this is a dream, Kollberg decided, it will end when the progress bar fills. That's how I'll know.

Soon-too soon, bitterly soon-he would be jerked or slapped awake, to find himself in his tiny cubicle at the Labor Clinic, facing his flickering, blurred desktop. He'd have to look at one of the Labor trash who were his coworkers and shrug apologetically, would have to smile sheepishly and mumble something about insomnia last night. Or, worse yet, he might wake up to find his office manager leaning over him, that stuck-up Artisan bitch with the plastic tits, the cracks in her face spackled with the makeup she troweled on every morning. That vicious cunt would dock his pay an hour for sleeping, even if he'd only nodded off ten minutes ago.

For this was his life.

After five years of enduring the soul-killing humiliation of the Temp boards, Kollberg had found a job, a real job. It paid less per hour than Temping, but it was steady; over the course of the sixty hours he spent each week inside his cubicle entering patients' data into the Labor Clinic's main core, he made enough to rent himself a room at an SRO only three blocks from the clinic, to rent a net screen, and even to buy private food three or four times a week. He was, in the brutally limited way only another Temp would really understand, making something of himself.

But now, he somehow knew, he was entering a new world: a world of dream, where all his hopes and his childhood imaginings might still come to pass.

He remembered getting stiffly out of his bed, throwing the bedclothes on the floor, dressing leadenly in yesterday's shirt and pants. No shower: freshwater showers at the SRO cost three marks for ten minutes, and he could only afford two each week. Salt water was cheaper, but it came un-treated straight from the Bay; it made him itch and stink worse than he would if he didn't bother to wash at all. He'd used a cream depilatory to smooth his stubbled cheeks, and only then had he realized he'd overslept by half an

hour. He'd raced to the clinic without breakfast, and had been able to slide into his cubicle and log on with a full minute to spare; this had allowed him the luxury of answering the Artisan cunt's fisheye with a slightly smug smile.

A dim, she'd begun sternly.

Kollberg had hunched over his keyboard, drawing breath for his automatic correction, but he saw the lift of her eyebrow and the compression at one corner of her mouth that said she was waiting for his correction, *hoping* he would remind her that his name was Arturo, purely so that she could call him *Arthur* again: another demonstration of how easily she could trample on whatever little dignity he thought to retain. He'd refused to give her the satisfaction. Instead, he had closed his *eyes* for a moment, gathered his composure, and said politely, "Yes, Artisan?"

"*Arthur*," she repeated heavily, "*I know* you're aware that Clinic policy requires data entrars to be on the premises fifteen minutes before log-on. Don't think that you'll be able to sneak away for coffee or to use the bathroom before your 0930 break. You should have arrived early enough to take care of that before you sat down."

"Yes, Artisan."

"I'll be watching you."

His cheeks flamed; he could feel the sneaking stares of the other clerks even through the cubicle walls; he could picture them paused, holding breath, leaning slightly, fingers silently poised above keypads, heads cocked as they listened raptly to his humiliation. "Yes, Artisan."

Kollberg suffered in the ringing silence.

Finally, the Artisan cunt had swept her eyes around at the other clerks, and the muffled thuttering of keystrokes had begun to spread throughout the terminal suite, and he had been able to breathe again. It was at that point, Kollberg decided, that he must have fallen asleep; up to then, it had been a perfectly unexceptional day.

The progress bar filled, and vanished.

For an instant the screen flashed pure white, as though its crystals were breaking down. The flash *hurt-hurt* his face, his temples, hurt his ears, hurt like it had reached inside his skull and squeezed his eyeballs together.

Kollberg gasped, for from the pain blossomed a vision, unfolding as though it downloaded directly into his brain: he saw himself recasted as an Administrator, returned to the arms of the Studio in triumph, carried through the iron gates on the shoulders of cheering undercastes.

Flash

Not only recasted, but upcasted: *Businessman* Kollberg, at the podium in One World Center in New York, accepting the Studio Presidency from Westfield Turner.

Flash

Leisureman Kollberg, retiring from the Studio to his private island in the Ionian Sea, to finish his allotted

span in a life of sybaritic comfort and satyric pleasures unimaginable to the undercastes . . . And that was when he knew. This was more than a vision: it was an *offer*.

And it was a test.

He had been seven years in the desert, and now he was being offered dominion over all the kingdoms of the Earth. There was more here than any burst-feed from the net into his brain. This was an offer of power unimaginable: the power of a god.

He muttered, through teeth clenched hard enough to make his gums bleed, "*Get thee behind me, Satan.*"

Where the progress bar had vanished, in the middle of his screen, now stood a menu box with two radio buttons:

(O) SERVICE (O) SELF

Kollberg set his jaw and straightened his spine. With pride in himself and in his calling, with pure, unshakable determination, he moved the cursor to SERVICE, and hit RETURN.

His annunciator chimed, and the menu box disappeared. His screen wiped to brilliant, eye-piercing white that cast black shadows behind him and fogged his vision as though he stared into the sun.

His breath caught and his stomach twisted: something huge and foul forced its way into his mouth, into his throat-tears swam in his eyes, and his face burned with agony as the light charred his flesh. But still, somehow, through the blinding light and the unbearable pain, he could read one last message, written in stark black upon the blazing white.

THOU ART MY OWN SON, WHOM I LOVE.
WITH THEE I AM WELL PLEASED.

Then it entered him with power: into his eyes, down his throat, in through his nose, his ears, ripping open his rectum and jamming up the length of his shriveled penis, forcing into him with howling lust; it filled him to bursting, swelling him from within, stretching him thinner and thinner like a weather balloon expanding toward destruction, while it dissolved and digested his guts, his heart, lungs and bones, everything within the stretching membrane of his skin. His eyeballs expanded, threatening to burst from his face, to explode from the pressure that built within them.

He screamed in pain as he squeezed his eyelids shut, trying to keep his eyes in their sockets by sheer strength-and as though that sudden shriek had broken the spell, the pain vanished without even the faintest twinge to mark its passing.

He opened his eyes again. Everyone was staring at him, leaning out of their carrels or peering meekly over the dividers, showing nothing but greasy hair and curious eyes. The Artisan cunt looked distinctly alarmed.

"Arthur," she said severely. "I hope there is some explanation for this . . . for this *breach of discipline*. If you're ill, you should have reported to the Physician before your scheduled log-on. If not ..." She let the sentence trail off into unspecified threat.

His screen was dark. It gave back a faint reflection of his face, and he could see that nothing of this ordeal had marked him: he looked exactly the same as he had one minute before. But now he felt suspended, floating at equilibrium, airy and filled with light. He understood now: yes, he was dreaming.

This *was* a dream, all of it.

It would always be a dream.

He would never have to wake up.

"Marie . . . ?" He murmured languidly. *Marie* was the Artisan cunt's name. "I think I'm going to fuck you."

One side of her mouth spasmed down toward her hard jaw as though she'd suffered a paralytic stroke. She backed away from him, making guttural *uhm*, *mm*, *erm* noises deep in her throat; then she said something unspecific about a breakdown, and something else about calling a Physician.

Kollberg slid the tip of his tongue in a slow meaty circuit around his slack lips. He became aware, looking at her, that she and he were not truly distinct individuals; that, in fact, he was a more potent expression of an energy that they both shared. She was a leaf, but he was the tree . . . No, that wasn't right. The concept continued to organize itself within him-or, perhaps, he around it. More like: she was a building, and he was the city.

She was human, and he was humanity.

He saw where she fit into him, and he into her, and now he could feel the lives of the Laborers around him: their cool firefly sparkles fed his landscape of light. He knew them thoroughly, inside and out, their petty hungers and their pale lusts, their tiny pathetic hopes and their private niggard fears. The wave front of his expanding, consciousness outripped with geometric acceleration, swelling the more with each mind that he swallowed: through the building, through the block, reaching out into the city. Here and there he tasted lives that were familiar: the fetid swamps of the useless on the streets of the District; the ugly fantasies of his SRO roommate, masturbating at a public urinal; the smug self-righteous timidity of his onetime secretary Gayle Keller; the blank wirehead dedication of Studio techs and the delicious devotion of Worker semen.

And perhaps this wasn't a dream, after all; perhaps the life of Arturo Kollberg had been a dream, from his childhood disgraced by the miscegenation of his mixed-caste parents, through his spectacular rise to the Studio Chairmanship and his still-more-spectacular fall.

Perhaps he was only now waking up.

He touched the scattered sparks that were the individual lives of the Board of Governors. He gifted them all with a small portion of his gratitude and gave them each the interior warmth and satisfaction of seeing a well-done job come to its fruition. They, in turn, gladly gave up the devotion that he required of them. His loyal priesthood had brought him forth in the body; he loved them for it, and they him.

With echoes of power ringing in his head, Kollberg wondered what he should do now-and the answer was obvious.

Whatever I want.

Joined with that vast sea of human minds, the choice of service and self vanished: there could be no difference between them. His gaze fell once more upon Marie, and sharpened its focus, and he offered his carious teeth to her in a shit-colored smile.

"You stay right there," she ordered, pale as milk. "Take one step out of your cubicle, and I'll call the Social Police."

"No need," Kollberg said, drawing out the word into a drawl of happy lust. "They're already here."

The office door slammed open as though kicked, and Social Police flooded the room, a riot platoon in full combat gear: twenty-five mirror-masked officers in ballistic armor, power rifles slanted across their chests, shock batons dangling from their belts. Everyone but Kollberg froze in place at their desks; in a sudden accession to their ancestral herd instincts, the data clerks understood that to move was to set oneself out from the crowd. To set oneself out from the crowd was to be marked.

They knew: the Artisan supervisor, she had been marked.

Kollberg moved to the center of the room, seeing his own face reflected in every single one of the mirror masks. Those reflections smiled upon him, and he upon them. The nearest officer inclined his head, just a trifle. "At your will," his digitized voice confirmed flatly.

"Seal the mom," Kollberg murmured. Then a better idea floated up from the hollow core of what had once been his brain. "No--seal the *building*."

The officer crossed his arms to tap out orders on his suit's forearm keypads.

Kollberg turned, his movement graceful and effortless, a weightless ballet. He met the eyes of the Artisan cunt, and his penis stiffened so suddenly that his breath came thick and hot. His testicles burned. "Her," he said, pointing.

She made a gagging noise, deep in her throat, and turned as though to bolt toward the inner offices. Two soapies sprang after her and tackled her to the floor. She moaned, and cried, and begged. Kollberg stepped over and stood above the three of them.

"Her clothes."

One of the officers held her pinned, grinding her face into the filthy polyester shag of the carpet, while the other unfolded a pocket knife and sliced away her clothes. Her flesh was pale and slack, pockets of fat bulging across her ass, down the sides of her thighs. Kollberg opened the fly of his dungarees, and his penis sprang out. "Turn her over. She has to kiss me when I come."

The officers rolled her onto her back, and one of them forced her legs apart. Her breasts spread huge and limp along her ribs, her nipples like used condoms pointing toward her elbows. *Hmp*, Kollberg thought. *Not plastic, after all*. He lowered himself between her knees.

He had to spit on her crotch for lubrication.

His penis slid into her, and he humped her thoughtfully, dispassionately, regarding her anguished sobbing struggle with a detached interest as she thrashed under him, held by the relentless grip of the Social Police. Fucking her was interesting, in an abstract sort of way; because *they* were one, he was also

fucking himself-and he was watching himself fuck her through the eyes of his stunned coworkers. Like masturbating while looking in a mirror.

This, he felt, was the ideal way to get up in the morning.

"And, you know what?" he said. "I woke up hungry."

He lowered his head and sank his teeth into her breast. Her flesh was tough, stringy and old, and she struggled harder and screamed more, but after a bit of work he managed to tear a chunk free. He chewed it slowly, interested in its delicate flavor and rubbery texture, but in the end it meant no more to him than if he'd bitten off a hangnail. He licked her blood from his lips, nodded to himself, smiled, then bent his head for another bite.

3

The live special report of *Adventure Update* gleamed and flickered in the mirror on Tan'elKoth's desk. Jed Clearlake had caught up with Hari Michaelson at a convention in Los Angeles and was now conducting a live interview from the convention floor-giving Michaelson a worldwide audience to make his case about the "HRVP crisis on Overworld"--while in the background hundreds of bizarrely dressed fans capered and cavorted for the video pickups.

Though the spectrum of costumes reflected admiration for hundreds of Actors active, retired, and dead, the majority of those picked out by the cameras advertised Caine's continuing popularity. Dozens were costumed as Caine himself, many as Pallas Ril, some as Berne or Purthin Khlaylock or the Khulan g'Thar; some few-generally poorly groomed and enormously fat-had costumed themselves as Ma'elKoth.

Tan'elKoth gave only a fraction of his attention to the report; mostly, he studied his visitors.

Arturo Kollberg sat at the ex-Emperor's side, staring at the screen with monomaniac fixity; his rubbery piscine mouth hung open, and he made half-audible panting noises like a tomcat in rut. He had arrived in the company of a four-man enforcement squad of the Social Police. The four officers boxed Kollberg and Tan'elKoth, standing at riot-ready around them, hands on shock batons and power pistols. The mirrored face shields of their helmets glinted with the reflections of the *Adventure Update* report, and with pinpoint distortions of Kollberg's and Tan'elKoth's screenlit faces.

So far, Tan'elKoth had been unable to determine if they were Kollberg's jailers, or his bodyguards.

The call from the Board of Governors had come only minutes before Kollberg's arrival. *You are acquainted with Laborer Arturo Kollberg. Laborer Kollberg has our full confidence in this matter. Treat with him as you would with us.*

He knew that dangerous forces interacted here below his level of perception, like predatory sharks jockeying for position around a sinking boat. The Social Police officers did not defer to Kollberg, nor did they seem to direct him; in fact, Kollberg had spoken only to Tan'elKoth since their arrival, and the soapies had remained facelessly silent. He also couldn't guess if any of them realized that their powered weapons were perfectly useless in the Curioseum's ON field; without its nerve-tangling discharge, a shock baton was no more lethal than a whiffle bat.

As Tan'elKoth studied them, he flicked his vision into mindview now and again; this he could do as effortlessly as an ordinary man blinks. When he did so quickly enough, cycling back and forth with ordinary vision, he could sometimes catch glimpses of some strange energy that surrounded all five of

them. Not their Shells-they didn't even seem *to have* Shells in the ordinary sense-but rather a strange colorless distortion. This odd energy or distortion would vanish as soon as he fixed his gaze upon it he saw it only as fleeting twists of reality in his peripheral vision.

Kollberg had changed beyond recognition in the six years since his trial. Had Tan'elKoth not been told to expect him, he would have had no idea who this thin, somnolent, ill-looking man might be. Their arrival had brought with it a smell: blood and more than blood, thick and meaty and sweetly rank: the fermenting shit of a carnivore. In the near darkness of the apartment it was difficult to tell, but Tan'elKoth thought the bloody stench might emanate from Kollberg himself-what remained of the man's hair seemed to be caked with something, and his face bore either some kind of birthmark or a smear of filth.

"The ultimate goal of your masters has never been a mystery to me," Tan'elKoth said by way of a preamble. "It was instantly clear that this release of HRVP was a ploy to increase the Earth presence on Overworld."

"Was it?" Kollberg said tonelessly. His voice was thick and meaty, inhuman, as though the choking stench that cloaked him had itself somehow spoken aloud. "Clear?"

"Of course. That's why you target the elves: They're *recute*. Cute creatures dying horrible deaths are ideal tools to mobilize public opinion. Once a few thousand elves die, the entire Leisure caste will clamor for a massive relief effort; the staunchest rock-ribbed Hands Off advocates on the Leisure Congress will be the first to insist that hundreds of thousands of your people should be shipped to Overworld to combat the disease. Within days, weeks at most, your people are fully in place across the entire continent. It is easy enough to invent excuses to remain, once there-and suddenly, Earth is no longer restricted to a tiny mining colony in the mountains. Suddenly there is cropland, forests for timber, uncontaminated fisheries, billions of tons of coal, crude oil, and space-simple space, to relieve the pressure of fourteen billion lives on Earth. This is how I know that HRVP is merely a dodge; in fact, I anticipate that your epidemic will mysteriously blow itself out, not long after your relief effort reaches its peak. It's clear that your Bog must have some method for controlling the infection-uncontrolled, it would destroy too many profitable ecosystems. The Board of Governors would not damage something as valuable as the Studio System, did they not anticipate decades and centuries of ever-increasing returns."

"You're very perceptive," Kollberg murmured.

"I am Tan'elKoth." *And yet-a niggling worm of doubt slithered through the back of his mind-hedid not say I was correct.*

"What do you propose?"

"An alliance. As I told your masters," Tan'elKoth said, "we have a common goal. Humanity has been locked in a struggle against extinction on my world for a thousand years; we vie with elves, dwarfs, krr'x, and ogrilloi for living space; we struggle against dragons in the mountains and leviathans at sea. In the midst of all this, we continue to war upon each other, giving aid to our enemies. With the power of Earth, we could overwhelm our enemies and ensure our survival-ha, I would not even need your technology: send me ten percent of your Labor caste and I could drown our foes with sheer number"

"So," Kollberg said flatly. "It's clear what we can do for you. Make me understand what you have to offer us."

That worm of doubt began to wriggle through the gates of Tan'el-Koth's mind, as though Hannto were trying to gain his attention; there was something about the way Kollberg spoke, something eerily familiar

about his affectless voice and academic diction. Tan'elKoth stepped on that worm and ground it beneath his mental heel; he had no leisure for second thoughts.

He spread his hands. "In my role as the rightful ruler of Ankhana-*who is also a citizen of Earth*--I can petition the Leisure Congress for the aid of the Overworld Company. I can invite you into the Empire. I can ensure that your *bleeding hearts*, as you call them, support your occupation, instead of oppose it."

"You may perhaps be useful, after all."

"I am more than useful. I am necessary. Without me, your plans cannot even be initiated." Tan'elKoth gestured to the mirror that flickered upon his desktop. "Have you forgotten Caine?"

Michaelson was saying, "*Of course, that recording was never intended for public release. We didn't want a panic. I've directed Studio Security to open an investigation into the source of the leak. There's been a lot of outcry already, but it's important for your viewers to understand that thanks to an immediate, aggressive response by the Studio itself-the crisis is already under control.*"

"And what was the Studio's response, Administrator?"

"*Well, I guess I can take some of the credit for that myself When you're married to a goddess-*" He gave a brief, self-deprecating, professionally charming chuckle. "*-a lot of problems just aren't as impossible as they might look*"

Kollberg grunted wordlessly at the screen.

"Do you understand yet how thoroughly your masters have been outfought?" Tan'elKoth asked. "You cannot even *retaliate*; not only is he once again a public hero, he is surrounded by thousands of his most devoted admirers-anything that happens to him will be witnessed by all Earth. By the time this convention has ended, it will be too late. Pallas Ril will have utterly destroyed your plan."

Kollberg only grunted again. His shoulders flexed, and his hands worked back and forth across the front of his pants. Tan'elKoth noted with swift distaste that the man had an erection-and he was *rubbing it* through his dungarees.

Clearlake continued to lob Michaelson his lines with clean-cut good nature. "*Did you ever consider that this might have been nothing but a hoax?*"

"*Sure. Sitting here, on Earth, we can't possibly know the truth. It could be a hoax-or it could be a catastrophe. Sending Pallas to Overworld is a measured response-if this is a hoax, it hasn't cost anybody much. If this is a real crisis, she can handle it. Speaking strictly for myself, I believe that elf was telling the truth. Look at him. Listen to his voice. You'll believe him, too. You know my philosophy: hope for the best, but plan for the worst.*"

"*There's been some public speculation that this outbreak might not have been an accident,*" Clearlake said, "*that it was deliberately inflicted on Overworld by a terrorist group, or some kind of psychopathic personality within the Overworld Company, or even the Studio itself*"

"*I'm inclined to doubt it,*" Michaelson said seriously, "*but the possibility must be investigated. I'm told the Overworld Company's Internal Security unit is already looking into this, but I believe that a situation as potentially grave as this one requires a response by the Studio itself. I've already spoken with Studio President Businessman Turner and offered my own services as a special envoy*"

for a fact-finding mission to Transdeia. I've, ah, offered to go over on ammod. As you know, my thoughtmitter is, still in place; on ammod, everything I see will be transmitted and recorded instantly on Earth. There'd be no possibility of mistake, or question of concealment-I'd be like a Registered Witness. The whole world would see how committed the Studio-and the Overworld Company-is to the welfare of the natives of Overworld."

Clearlake had given one of his familiar suave, knowing chuckles. *"Ever the man of action, eh, Hari? Showing a little of that old Caine spirit?"*

*"Well, Jed-"*An answering chuckle. *"-sometimes a little of that old Caine spirit is exactly what we need."*

Another chuckle from Clearlake, this time less knowing, more openly appreciative. *"Well, I for one would certainly pay a mark or two to see Caine back on-line. How can the Studio resist?"*

Tan'elKoth allowed himself a grim smile.

Michaelson went on, *"And an investigation should be opened here on Earth, as well. We need to know how this happened. We need to make sure it can never happen again."*

"Do you see?" Tan'elKoth said to Kollberg. "Do you see the avalanche as it descends upon you?"

Kollberg nodded. "He must be stopped."

"You must understand that you cannot simply kill him. Not now. His energies have already been directed against you and your masters; his sudden death-even by accident or 'natural causes'-will result in an explosively destructive release of those energies."

Kollberg's head swiveled as though mounted on gimbals, and his gaze met Tan'elKoth's with the blank incuriosity of a lizard's. "Expand on this."

Tan'elKoth compressed his lips. "Consider only the most obvious, surface level of the effect: Anything that happens to Michaelson will be taken by Caine's admirers as hard evidence of a sinister conspiracy-and there are many admirers of Caine sitting on the Leisure Congress itself. The best you could hope for would be a public investigation into the practices of the Studio and the Overworld Company. You would bring about precisely the events that you hope to avert."

"I do not see how this is related to Michaelson's so-called *energies*."

"I am not responsible for the limitations of your vision," Tan'elKoth said sourly. "Those energies have little to do with Michaelson. They are Caine's. It is not Michaelson who is beloved by a billion fans and more. And even that love is the merest iceberg tip-but how can you comprehend the enormity that lies below the surface, when you are blind to the decimus in plain view?"

"What solution do you propose?"

That worm of doubt wriggled beneath Tan'elKoth's mental heel, and suddenly grew into an icy serpent he realized why Kollberg's manner was so eerily familiar. He spoke exactly like a meat-and-bone version of the Board of Governors.

A premonition of disaster rose up in his throat like vomit.

"The key to successful solution of your Michaelson problem is analysis," he said briskly, to cover his momentary lapse. "Reduce the problem to its components, so that the necessities involved in successful resolution become clear. The Michaelson problem breaks down neatly into two components: dealing with Pallas Ril, and dealing with Caine. Dealing with Caine also breaks down into two components: the public and the personal.

"The public side of the Caine component is his popularity: the attention-and even love-he commands worldwide. This is more susceptible to resolution than it may at first appear; one must simply be conscious of what it is, after all, that Caine's fans love. It *is not* Caine himself, despite what they may claim, and even believe. What they value so highly is the *myth* of Caine: the drama and adventure he has brought into their dull workaday lives. Thus: the necessary resolution of the public component must have a certain high drama-a sort of poetic thunder that will satisfy his fans."

Kollberg said flatly, "They won't mind that he dies, so long as he dies well."

"Precisely. It must have every necessary element of a Caine tale: villains and heroes, a struggle against hopeless odds, and an apocalyptic denouement."

"This can be done?"

Tan'elKoth met his blank gaze without hesitation. "It can. Most of these elements are already in place; success is only a matter of the proper orchestration. It requires, if I may extend the metaphor, the proper conductor."

"This being you."

"This being me." He nodded to himself, he liked the way this was going, now-despite Tan'elKoth's misgivings, Kollberg seemed eminently pragmatic and accessible to reason. "Caine's public energies are not the only energies at his command. The private component deals with his will itself-one might call it his rapier, by contrast with the more public bludgeon."

Tan'elKoth rose restlessly and began to pace: a tiger prowling the limits of a cage marked by the silent, motionless Social Police officers. "The successful resolution of the private component-blunting, as it were, Caine's rapier-involves diverting him, scattering his energies, overwhelming him with multiple problems until he cannot focus on any single one. It is insufficient to defeat him objectively-we must beat him *subjectively*. We must demonstrate to him beyond any shadow of dispute that he is helpless. We must teach him to think of himself as a defeated man."

A hint of a smile began to twitch the corners of Kollberg's thick, deadmeat lips. "You want to break him before you kill him."

Tan'elKoth halted his pacing and met Kollberg's empty eyes. "Yes." "Is this a true necessity? Or is this revenge?"

"Does it matter?" Tan'elKoth shrugged. "In this case, the concatenation of necessity and pleasure is fortuitous-which is to say: yes, we must do this ... and yes, I shall enjoy it."

The liver-colored tip of Kollberg's tongue circled his lips. "I approve," he said.

Tan'elKoth gave him a slim smile. "Now, we turn to the Pallas Ril component. This breaks down neatly

into another pair, as well: the mystic and the physical. The physical difficulties are obvious, I think. Pallas Ril is a creature of nearly unlimited power, able to sense-and theoretically to affect-every living thing in the entire Great Chambaygen watershed; she can act at nearly any distance. She can stride the length of the Empire in a single hour; even granting the ability to defeat her, she cannot even be *located* unless she wishes to be found."

"You make her sound invincible."

"No one is invincible," Tan'elKoth said darkly, "as I have learned to my eternal shame. It is a matter of selecting the proper weapon."

Kollberg's eyes were flat and dull as chips of slate. "Go on."

"The mystic component is still more parlous. To simply slay her is not enough; she has imposed her will upon Chambaraya to the extent that the death of her body would do far more harm than good, insofar as the success of your plans is concerned."

His great hands knotted behind his back, but his tone remained dry, precise, clinical: the clipped delivery of the professional lecturer. "Consciousness is a patterning of energy; infused with the power of Chambaraya, her consciousness cannot be overcome by a merely physical death. Will is expressed through a body, and is to some extent limited by the body that expresses it. To merely destroy Pallas Ril's body would release her consciousness-and that consciousness could pattern the river itself, the entire Great Chambaygen watershed, as its body. We would have made of our enemy a god in truth, instead of a part-time Actress playing with unearned power."

He turned and regarded Kollberg with a trace of a smile. "On the other hand, she is the only part of Chambaraya that cares a whit whether the races of Overworld live or die. To Chambaraya, life is life: the maggots that would feed upon their corpses are every bit as precious as elves and dwarfs and even human beings slain by your disease. So the solution is obvious: we must *separate her from the river*. In this fashion-only in this fashion-can the Pallas Ril component be successfully resolved."

Kollberg's reptilian gaze never wavered. "How will this be accomplished?"

"Not by me personally, you may be assured," Tan'elKoth said. "She would become aware of me with my first breath of Home air, and would be on her guard. No more must Caine be aware that my hand is against him to give him a clear vision of his enemy is to hand him victory."

Tan'elKoth allowed his smile to sharpen to a razor edge. "The components have been analyzed; the true measure of success shall be the elegance of their solution. We have regarded them individually. We must resolve them simultaneously"

"You say you can do this," Kollberg murmured tonelessly.

"I can."

"Then do it."

Tan'elKoth leaned comfortably back in his chair, taking a deep, slow, easeful breath. He glanced at the four distorted reflections of his face in the mirror masks of the Social Police, then let his gaze slide back to Kollberg.

"First-as Caine would say-let's talk deal."

4

Vinson Garrette, Viceroy of Transdeia, leaned forward onto the table, holding his cut-crystal wineglass before his eyes, examining the way the rich cabernet shaded to rusty earth tones at the intersection of wine and glass. "*What if we-the Artan rulers-as a gesture of good faith,*" he said slowly, meditatively, "*to cement our . . . relationship ... with the Monasteries, were to give you something that you want? Hypothetically. Something of small value to us, but substantial value to the Monasteries. To you personally, Your Excellency.*"

Raithe folded his skeletal hands and stared past his own wineglass, untouched on the table. "What-hypothetically-would we be talking about, Your Highness?"

"What would it be worth to you, for example-" Garrette leaned back into his ornately carved chair at the head of the table. "-to get your hands on Caine?"

Raithe sat motionless as a lizard for a very long time; he did not even blink.

Then he reached out and grasped his wineglass, and raised it slowly to his lips.

5

As His Radiance Toa-Sytell, Patriarch of the Ankhanan Empire, stared at the image of Ambassador Raithe in his Mirror, he wondered if the young Ambassador had any idea how much the Empire was already learning of the inner secrets of the Monasteries.

In only a month, the Artan Mirror had revolutionized communication in the Empire. Now there were at least one or two Artan Mirrors in every major city and not a few of the minor ones; each major military outpost had its own. Only three days ago, a young thaumaturge in the service of the Eyes of God had reported that he had discovered a way to eavesdrop on Mirrored conversations without the knowledge of the speakers at either end.

Toa-Sytell used his free hand to mop faint beads of sweat from his upper lip; he'd been feeling a bit under the weather *for* a day or two, and now it seemed he might be developing a fever. His discomfort made it difficult to fix his attention on the young Ambassador's words.

"-as you know," the Ambassador was saying, "*the Council of Brothers supports fully the Empire and the elKothan Church. The gesture we are prepared to make, we offer without any expectation of return.*"

Toa-Sytell flicked a glance at the Eye Mirror-speaker, whose hand he held. The Eye nodded, indicating that the Ambassador was telling the truth as he knew it. This was another of the innovations from the Eyes of God researchers: the Eye would have heard the untruth of any lie. "All very heartwarming," the Patriarch responded with his characteristic dry irony, "but I was told this is some sort of emergency?"

"What is urgent, Your Holiness, is our need for reassurance that our gift will be put to its proper use."

"And that use would be?"

"It is a gift for the Festival of the Assumption, Your Holiness, A very, very special gift, to honor the

Empire, and the Church."

Again, the Mirror-speaker nodded.

"Yes, yes," Toa-Sytell said testily. "Go on; what is it?"

"What, if you had the power," Raithe said with a secretive smile, as though he already knew the answer, "would you do with Caine?" Toa-Sytell jumped, and his eyes took fire. "Caine ..."

"Caine was never officially sentenced for his murder of the late Ambassador Creek. He is, insofar as the Monasteries are concerned, a free man, innocent of any crime," Raithe said. "However, I believe his status with the Empire is rather different."

Toa-Sytell barely hear the words; he found himself on his feet, trembling, crushing the Mirror-speaker's hand until the poor man blanched. "You can give me *Caine*?"

Within his head roared the flames of a Festival auto-da-fé; in his nostrils the scent of Caine's burning flesh; in his ears the cheers of Beloved Children around the world; around his heart coiled the old, cold serpent that whispered sweet revenge.

Raithe smiled. *"If I can?"*

"I swear-We swear, I and God Himself-" Toa-Sytell said, forcing the words from his breathless chest, "you will not be disappointed."

6

The face of the woman on the screen was attractive, even without makeup, even puffy with interrupted sleep, even though past seventy without ever indulging the vanity of cosmetic surgery. A long straight nose, planar cheeks, strong jaw, eyes the crystal blue of a Nordic winter sky; her hair was cut to a uniform half inch, a skullcap the color of steel. Only her mouth marred her classic beauty: it was a thin, lipless gash like a hatchet wound in her face.

Tan'elKoth allowed himself to study her. His video was refused; on her end, she glared with sleepy antagonism into a blank screen. Past her shoulder he could see a wrought-iron bedstead, and he could glimpse the curve of a young man's back half buried in tangled bedcovers at her side.

Tan'elKoth glanced up at the Social Police; they stood in an arc behind him. Kollberg pressed close to his side, his breath bloody and rank.

"I don't know who you are or how you got this code," Businessman Avery Shanks said, her voice thick and clumsy, the way it always was when she was unexpectedly awakened-the sedatives she'd been using intermittently for forty years always left her a bit dazed. *"You should know I have no tolerance for pranks. SynTech security is tracing this call."*

There it was: that tone of generalized threat he remembered so well. He let the sound of her voice call forth Lamorak.

Overpowering love swelled within his captured memory, leaving him breathless; one enormous hand came up to touch the unfamiliar curve of his face, as he remembered being smaller, blond and graceful, a master swordsman-and smaller yet, coming in tears with scraped elbows and knees to this woman's

hard, unforgiving lap. She had never been comfortable-but she had always been protective, and vengeful as a dragon.

Her hand came up, reaching for the cutoff, and Tan'elKoth whispered, "*Mother... ?*"

Her hand froze, suspended weightless in midreach, and her face went utterly blank.

"Mother?" Tan'elKoth said softly, gently, lovingly, in Lamorak's voice. "Mother, it's me. Don't you know me?"

The hard, cold lines of her face crumbled like a glacier breaking up into the sea. "*Karl ... ?*" she whispered, sounding suddenly sixty years younger. "*Karl, is that you ... ? Am I dreaming?*"

"Mother, I need you. Please. Help me."

Astonishment glistened in the corners of her ice-blue eyes. "*Help you? Karl ... oh Karl, oh my god, Karl ...*"

A single keystroke uploaded the file from Tan'elKoth's personal datacore: a digigraph of a snapshot he'd downloaded from the Studio security-video archives, when he'd been considering using Faith as a model for a sculpture he'd been planning. He'd never done the sculpture but he'd also never erased the digigraph. The frame-in-frame showed him a small version of what Avery would be seeing on her screen right now: a beautiful golden-haired child with a sunny smile and pale blue eyes.

"Do you know who this is, Mother? It's Faith Michaelson." "*Michaelson?*" Avery's face iced over, and her voice congealed. "*The Michaelson? That's his daughter?*"

"No, Mother," Tan'elKoth whispered. "That's Pallas Ril's daughter." Her eyes widened.

Tan'elKoth said, "That's *my* daughter."

"Your ... Karl, what-?"

"Mother, please," he whispered, letting his voice fade. "Please help me..."

"Karl-"

He stroked the cutoff.

He looked up. Lit by the cool glow of the blank screen, Kollberg leered at him, wiping something from his chin with the back of his hand. Tan'elKoth said, "It has begun."

And there came a day when the god of dust and ashes raised up its hammer against the dark angel.

The hammer was lifted piecemeal, and each piece was a person, and to each person the god of dust and ashes whispered: *This do for me, and receive in payment your fondest desire.*

Each person, each piece said *yes*, and in so saying became the hammer of the blind god.

EIGHT

A perfectly anonymous digitized voice cut through the dully roaring babble on the convention floor.

"Administrator Michaelson."

Hari looked up from the autograph book he was signing and saw his own face, fisheye distorted and reflected four times over in the mirror masks of a Social Police enforcement squad.

He couldn't breathe.

That instant stripped away Caine's success and fame; stripped away the thousands of fans who crowded around him in this immense overheated room; stripped the power of the Administrator caste and the status of the Studio Chairmanship; stripped every part of him that lay over his most fundamental baseline. The baseline of his soul was Labor.

Every Laborer knows that trouble with Soapy is the last trouble you ever have.

"Administrator Hari Khapur Michaelson. You are under arrest."

The crowd of fans drew back, muttering to each other and exchanging awed glances. He couldn't even tell which one of the soapies had spoken.

The exhibition hall flattened around him, ironing the stalls and the booths and every fan into painted images of themselves, as two-dimensional as cheap cover art; only the soapies still had solidity. The rumble of voices and music and the blare of PA announcements all settled into an insectile buzz that sounded like he had a housefly trapped inside his skull.

He coughed once, harshly. He wanted to ask *On what charge?* but the words stuck in his throat like a chunk of half-chewed meat. He stood nervelessly, unresisting, as one of the soapies turned him and bound his wrists behind his back with plastic stripcuffs. Two held his arms; another kept a shock baton at the ready.

The last of them extended a palmpad. "*Where is this child?*"

The screen of the palmpad showed a bright, cheerful image that he recognized: it was a souvenir photo, a couple of years old, from a visit to the Studio Curioseum. "Faith?" he said stupidly. "She's right over-"

He shut his mouth and clenched his teeth till his ears rang.

He had met with his fans right next to the KidZone, the huge complex of intertwined climbing tubes and game pods that dominated an entire corner of the exhibition hall. The KidZone swarmed with children; supervised by a double handful of Artisan au pairs, it was the place where offspring were deposited so their parents could visit the convention unencumbered. Faith was in a Leisure Call pod with a dozen or so other kids-Faith was the Caller, and half of them were already out, having either failed to follow an order or taken an order that wasn't preceded by "Leisure Calls." Two more were counted out even as Hari glanced up there. No surprise; Faith was lethal at Leisure Call.

What stopped Hari's mouth was a tall, slim woman with an iron-grey crewcut and a jaw like a fire axe. She stood at the chest-high fence surrounding the KidZone, her teeth bared in what might, on a human, have looked like a smile. She scanned the children inside with eyes cold as security cameras. She wore full Business dress, and four bodyguards with SynTech logos on their shirts kept the crowd from pressing too close to her.

Avery Shanks.

The soapy shoved the palmpad at him again. "*Where is this child?*" Hari said through his teeth, "Ask my fucking lawyer."

But even as he spoke, Shanks lifted her hand and pointed right at Faith up high in the game pod, and three of the SynTech guards moved through the gate of the KidZone.

"Shanks," Hari snarled. The ice that had lodged in his chest became instant flame. "*Shanks! Leave her alone! You leave her the fuck alone!*"

He lunged for her, but the soapies yanked his arms back painfully. The one with the shock baton moved its business end closer to his ribs, and he made himself stop; if he didn't, Faith would see the soapies beat him-maybe beat him to death. He couldn't do that to her.

At his shout, Shanks turned and gave him a good view of her shark-toothed grin. She came over, her bodyguard a muscle-bound shadow at her shoulder. "Hello, Hari," she said in a soft mockery of cheer. "Enjoying the convention?"

"If you touch my daughter, Shanks, I swear to you--"

The false cheer vanished instantly, revealing furious black triumph in-side her gem-blue eyes. "*She's not your daughter,*" Shanks spat. "*That's exactly the point.*"

Hari went numb. He couldn't feel his legs-either his bypass had shut down, or he was about to faint; he couldn't tell which.

"You see, *I can* touch her," Shanks said. "It's you that can't. A simple DNA test will show she's a Shanks. *She's Business.* You understand what that means, Michaelson? Do you?"

Hari couldn't answer; he couldn't draw breath enough to speak.

"*She's too young to give consent. That means every single time you have ever touched her, you have committed Forcible Contact Upcaste.*" She bared her teeth, savage as a panther. "If I'd known about this six years ago, I could have had you broken and sent to a social camp for so much as changing her *diaper.*"

He found his legs worked, after all. He lunged at her. But the soapies held him tight and the shock baton triggered against his ribs. They were almost gentle with him; instead of throwing him twitching to the floor, the charge from the baton only shot fire up his spine and made him sag. "Good, good," Shanks said. "Try again. I will enjoy watching these officers kill you."

"You can't hope this'll stand up," Hari said desperately. "I'm married to her mother-her mother can give consent-"

She looked at the soapies. "You heard."

"We heard."

"You've just established foreknowledge, Michaelson. You knew she's a Shanks. You've always known

it. I'll see you under the yoke for this." "My wife-

"Yes, where is your wife? Is she available to testify?"

"She's on Overworld," Hari ground out between his teeth. "You*know* she's on Overworld. That's why you're pulling this shit now."

"Mind your tone, Michaelson. Unless you liked that tap from the shock baton?"

"Where did you get the image?" There was only one copy of that shot: it was framed on his office desk at the Abbey. "Who gave you that picture?"

Shanks' eyes went distant and soft, and for a moment she did not speak. "It was sent to my message dump . . . ah,*anonymously*," *she* said finally. "Yes, anonymously."

Hari was coldly calculating whether he could yank free and get his teeth into her throat before the soapies could pull him down when he heard Faith say, "Daddy? What's going on? Where's Gramma?"

One of the SynTech bodyguards led her by the hand. She looked up at the Social Police with wide eyes that slowly filled with puzzlement and hurt. "He said Gramma was here," Faith said, a little petulantly. *Gramma*, to Faith, was Mara Leighton, Shanna's mother. She looked up at the body-guard who held her hand. "You shouldn't lie to a kid, Art'san. That's really, really bad."

Avery Shanks turned, six full feet of regal calm. "He didn't lie, child. I am your grandmother."

And seeing them together-the shape of their faces, even the way they both stood, looking at each other-even to Hari, the family resemblance was unmistakable. It went through him like another shot from the baton.

Faith frowned, and bit her lip. "Mommy's really upset." She looked up into Hari's eyes and said gravely, "She's coming home. She's really, really, really upset."

For one slack second, Hari was grateful-Oh,*thank god, she'll straighten this shit out in a second*-but then he realized what was at stake. He realized what would be lost if Pallas Ril left Overworld with her job unfinished. She would never get the chance to go back.

"No," he said. "No, Faith, no-she can't come home. Tell her I can handle*it*. *I can handle it*. Tell her to stay and finish her work. Stay there until I send for her."