

This is true: Gene Wolfe, who grew up in Houston, Texas, attended Edgar Allan Poe Elementary School. later, he produced some of the most important science fiction of the last forty years, including The Book of the Sun, The Urth of the New Sun, and The Book of the Long Sun. He has won two Nebulas and three World Fantasy Awards, as well as the British Science Fiction Award and the British Fantasy Award. The Urth of the New Sun earned the Premio Italia.

New short fiction from Gene Wolfe is always an event; stories besides this new wonder can be found in collections such as The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories (another wonderful title as wonderful as that of the abovementioned Kit Reed collection) and the newest, Strange Travelers.

Viewpoint

Gene Wolfe

"I have one question and one only," Jay declared. "How do I know that I will be paid? Answer it to my satisfaction and give your orders."

The youngish man behind the desk opened a drawer and pulled out a packet of crisp bills. This was followed by another and another, and they by seven more. The youngish man had brown-blond hair and clear blue eyes that said he could be trusted absolutely with anything. Looking at them, Jay decided that each had cost more than he had ever had in his entire lifetime to date.

"Here's the money," the youngish man told Jay softly. "These are hundreds, all of them. Each bill band holds one hundred, so each bundle is ten thousand. Ten bundles make a hundred thousand. It's really not all that much."

"Less than you make in a year." \

"Less than I make in three months. I know it's a lot to you." The youngish man hesitated, though groping for a new topic. "You've got a dramatic face, you know. Those scars. That's your edge. Did you really fight a bobcat?"

Jay shrugged. "The bullet broke its back, and I thought it was dead. I got too close."

"I see." The youngish man pushed the packets of bills toward him. "Well, you don't have to worry about getting paid. That's the full sum, and you're getting it up front and in cash." Jay paused. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you this."

Jay was looking at the money. "If it's confidential, say so and I'll keep it that way."

"Will you?"

Jay nodded. "For a hundred thousand? Yes. For quite a bit less than that."

The youngish man sighed. "You probably know anyway, so why not? You can't just go to a bank and stick it in a bank. You understand that?"

"They'll say it's drug money."

For a moment the youngish man looked as if he were about to sigh again, although he didn't. "They'll say it's drug money, of course. They always do. But they really don't care. They have a lot of money, and if it gets into a bank Big Daddy will have it in a nanosecond. It'll take you years to get it back, and cost a lot more than a hundred thousand."

Though skeptical, Jay nodded. "Sure."

"Okay, I didn't want to give you this and have them grab it before five. They'll take a big chunk of anything you spend it on anyway, but we've all got to live with that."

Jay did not, but he said nothing.

"Count it. Count it twice and look carefully. I don't want you thinking we cheated you for

lousy hundred thou."

Jay did, finding it impossible to think of what so much money could buy. He had needed money so badly that he could no longer calculate its value in terms of a new rifle or a canoe. Now that he had the money itself he hungered for now, and this was more than he had dared dream of.

"You want a bag? I can give you one, but that jacket's got plenty of pockets. It's for camp, right?"

"Hunting."

The youngish man smiled the smile of one who knows a secret. "Why don't you put it in there? Should be safer than a bag."

Jay had begun to fill them already—thirty thousand in the upper right inside pocket, twenty more in the upper left, behind his wallet. Twenty in the left pocket outside.

"You're BC, right?"

"Sure." Jay tapped the empty screen above his eyes.

"Okay." The youngish man opened another drawer. "As a bonus you get a double upgrade. Couple of dots. Sit still." Jay did.

When the youngish man was back behind his desk, he said, "I bet you'd like to look at yourself. I ought to have a mirror, but I didn't think of it. You want to go to the men's? There's a lot of mirrors in there. Just come back whenever you've seen enough. I've got calls to make."

"Thanks," Jay said.

In the windowless office beyond the youngish man's, his secretary was chatting with a bionic security bot. Jay asked where the rest rooms were, and the bot offered to show him, gliding noiselessly down the faux-marble corridor.

"Tell me something," Jay said when the bot had come to a stop before the door. "Suppose that when I got through in there I went down to the lobby. Would there be anything to stop me from going out to the street?"

"No, sir."

"You're going to be standing out here waiting for me when I come out, right? I'd never make it to the elevators." "Will you need a guide at that point, sir?"

The blank metal face had told Jay nothing, and the pleasant baritone had suggested polite inquiry, and nothing else. Jay said, "I can find my way back all right."

"In that case, I have other duties, sir." "Like talking to that girl?"

"Say *woman*, sir. To that young woman. They prefer it, and Valerie is an excellent source of intelligence. One cultivates one's sources, sir, in police work."

Jay nodded, conceding the point. "Can you answer a couple more questions for me? If it's not too much trouble?"

"If I can, sir. Certainly."

"How many dots have I got?"

"Are you referring to IA stars, sir?" Jay nodded.

"Two, sir. Are you testing my vision, sir?"

"Sure. One more, and I'll let you alone. What's the name of the man I've been talking to?"

There's no nameplate on his desk, and I never did catch it."

"Mr. Smith, sir."

"You're kidding me."

"No, sir."

"John Smith? I'll bet that's it."

"No, sir. Mr. James R. Smith, sir."

"Well, I'll be damned."

Scratching his chin, Jay went into the men's room. There were at least a dozen mirrors there as the youngish man had said. The little augmentation screen set into his forehead, blank and black since he had received it between the fourth and the fifth grades, showed two glimmering stars now: five- or six-pointed, and scarlet or blue depending on the angle from which he viewed them.

For ten minutes or more he marveled at them. Then he relieved himself, washed his hands, and counted the money again. One hundred thousand in crisp, almost-new hundreds. Logically it could be counterfeit. Logically, he should have shown one to the security bot and asked for its opinion.

Had the bot noticed his bulging pockets? Security bots would undoubtedly be programmed to take note of such things, and might well be more observant than a human officer.

He took out a fresh bill and examined it, riffling it between his fingers and holding it up to the light, reading its serial number under his breath. Good.

If the bot had called it bad, it would have been because the bot had been instructed to do so and that was all.

Furthermore, someone had been afraid he would assault the youngish man the bot called James R. Smith, presumably because metal detectors had picked up his hunting knife; but Smith had not asked him to remove it, or so much as mentioned it. Why?

Jay spent another fifteen or twenty seconds studying the stars in his IA screen and three or four minutes concentrating before he left the rest room. There was no bot in the hall. A middle-aged man who looked important passed him without a glance and went in.

Jay walked to the elevators, waved a hand for the motion detector, and rode a somewhat crowded car to the lobby. So far as he could see, no one was paying the least attention to him. There was another security bot in the lobby (as there had been when he had come in), but it appeared to pay no particular attention to him either.

Revolving doors admitted him to Sixth Avenue. He elbowed his way for half a block along a sidewalk much too crowded, and returned to the Globnet Building.

The security bot was chatting with the young woman in her window-less room again. When she saw Jay she nodded and smiled, and the doors to Smith's office swung open.

Smith, who had said that he would be making calls, was standing at one of his floor-to-ceiling windows staring out at the gloomy December sky.

"I'm back," Jay said. "Sorry I took so long. I was trying to access the new chips you gave me."

"You can't." Smith turned around.

"That's what I found out."

Smith's chair rolled backwards, and he seated himself at his desk. "Aren't you going to ask me what they're for?"

Jay shook his head.

"Okay, that will save me a lot of talking. You've still got the hundred thousand?" Jay nodded.

"All right. In about forty-seven minutes we're going to announce on all our channels that you've got it. We'll give your name, and show you leaving this building, but that's all. It will be repeated on every newscast tonight, name, more pictures, a hundred thousand in cash. Every bar and grifter in the city will be after you, and if you hide it, there's a good chance they'll stick your feet in a fire." Smith waited, but Jay said nothing.

"You've never asked me what we're paying you to do, but I'll tell you now. We're paying you to stay alive and get some good out of your money. That's all. If you want to stay here and tough it out, that's fine. If you want to run, that's fine, too. As far as we're concerned, you're to do whatever you feel you have to do."

Smith paused, studying Jay's scarred face, then the empty, immaculate surface of his own desk. "You can't take those chips out. Did you know that?"

Jay shook his head.

"It's easy to put them in to upgrade, but damned near impossible to take them out without destroying the whole unit and killing its owner. They do that to make it hard to rob people on their upgrades. I can't stop you from trying, but it won't work and you might hurt yourself." Jay got it." Jay counted the stars on Smith's screen. Four. "The announcement will go out in forty-five minutes, and you have to leave the building before then so we can show you doing it." The doors behind Jay swung open, and the security bot rolled in. "Kaydee Nineteen will escort you." Smith sounded embarrassed. "It's just so we can get the pictures." Jay rose.

"Is there anything you want to ask me before you go? We'll have to keep it brief, but I'll try to answer you all I can."

"No." Jay's shoulders twitched. "Keep the money and stay alive. I've got it."

As they went out, Smith called, "Kaydee Nineteen won't rob you. You don't have to worry about that."

Kaydee Nineteen chuckled when Smith's doors had closed behind them. "I bet you never even thought of that, sir."

"You're right," Jay told him.

"Are you going to ask where the holo cameras are, sir?"

"In the lobby and out in the street. They have to be."

"That's right, sir. Don't go looking around for them, though. It looks bad, and they'll have to edit it out."

"I'd like to see the announcement they're going to run," Jay said as they halted before an elevator. "Can you tell me where I might be able to do that?"

"Certainly, sir. A block north and turn right. They call it the Studio." The elevator doors opened, moving less smoothly than Smith's; Kay -dee Nineteen paused, perhaps to make certain

the car was empty, then said. "Only you be careful, sir. Just one drink. That's plenty." Jay stepped into the elevator.

"They've got a good holo setup, I'm told, sir. Our people go there all the time to watch the shows they've worked on."

When the elevator doors had closed, Jay said, "I don't suppose you could tell me where could buy a gun?"

Kaydee Nineteen shook his head. "I ought to arrest you, sir, just for asking. Don't you know the police will take care of you? As long as we've police, everybody's safe." The elevator started down.

"I just hoped you might know," Jay said apologetically. "Maybe I do, sir. It doesn't mean to tell."

Slipping his hand into his side pocket, Jay broke the paper band on a sheaf of hundreds, separated two without taking the sheaf from his pocket, and held them up. "For the information. It can't be a crime to tell me."

"Wait a minute, sir." Kaydee Nineteen inserted the fourth finger of his left hand into the STOP button, turned it, and pushed. The elevator's smooth descent ended with shocking abruptness. "Here, take it." Jay held out the bills.

Kaydee Nineteen motioned him to silence. A strip of paper was emerging from his mouth; he caught it before it fell. "Best dealer in the city, sir. I'm not saying she won't rip you off. She will. Only she won't rip you off as badly as the rest, and she sells quality. If she sells you home-workshop, she tells you home-workshop."

He handed the slip to Jay, accepted the hundreds, and dropped them into his utility pouch. "You call her up first, sir. There's an address on that paper, too, but don't go there until you call. You say Kincaid said to. If she asks his apartment number or anything like that, you have to say number nineteen. Do you understand me, sir?" Jay nodded.

"It's all written out for you, and some good advice in case you forget. Only you chew the paper up and swallow it once you got your piece, sir. Are you going to do that?"

"Yes," Jay said. "You have my word."

"It better be good, sir, because if you get arrested, you're going to need friends. If they find that paper on you, you won't have any."

Jay walked through the lobby alone, careful not to look for the holo camera. Those outside would be in trucks or vanettes, presumably, but might conceivably be in the upper window buildings on the other side of Sixth. He turned north, as directed. Glancing to his right at the end of the next block, he saw the Studio's sign, over which virtual stagehands moved virtual lights and props eternally; but he continued to walk north for two more blocks, then turned toward Fifth and followed the side street until he found a store in which he bought a slouch hat and an inexpensive black raincoat large enough to wear over his hunting coat.

Returning to the Studio, he approached it from both west and east, never coming closer than half a block, without spotting anyone watching the entrance. It was possible-just possible, he decided reluctantly- that Kaydee Nineteen had been as helpful as he seemed. Not likely, but possible.

In a changing booth in another clothing store, he read the slip of paper:

Try Jane MacKann, Bldg. 18 Unit 8 in Greentree Gardens.
1028 7773-0320. Call her first and say Kincaid. Say mine if
she asks about any number. She will not talk to anybody
nobody sent, so you must say mine. She likes money, so say
you want good quality and will pay for it. When you get
there, offer half what she asks for and go from there. You
should get ten, twenty percent off her price. Do not pay her
asking price. Do not take a cab. Walk or ride the bus. Do
not fail to phone first. Be careful.

It took him the better part of an hour to find a pay phone in the store that looked secure. He fed bills-the change from the purchase of his raincoat-into it and keyed the number on Kaye Nineteen's paper slip.

Three rings, and the image of a heavysset frowning woman in a black plastic shirt and a skirt appeared above the phone; she had frizzy red hair and freckles, and looked as though she should be smiling. "Hello. I'm not here right now, but if you'll leave a message at the tone I'll call you back as soon as I can."

The tone sounded.

"My name's Skeeter." Jay spoke rapidly to hide his nervousness. "I'm a friend of Kincaid's. He said to call you when I got into the city, but I'm calling from a booth, so you can't call me. I'll call again when I get settled."

None of the clerks looked intelligent. He circled the store slowly, pretending to look at cheap electric razors and souvenir shirts until he found a door at the back labeled DO NOT ENTER. He knocked and stepped inside.

The manager flicked off his PC, though not before Jay had seen naked women embracing reflected in the dark window behind him. "Yes, sir. What's the problem?"

"You don't have one," Jay told him, "but I do, and I'll pay a hundred"-he held up a bill-"to you to help me with it. I want to rent this office for one half hour so that I can use your pay phone. I won't touch your papers, and I won't steal anything. You go out in your store and take care of business. Or go out and get a drink or a sandwich, whatever you want. After half an hour you come back and I leave."

"If it's long distance . . ." Jay shook his head.

"Local calls, all of them."

"You promise that?" The manager looked dubious.

"Absolutely."

"All right. Give me the money." Jay handed the bill over.

"Wait a minute." The manager switched on his computer, studied the screen, moved his mouse and clicked, studied the result, and clicked again. Jay was looking at the phone. As he had expected, its number was written on its base.

"All right," the manager repeated. "I've blocked this phone so it won't make long distance calls. To unblock it, you'd have to have my password."

"I didn't know you could do that," Jay said.

"Sure. You want out of the deal?" Jay shook his head.

"Okay, you've got the place for half an hour. Longer if you need it, only not past three-thirty. Okay?"

"Okay."

The manager paused at the door. "There's a booth out here. You know about that?"

Jay nodded. "It won't accept incoming calls."

"You let them take calls and the dealers hang around and won't let anybody use it. You a dealer?"

Jay shook his head.

"I didn't think so." The manager shut the door.

One oh two eight. Seven seven seven three. Oh three two oh. Three rings as before, and the image of the heavysset redhead appeared. "Hello.

I'm not here right now, but if you'll leave a message at the tone I'll call you back as soon as I can."

The tone sounded.

"This is Skeeter again," Jay said. "I've got money, and Kincaid said you and I could do some business." He recited the number from the base of the manager's phone. "If you can give me what I want, this is going to be a nice profitable deal for you." Hoping that she would not hang up, he added, "Ask Kincaid," and hung up.

He had slept in a bod mod at the Greyhound station, had left his scant luggage in a storage locker; that luggage was worth nothing, and seemed unlikely to furnish clues to his whereabouts when a criminal gang came looking for him and his hundred thousand.

The forty-five minutes Smith had mentioned had come and gone. His image had appeared in the Studio and millions of houses and apartments.

They might be looking for him already-at the bus station, at the Studio, at any other place they could think of. At the MacKann woman's.

The phone rang and he picked it up. "Skeeter."

"This's Jane, Skeeter." The loose shirt was the same; but the dark skirt had given way to jeans, and her hair was pulled back by a clip. "Kincaid said to call me?"

"That's right," Jay told her. "He said we might be able to do business, and he gave me your number."

"He must be getting to be a big boy now, that Kincaid."

"He's bigger than I am," Jay said truthfully.

"How old is Kincaid these days anyway?"

"Nineteen."

"He gave you my address? Or was it just this number?"

"He gave me an address," Jay said carefully. "I can't say whether it's right or not. Have you moved recently?"

"What is it?"

Jay hesitated. "All right to read it over the phone?"

"I don't see why not."

The door opened, and the manager looked in. Jay waved him away.

"What address did he give you?"

Kaydee Nineteen's paper lay on the desk. Jay held it up so the small woman seated above the telephone could read it.

"The print's too small," she told him. "You'll have to say it."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it?"

Jay sighed. "I don't know. When I was in college, I used to play chess. Now I feel like I'm playing chess again and I've forgotten how."

He reversed the slip of paper. "Building Eighteen, Unit Eight in the Greentree Gardens?"

"That's it. When will you be here?"

The black raincoat had slits above its pockets that let Jay reach the pockets of the camouflage hunting coat under it. Extracting a bill, he held it up. "Can you read this?"

"Sure."

"I'll give it to you if you'll pick me up. You've seen me and how I'm dressed. I'll be in the little park at the corner of Sixth and Fortieth."

"No," she said.

"I'll be there, and I'll buy. I'll pay you this just for the ride." He hung up, rose, and left the store, waving to the manager.

There was a hotel down the street; he went in and stood at the front desk, a vast affair of bronze and marble. After five minutes a black woman in a transparent plastic blouse asked "You checkin' in?"

"I'd like to." Jay laid two hundreds on the counter.

"We can't take those." She eyed them as though they were snakes. "Got a credit card?" Jay shook his head.

"You got no bags either." Jay did not deny it.

"You can't check in here."

He indicated the hundreds. "I'll pay in advance."

The black woman lowered her voice. "They don't let us take anybody like you, even if you got two dots."

In a department store a block away, Jay cornered a clerk. "I want a lightweight bag, about this long."

The clerk yawned. "Three feet, sir?"

"More than that." Jay separated his hands a bit.

The clerk (who probably called himself an associate) shook his head and turned away.

"Three and a half, anyway. Forty-two inches."

"Soft-sided?" The clerk clearly hoped Jay would say no.

"Sure," Jay said, and smiled.

"Wait right here." Briefly, the clerk's fingers drummed the top of a four-suit. "I'll be gone a while, you know?"

Jay removed his slouch hat and wiped his forehead with his fingers. The hat had been a comfort in the chill air of the street, but the store was warm.

None of the milling shoppers nearby were giving him any attention, as far as he could judge, but, of course, they would not. If he was being watched, it would be by someone some distance away, or by an electronic device of some kind. Looking around for the device, he found three cameras, none obtrusive but none even cursorily concealed. City cops, store security, and somebody else—for a minute or two Jay tried to think who the third watchers might be, no speculation seemed plausible.

Men's Wear was next to Luggage. He wandered over.

"What do you want?" The clerk was young and scrawny and looked angry.

With your build, you'd better be careful, Jay thought; but he kept the reflection to himself. Aloud he said, "I had to buy this raincoat in a hurry. I thought I might get a better one here."

"Black?"

Jay shook his head. "Another color. What've you got?"

"Blue and green, okay?"

"Green," Jay decided, "if it's not too light."

The clerk stamped over to a rack and held up a coat. "Lincoln green. Okay?"

"Okay," Jay said.

"Only if you turn it inside out, it's navy. See?"

Jay took the coat from him and examined it. "There are slits over the pockets. I like that."

"Same pockets for both colors," the clerk sounded as if he hoped that would kill the sale.

"I'll take it."

The clerk glanced at a tag. "Large-tall. Okay?"

"Okay," Jay said again.

"You want a bag?"

Jay nodded. A stout plastic bag might prove useful.

The clerk was getting one when the clerk from Luggage returned. He frowned until Jay hurried over.

"This's what we call a wheeled duffel," the luggage clerk explained. "You got a handle there. You can carry it, or you got this handle here that pops out, and wheels on the other end. Forty-four inches, the biggest we've got. You got a store card?"

"Cash," Jay told him.

"You want a card? Ten percent off if you take it."

Jay shook his head.

"Up to you. Hear about that guy with all the cash?"

Jay shook his head again. "What guy?"

"On holo. They gave him a wad so somebody'll rip him off. Only description."

"They see what he sees?"

"Sure," the clerk said. "It's his augment, you know? Anytime he sees you they see you."

"Can they spy on people like that?"

"They don't give a rat's ass," the clerk said.

The angry Men's Wear clerk had vanished. Jay's new reversible rain coat lay on a counter in a plastic bag. He unzipped his new wheeled duffel and put the raincoat inside.

Outside it was growing dark; beggars wielding plastic broomhandles and pieces of cardboard were working the shopping crowd, shouting threats at anyone who appeared vulnerable.

The little park was an oasis of peace by comparison. Jay sat down on a bench, the wheeled duffel between his knees, and waited. Traffic crawled past, largely invisible behind the hurrying, steam-breathing pedestrians. Some of the drivers looked as angry as the Men's Wear clerk; but most were empty-faced, resigned to driving their cubical vanettes and hulking CU vans at four miles per hour or less.

"Ain't you cold?" An old man with a runny nose had taken the other end of Jay's bench. Jay shook his head. "I am. I'm damned cold." Jay said nothing.

"They got shelters down there," the old man pointed, "ta keep us off the streets. Only you get ripped off soon's you go to sleep. Right. An' they don't give you nothin' ta eat, either. So if you was ta give me somethin', I could get me somethin' an' go down there an' sleep without bein' hungry. Right."

"You could get a bottle of wine, too," Jay said.

"They won't sell it 'less you got the card." The old man was silent for a moment, sucking on almost toothless gums. "Only you're c'rect, I'd like to."

"Sure," Jay said.

"I used ta get Social Security, only it don't come no more. There's some kind a problem with it."

"You could get yourself a sweater, too," Jay suggested. "Winter's just getting started."

"If there was enough I could," the old man agreed. "I could sleep in one a them boxes, to 'stead a the shelter." "A bod mod." "Yeah, right."

"I slept in one last night. Jay considered. "I didn't like it, but they're probably better than the shelter."

"Right."

"You said you were cold. Would you like my coat?"

The old man appeared to hesitate. "You said you wasn't. You will be if you give it."

Jay stood up, pressing rubberoid buttons through plastic buttonholes.

On Fortieth someone leaned down on the horn, a muted keening that suggested a dying whale.

"You're givin' it?"

"I am," Jay said. He held it out by the shoulders. "Put it on."

The old man pushed an arm into one of the capacious sleeves. "Lady over there wants y

is what I think."

"Those cars aren't moving anyhow." Jay waited until the old man's other arm was in the other sleeve, then fished a hundred out of his hunting coat. "If I give you this, are you going to tell those beggars with the sticks?"

"Hell, no," the old man said. "They'd take it."

"Right." Jay put the hundred in his hand and sprinted out of the park, thrust shoppers aside with the duffel, and strode out into the motionless traffic.

A red-haired woman in a dark gray vanette was waving urgently. He opened the right front door and tossed in the duffel, got in, and sat down, smelling dusty upholstery and stale perfume.

"Don't look at me," she said. "Look straight ahead."

Jay did.

"Anytime you're with me, you don't look at me. You got that? Never. No matter what I say, no matter what I do, don't look."

Assuming that she was looking at him, Jay nodded. "That's the first thing. They've already seen me on the phone, but the less they see of me the better."

"Thank you for coming to get me," Jay said.

"I wasn't going to," the woman told him bitterly, "but you knew I would. You knew I'd have to come to you."

Jay shook his head again, still without looking in her direction. "I hoped you would, that's all. You said you wouldn't, but after I'd hung up I decided that if I were you I'd have said the same thing, so they wouldn't be waiting for us if they were listening in."

"They were listening. They're listening now. They can hear everything you hear and see everything you see."

Mostly to himself, Jay nodded. "I should have known it would be something like that."

"They put our call on the news. That dump in Grcentree? There's a mob there. I went there thinking I'd wait for you, and there must have been five hundred people, and more coming all the time."

"I'm sorry," Jay said, and meant it.

"I'll have to get a new dump, that's all." The woman fell silent; he sensed that her jaw was clenched. "Anyway, I came. I probably shouldn't have, but I did. Did you see my license plate?"

He searched his memory. "No."

"That's good. Don't look at it when you get out, okay?"

"Okay."

"Did you think Jane MacKann was my real name?"

"It isn't?" The thought had not occurred to him.

"Hell, no. This isn't even my car, but the guy I borrowed it from is kind of a friend, and I have to steal new plates. So all they know is a green car, and there are lots of them."

"My color vision's a little off," Jay told her.

"Yeah, sure. A lot of guys have that." The woman paused to blow the vanette's horn, fuming at the semibus ahead of her. "Anyway, I came and got you. So you owe me."

Jay fished a hundred from a pocket and gave it to her. "This isn't for your heat. This's just for the ride. You tell me where, and I'll take you there and drop you, okay? That's what you're paying me for now."

"If I tell you, I'll be telling them as well?"

"I guess so. I didn't watch it, but that's what the people I talked to said."

"Suppose I were to write it on a piece of paper without looking at the paper. Then I could pass it to you without looking at you, and you could look at it."

The woman considered. "That ought to work. I've got a pen in my purse, if you've got paper."

"I do." Jay hesitated. "You said heat. I want a gun."

"Sure. That's heat."

"Slang."

"No, it's just what everybody says. Or its tons if you got more than one. Like, I got fifteen tons stashed around now. So immediate delivery on them. What kind you want?"

Jay stroked his jaw, trying to reduce a hundred dreams to the pinpoint of a single gun small enough to fit into his wheeled duffel.

"Lemme explain my pricing structure to you while you're thinking it over," the woman sounded very professional indeed. "Top of the line, I got submachine guns and machine pistols. That's mostly nine millimeter, but there's some other stuff, too. Like right now, on hand I've got this very cool little machine pistol that's seven sixty-five."

She had paused to see whether he was interested; he sensed her scrutiny.

"It's what we used to call a thirty-two, only this one's got seven point sixty-five on the slide."

He shook his head and said, "I understand."

"Okay, under that is your high-cap autos. Only they're not really full auto, they're semi. I got's a nine that holds seventeen rounds. Honest to God. Twenty-five hundred for any of the

Jay did not speak.

"Where you draw the line is eleven, okay? If it holds eleven or under, it's low cap. Twelve or better is high."

"These are handguns you're talking about."

"Yeah. Sure. Low cap is two thousand. Or eighteen hundred if it only holds eight. There's a lot of these single-stack forty-fives around, and eight is all they'll take. So eighteen hundred for one in good shape. Then if you want a real buy, you get a revolver. I've seen some that hold eight, but it's mostly six, and nine times out often six will do it if you're careful. Twelve, thirteen hundred and you can get two, so that gives you twelve rounds and you got two guns in case one breaks. It's a really good deal, because most people are too dumb to see that it is."

"I need a rifle," Jay told her. "Don't you have any rifles?"

"The feds melted them down, or most of them," the woman said dubiously.

"I know. But I hunt my food, for the most part." Jay cleared his throat. "I'm not from around

here at all. I'm from Pennsylvania."

"So you don't really want to shoot anybody?"

"Deer," he told her. "Deer and black bear. Rabbits and so forth now and then. Birds. A shotgun would be better for those, but I can't carry both back with me, and if I had a rifle I could shoot birds sitting sometimes." Doubting her comprehension, he added, "Ducks on the water. That sort of thing."

"I don't have one in my stock. I don't have a shotgun, either, and the shells are really hard to get these days."

He nodded sadly. "I suspected that they would be."

"Listen, we're just sitting here in this traffic. Would it bother you too much if I banged on your laptop some? Maybe I can find something for you."

"No. Go ahead."

"Okay, turn around the other way. Not toward me, away from me. Push slow against the seat harness."

He did, and the vanette announced, "I am required by law to caution you that your chance of survival in a high-speed crash has been reduced by sixty-two percent."

The woman said, "We're not even crawling, you idiot."

"The vehicle that strikes me may be traveling at a high rate of speed, however," the vanette replied primly.

Jay had contrived to turn 180 degrees, so that he was kneeling in his seat and peering into the immensely cluttered rear of the vanette.

"Chinese red," the woman said.

He picked up the only red object he saw and held it up, careful not to look at her. "Is this it?"

"Sure."

Turning away from her again, he resumed a normal posture. "Would you like me to open the door for you?"

"You can't. There's a thumbprint lock." She took it, and from the corner of his eye he saw her prop it against the wheel and plug a wire into the instrument panel.

"You watch traffic, okay? If the car in front moves, tell me."

"All right," he said, and added, "Where are we going?"

"Nowhere." She sounded abstracted, and he heard the quick, hard tapping of her fingers on the keys. "We're going nowhere, Skeeter." More taps, and a little sound of disgust.

"They know that name already, huh? From when you phoned." The woman appeared to hesitate. "Yeah, I guess they have to. You can call me Mack."

"All right. Can't you find me a rifle, Mack?"

"Not so far. I got one more place I can try, though." She tapped keys again.

He said, "The car in front's moving."

"About time."

"Can I ask a question?"

"Sure. You can ask me a thousand, only I might not answer any."

"Who is *they*?"

He felt her incomprehension.

"You said they probably know my name. Did you mean the holoivid people who gave me an upgrade?"

"Globnet."

"Yes, Globnet. Was that who you meant, Mack?"

"No. The feds. Big Daddy."

"So they can collect taxes on my money? I haven't refused to pay them. I haven't even been asked to pay."

Traffic had stopped again. Jay heard the rattle of its hard plastic case as the woman shifted her laptop back to the steering wheel. "They know you won't pay. Say, would you like a carbine? He's got a carbine."

Jay felt his heart sink. "Not as much as a rifle. Hasn't anybody got a rifle?"

"Not now. They might have something later, but maybe not. You never know."

Unwilling to surrender the new rifle he needed, Jay changed the subject. "How could the government possibly know I won't pay the tax?"

"How much did they give you? The holoivid people?"

"That's my affair."

"Okay. Whatever it was? Have you still got it all?"

"No," Jay said. "I gave you a hundred."

"So you don't. So you wouldn't pay the whole tax because you couldn't."

He felt her hand on his arm.

"They want it all. The works. You'll find out. Not all you've got now, the most you ever had. Traffic like this-how many choppers do you think we ought to hear?"

He shook his head.

"About one every hour, maybe a little more. Three in an hour, tops. They been goin' over every three or four minutes lately. I just timed the last two on the dash clock. About three minutes."

From the corner of his eye he saw her hand reach out to rap the instrument panel. "Hey, y... Wake up there. I want you to open the sunroof."

The sunroof slid smoothly back, and the interior of the vanette was abruptly frigid. "Wait a moment for them awhile," the woman told Jay, "it'll keep you from looking at me."

He did, craning his neck to see the bleak winter sky where the towering office buildings failed to obscure it. "Won't our open roof attract their attention?"

"I don't think so. There must be a couple of thousand people stuck in this mess who're wondering why they're flying over all the time."

"Black helicopters." Jay spoke half to himself. "Out where I live, way out in the country, people make jokes about black helicopters. Somebody in town did once, that's what I'm trying to say, one time when I came into town. He said the black helicopters would get me, and

laughed, and I've remembered it for some reason."

"Sure."

"It's supposed to be like flying saucers, something crazy people see. But here in the city real. I caught sight of one a moment ago."

"Sure," the woman repeated. "They're looking for drugs out there is what we hear. *Flying* over the farmers' fields to see if they're growing pot in the middle of the cornfield. They're really black, I guess. People who've seen them up close say they're UPS brown, really. But they sure look black, up there."

"They must have binoculars-no, something better than binoculars. Isn't there a chance they see me down here and recognize me?" "Mmm," the woman said.

"If the government is really after me at all, I mean. The holovid people said it would be criminals." Jay paused, recalling his conversations with Smith. "Mostly criminals, unless I have the money in a bank."

"Okay, close it," the woman told the vanette, and the sunroof slid shut as smoothly as it had opened. "You're right about the binoculars," she told Jay. "They'll have something better, something they won't let us own. But I'm right about the feds being after you. Ten minutes after the broadcast, they'll have had a dozen people on it, and by this time there could be a couple hundred. They'll be another news tonight at eleven, and we'd better watch it." Jay nodded. "We can."

"We can. The big question's how good a look they've had at you. Been looking in any mirrors lately?"

"Since I got the upgrade?" Certain already that he knew the answer, he squirmed in his seat. "Let me think. Yes, once. In a rest room in the Globnet Building. I was looking at the new screen in my screen, though. Not at my own face."

"You will have seen your face, though," the woman said thoughtfully. "I'd like to know if they broadcast that. In a toilet? Maybe not."

"I'd like to watch the news tonight. I know how silly this sounds, but I can't visualize it." Apologetically he added, "I haven't watched much holovid."

"I'd like to, too," the woman said, "because I haven't seen this either, just had people tell me. I'll fix it."

"Thanks."

"What about this carbine? Do you want it?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I'd better take it, if there's nothing else. No rifles."

"They're harder to hide, so the feds have about cleaned them out, and there's not much choice for them. Later I might be able to find one for you."

"Later I won't be here. What caliber is it?"

"Forty. Same as a forty-caliber pistol is what he says, and uses the same magazine." She pressed more buttons. "It folds up, too."

"A folding stock?"

"Doesn't say. Just that it's thirty inches long to shoot and sixteen folded. What are you grinning about?"

Jay patted the duffel. "I was afraid this wouldn't be long enough to hold the rifle I was hoping to get."

She grunted. "Well, you could carry this under that coat. Put a loop of string over your shoulder and fold it over the string. It wouldn't be as handy as a pistol, but you could do it."

"I'd rather hang it by the butt, if it will stay folded." Jay was silent for a moment, thinking. "I'll have to see it first. I don't suppose that gadget gives an effective range?"

More buttons. "A hundred and fifty meters is what he says."

"Huh."

"Probably got a lot of barrel. Twelve, fourteen inches. Something like that, and even our pistol barrel a forty travels pretty fast."

"I imagine he's stretching it," Jay said slowly, "even so, most of the shots I get are under a hundred yards, and those that are longer aren't a lot longer."

"Going to take it?"

He nodded. "I've been using a bow. A bow I made myself and arrows I made myself, too. Did I tell you?"

"I don't think so. I thought maybe you had a shotgun already. You hunt a lot."

He nodded again. When ten minutes had passed, and they were crawling along steadily, he asked, "Where are we going?"

"Dump I got. You know that address? Greentree?"

"There were people there, you said."

"We're not going there. I just wanted to say I don't live there. It's a place I got where I make sales sometimes, that's all. Where we're going now's like that, only uptown."

The sunroof slid smoothly back, and a woman in an orange jumpsuit dropped into the rear seat. Jay released his seat harness to turn and look at her, and the vanette said, "I am required by law to caution you that your chance of survival in a high-speed crash has been reduced to seventy percent."

The woman who sold guns snapped, "Shut your sunroof!"

The woman in the orange jumpsuit had cleared a space for herself on the seat. She removed her helmet, shook out long, dark hair, and smiled at Jay. "I'm sure you know who I am."

He tried to return the smile. "I have no idea."

"Who I represent, I mean. My name is Hayfa, Hayfa Washington." She ran her finger down the front seam of her jumpsuit, reached inside, and produced a sparkling business card. "Look at this, please. Read it carefully."

Captain H. Washington
Fifth Airborne Brigade
Federal Revenue & Security Services
0067 5667-1339
www.hayfawings.gov

"You may keep the card, of course."

"I'd like to," Jay told her. "I've never seen such a beautiful one."0

She smiled again. "You have a great deal of money belonging to our Federal Government. One hundred thousand, if not more."

The other woman said, "He thinks it belongs to him."

"I do," Jay said. "It was paid me by Globnet."

"Which didn't own it either," Hayfa Washington told him.

Jay said, "They ran advertisements, as I understand it, and included it in a lot of their news broadcasts. I was at a friend's house and saw one. My rifle's broken, and I need a new ax and a new rifle. For a moment, her expression silenced him. "And other things. You don't care about that, do you?"

"Not really."

"So I wrote a letter and my friend e-mailed it, with some pictures of me and my cabin. They said that if I'd come here and talk to them, they might give me the money."

"A hundred thousand."

"Yes, one hundred thousand. I borrowed money for bus fare, and I came. And they talked to me and gave it to me."

"No, they didn't." The woman in the orange jumpsuit looked sincere and somewhat troubled. She leaned toward Jay as she spoke. "They couldn't, you see. It didn't belong to them. All money belongs to the Federal Government, Jay. People-people who own small businesses, particularly-speak of making money. Quite often they use those exact words. But if you'll think about it, you'll see that they are not true. All money is made by Government, and so all money belongs to Government, which allows citizens like you and me to have some, sometimes, so we can buy the things we need. But Government keeps tide to all of it, and by the very nature of things it can't lose title to any of it. I've most of last month's pay on me right now." She paused, extracting a hard plastic portemoney from an interior pocket of her jumpsuit.

"You're saying that what they paid isn't mine at all."

"Correct. Because no money really belongs to anyone except Government, which issued it." The woman in the orange jumpsuit opened her portemoney, took out bills, and fanned them. "Here's mine. You see? Eleven five-hundreds, three one-hundreds, and some twenties, tens, fives, and singles. This is what our Government lets me have, because my taxes were already deducted from my check." The other woman said, "Except sales tax."

"Correct, although sales tax is actually paid by the seller. There's a pretense that the buyer pays, but we needn't get into that. The point is that I have this money, although it's not mine. I'm showing it to you. This is what I've got, Jay. Now will you, in an act of good faith, show me what you have to me?"

"No," Jay said.

"I'm sorry to hear that, very sorry." The woman in the orange jumpsuit paused as though expecting her expression of regret to change his answer. He said nothing more; neither did the other woman.

"There's an easy, painless way to handle this," the woman in the orange jumpsuit said. "I could turn the money over to me now. I'd count it and give you a receipt for it that would be good for anything you want to buy."

backed by the full faith and credit of the Federal Government. When the Government had decided how much should be returned to you, it would be sent to you. I'm sure there would be enough for a new ax. Not for a rifle, though. The danger a rifle would pose to you and your family would far outweigh any possible benefit to you."

"They're against the law," the other woman remarked a little dryly. "Yes, they are, for that very reason." The woman in the orange jumpsuit spoke to Jay again. "You would have to do prison time. I think I can promise you that. There probably wouldn't even be a trial. Won't you please hand that money-the Government's money-to me to count? Now?" He shook his head.

"You want to think it over. I understand." The woman in the orange jumpsuit tapped the other woman's shoulder. "Where are we? Ninety-fifth? You can let me out now. Just stop anywhere."

The vanette stopped, causing several vehicles behind it to blow their horns, and the woman in the orange jumpsuit opened its sliding door and stepped out. "You've got my card, Jay. Call anytime."

He nodded and shut the door, the vanette lurched forward, and the woman driving it said "Thank you for appearing on our show tonight." Jay nodded, although he could not be sure she was looking at him. "That was for the holovid, wasn't it? She was so pretty."

"Prettier than me?" There was a half-humorous challenge in the question.

"I don't know," Jay told her.

"You don't want me to look at you."

"Well, she was, and she wasn't just pretty, she was beautiful, the way the Government wants you to think all the feds look, beautiful women and good-looking men. She'll make the next news for sure. I wouldn't be surprised if they run everything she said. You still want to see her?"

"Yes," he said. "Certainly."

"Okay, we will. I've got a place a couple of blocks from here." "What about my carbine?" "I like to buy it tonight." "He's got to get it from wherever he's got it stashed. Ammo, too. I saw fifty rounds."

"More," Jay told her. He considered. "Five hundred, if he has them." "Okay, I'll tell him that." The vanette pulled into an alley, and the laptop returned to the steering wheel. When the woman who sold guns had closed it again, she said, "Ten years ago I could have stood up to her. I was a knockout. You don't have to believe me, but I was." He said he believed her.

"But I had two kids. I put on some weight then and I've never got it off, and I quit taking care of my complexion for a while. You haven't been looking at me." "No," he said.

"That's good, but now don't look at anything else either, okay? I want you to shut your eyes and keep them shut. Just lean back and relax."

He nodded, closed his eyes, and leaned back as she had suggested, discovering that he was very tired.

As if it were in another room, her fingers tapped the instrument panel. Softly she said, "I'll be there for you. Open your sunroof."

Cold poured over him like water, and he shivered. She grunted, the vanette shook, and the

seat he had shared with her sagged; after a little thought, he decided that she was standing on the roof with her head and shoulders thrust up through the open sunroof.

Sometime after that, the sunroof closed again and she left the vanette, got into the rear seat, and rummaged among her possessions there.

"Okay," she said. "Only don't open your eyes."

He said that he would not.

"I figured she might have planted some sort of bug, you know? Something to tell the feds where we went. Only it would have to be on the roof or in back, and I couldn't find it, so probably they figure you're all the bug they need. We're going to drive around some now, and I want you to keep your eyes shut the whole time. We'll be turning corners and doubling back and all that, but don't look."

They "drove around" for what seemed an hour; but though there were indeed a number of turns, Jay got the impression that the point at which they stopped was miles from the one at which he had closed his eyes.

"All right." She tapped the instrument panel. "No lights." The engine died; the soft *snick* heard was presumably the ignition key backing out. It rattled against other keys as she removed it and dropped it into her purse. "You can look around. Just don't look at me."

He did. "It's dark."

"Yeah. Well, it gets dark early this time of year. But it's about eight o'clock. You don't have a watch."

"No," he said.

"Me neither. There's the dash clock if I'm driving, and the holovid will give it if I'm inside. Come on."

There was no doorman, but the lobby into which she led him was fairly clean. He said, "You don't really live here."

"Hell, no. But sometimes I sleep here, and I'm going to sleep here tonight. We both are."

He wondered whether she meant together. Aloud, he said, "You don't really live in Greentree Gardens, either. That's what you told me."

"Nope."

"I would think it would be horribly expensive to rent so many places."

The doors of an elevator shook and groaned, and at last rattled open. They stepped inside.

"It costs, but not nearly as much as you'd think. These old twentieth-century buildings are rent controlled."

He said, "I didn't know that."

"So what it is, is the grease you've got to pay the agent to get in. That can be quite a chunk. You don't understand grease, do you?"

"No," he said.

"I could see you didn't. It's under-the-counter money, money the agent can put in his pocket and not pay taxes on. Money's like three, four times more without taxes."

The elevator ground to a halt, and they got out.

"So I pay that-I've got to-and the first month's rent. I buy used furniture, not very much, a move in. Then I don't pay anything else for as long as I can get by with it."

The keys were out again, jangling in her hand.

"That could be six months. It could be a year. When I get the feeling they're about ready to take me to court, I pay another month, maybe, or half a month. It's rent controlled, like I said, it's not much."

She opened a door that had long ago been damaged by water. "My utility bills aren't much because I'm hardly ever here, and I don't complain or cause trouble. See? And they know if they go to court the judge will find out I just paid something and tell them to give me more. So they don't. You want to turn that thing on? It's almost time for the nine o'clock."

He did, fumbling with the controls until he found the right control. "It's an old one," she apologized.

A shimmering beach half filled the stale air of the dingy room; on it, young women with spectacular figures tossed a multicolored ball, at last throwing it into the ocean and swimming out to retrieve it.

"You were expecting voice control, right? I got it at the Salvation Army store. They fixed it up so it would work again."

He nodded. A brunette with flashing eyes had gotten the ball. She threw it to a blonde, tracing a high arc of red, green, and yellow against the clear blue sky.

"This's a commercial," the woman who sold guns told him, "See how their makeup stays on and their hair stays nice even in the water? That's what you're supposed to be looking at." He nodded again.

An elderly sofa groaned as she sat down. "You want the sound? It's the next knob up, or they're going to be talking about hair spray and stuff."

He shook his head.

"Fine with me. Only we better turn it on when the news comes on."

He did, and by the time he had taken a seat next to her, a handsome black man and a beautiful Chinese woman faced them across a polished double desk. Both smiled in friendly fashion. "Thank you for inviting us into your living room," the black man said.

The Chinese woman added, "There's a lot of news tonight. What do you say we get to it, Phil?"

Phil nodded, abruptly serious. "There certainly is, Lee-Anne. Johns Hopkins has a new artificial heart so small you can have it implanted before your present heart gives out."

Lee-Anne said, "There's the cat in the mayor's Christmas tree, too. I like that story. The firemen way up on their little ladders look like ornaments."

Phil smiled. "You're right, they do. We've got a review of the new Edward Spake film, *The Trinidad Communique*. It got raves at Cannes."

"Aunt Betsy's going to show us how to make cranberry flax for the holidays."

"Almost live coverage of the big parade in Orlando."

"And a peek in on the Hundred Thousand Man. He's had a little visit from FR&SS."

"That's you," the woman who sold guns told Jay. "It's going to be a while before they get"

you, though. You want something to eat?"

"Yes." He had not realized how hungry he was.

"I don't keep much besides beer in these places. Usually I just phone out. Pizza okay?"

He had not eaten pizza since college. He said it was.

"You've got to get out of here, 'cause I'll have to give the address. Why don't you go in the kitchen?"

A plastic model of a large artery enclosing a very small artificial heart stood in the middle of the room. He nodded and went into the kitchen.

"Bring me a beer, okay?"

The refrigerator was white, as his mother's had been; he knew vaguely that no one had white refrigerators now, though he did not know why. It held beer in squat plastic bulbs and a decorative container of potato salad. He opened a bulb over the small and dirty sink, afraid that the food might overflow the bulb. When he could no longer hear her voice, he called, "Can I come back in?"

"Sure."

He brought her the beer, and she said, "Pepperoni, hot peppers, and onions, okay? You can have a beer, too."

He shook his head. "Not until the food gets here."

"Don't you think it's coming?"

It had not even occurred to him. He said, "Of course it is," and returned to the kitchen to get a beer for himself.

"I need to make another call. I got to call my baby-sitter and tell her I won't be back tonight. But I'll wait till we see you."

He nodded, careful not to look at her. A towering Christmas tree, shrunken by distance, disappeared into the ceiling. Little firemen in yellow coveralls and Day-Glo red helmets clambered over it like elves.

"I turned off the sound so I could call. All right?"

"Sure," he said.

"Maybe you'd better turn it back on now."

He did, getting it too loud then scaling it back. Reduced to the size of a child's battery-powered CUV, an immense float trundled through the room, appearing at one wall and disappearing into the other while doll-size women feigned to conceal their nakedness with bouquets from which they tossed flowers to the onlookers. Lee-Anne's voice said, "... la turista fiesta queen and her court, Phil. They say the fiesta is worth about three hundred million to the city of Orlando."

Phil's voice replied, "I don't doubt it. And speaking of money, Lee-Anne, here's a lady trying to collect some."

A good-looking woman in a skintight orange jumpsuit rappelled down a mountain of air, bouncing and swaying. Jay said, "I didn't see that."

"They were shooting from a helicopter, probably," the woman who sold guns told him.

It took about half a second for him to realize that by "shooting" she intended the taking of

pictures; in that half second, the swaying woman on the rope became the helmetless woman recalled, shaking out her hair in the rear seat of the vanette. "You have a great deal of money belonging to our Federal Government. One hundred thousand, if not more."

The other woman said, "He thinks it belongs to him."

Then his own voice, just as he heard it when he spoke: "It was paid me by Globnet."

Their conversation continued, but he paid little attention to what they said. He watched Hayfa Washington's face, discovering that he had forgotten (or had never known) how beautiful she had been.

Too soon it was over, and a woman in a spotless gingham apron coalesced from light to about lemon custard. The woman who sold guns said, "You want to turn that off now?" and did.

"I'm going to call my sitter, okay? You can stay, though. I won't tell her where I am."

"I'll go anyway," he said, and returned to the kitchen. Faintly, through the tiny dining nook and the door he had closed behind him, he heard her tell someone, "It's me, Val. How are the kids?"

The card was in his shirt pocket, under the hunting coat he had been careful not to remove. "Captain H. Washington, Fifth Airborne Brigade." He turned it over, and discovered that her picture was on the reverse, and that her soul was in her huge dark eyes.

"Hey!" the other woman called from the living room. "The pizza's here. Bring out a couple more bulbs."

He did, and opened hers for her while she opened the pizza box on the rickety coffee table, then returned to the kitchen for plastic knives and forks, and paper napkins.

"If we eat in there we'll have to sit facing," she said. "So I figured in here. We can sit side-by-side, like in the car. It'll be easier." He said that was fine, and asked about her children. "Oh, they're okay. My girlfriend is sitting them. She's going to take them over to her house till I get back. Ron's eight and Julie's seven. I had them right together, like. Then we broke up, and he didn't want any part of them. You know how that is."

"No," he said. "No, I don't."

"Haven't you ever been married? Or lived with a woman?"

He shook his head.

"Well, why not?"

"I've never been rich, handsome, or exciting, that's all." He paused, thinking. "All right, rich now, or at least have something like riches. But I never did before."

"Neither was he, but he got me."

Jay shrugged.

"He was nice, and he was fun to be with, and he had a pretty good job. Only after the divorce his company sent him overseas and he stopped paying support."

"I've never had a job," Jay said.

"Really?"

"Really. My friends call me a slacker." He found that he was smiling. "Dad called me a woods bum. He's dead now."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I, in a way. We seldom got along, but well. . ." He shrugged and drank beer.

"I know."

"He sent me to college. I thought I was a pretty good baseball player in those days, and a pretty good football player, but I didn't make either team. I tried hard, but I didn't make the

She spoke with her mouth full. "Tha's too bad."

"It was. If I had, it would have been different. I know it would. The way it was, I worked hard up until I was close to graduation." The pizza was half gone. He picked up a square piece that looked good, bit into it, and chewed and swallowed, tasting only the bitterness of empty years.

"What happened then?" she asked.

"When I was a senior? Nothing, really. It was just that I realized I had been working like a dog to acquire knowledge that nobody wanted. Not even me. That if I did everything right and passed my exams and got my Master's I'd end up teaching in the high school in the little Pennsylvania town where we lived, or someplace like it. I'd teach math and chemistry, and maybe coach the baseball team, and it would be kids who were going to work on farms or factory jobs when they got out of school. I said to hell with it."

"I don't blame you."

"I went back home and told my folks some story. They didn't believe it, and I don't even know what it was now. I got my camping stuff together and went out into the woods. I had a little tent, an air mattress, and a sleeping bag. The first winter was rough, so I built a cabin about as big as this room in a place where nobody would ever find it." He paused, recalling Hayfa Washington and the helicopter that had let her down on a rope and somehow made the sunroof open. "It's federal land, really. National Forest. I don't think about that much, but it

The woman shrugged. "If all the money's theirs, all the land is, too, I guess."

"I suppose you're right." He put his half-eaten piece of pizza back in the box.

"You just live out there? Like that?"

"It was always going to be for a little while."

"But you never came back in?"

"Oh, sometimes I do. For my father's funeral, and then for mom's. She died about a month after he did."

"I'm sorry."

"I was, too. But they left everything to me-I was the only kid. The house and so on. The car and a little money. I sold the house and the car, and I don't spend much. I hunt deer and snipe and small game, and that's what I eat, mostly. Wild plants in the summer." He smiled. "I use deer leaves for toilet paper."

"Do you want to know about me?"

"If you want to tell me."

"Well, I never got to go to college. I was a clerk in a store and a waitress. Then I got married and had the kids, and you know about that. You want to know how I got started selling guns? A friend wanted to know where she could buy one, so I asked this guy I knew, and he

sent me to somebody else. And that guy said he'd sell to me only not to her, because the guy sent me didn't know her. So I said, okay, sell it to me, and I paid him, and I told him I'd get money back from her. And he said you ought to charge her about a hundred more, I would. charged her fifty over. And after a couple weeks, I guess it was, she sent somebody else to another woman in her building that was scared worse than she was. Now here I am."

Softly he said, "I steal from campers, sometimes. From hunters, too. That's how I got this coat. A hunter got hot, and hung it on a tree."

She nodded as though she had expected no less. "You want to get me another beer?"

The telephone buzzed as he rose; a thin-lipped man who wore a business suit as though were a uniform said, "You still haven't called Captain Washington."

"No," Jay admitted. "No, I haven't."

"We don't like to arrest people over tax matters. You may have heard that."

Jay shook his head.

"We don't. Yet more than half the prison population is made up of tax offenders." The thin-lipped man vanished.

"They know where we are," Jay told the woman.

"Yeah. Get me that beer, will you?"

"Shouldn't we leave?"

She did not speak, and after half a minute or so he brought her another beer from the kitchen.

"Here's how I see it," she said when he (with face averted) held out the beer. "Let me go through it, and you tell me if you think I'm wrong."

"To start with, how do they know we're here? Answer-that FR&SS woman put a bug on the car, I just didn't find it. That means that if we take the car we might as well stay here. And if we don't take the car, we'll have to go on foot. They'll have people all around this building now waiting to tail us, and with the streets pretty well empty it would be a cinch."

"Where would we go?" he asked.

"Damned if I know. We might end up walking all night. Next question. Are they about to break down the door and bust us? Answer-no, because they wouldn't have called first if they were. The FR&SS woman made the news, she was good-looking, it was dramatic, and blah blah. It was meant to. Now they'll be watching to see if that phone call makes it. I think what they'll do is get a little rougher every time, because every time they come around the chance that it'll make Globnet's news show gets slimmer. The woman was really pretty nice, on purpose. The guy on the phone wasn't so nice, and next time's going to be worse. Or that's how it looks to me."

"You're probably right. But you're leaving something out. They knew that we were in this apartment, and not in some other apartment in this building."

"Piece of cake. The guys staking it out talked to the pizza man. 'Who paid you?' 'Well, she was a middle-aged woman with red hair.' 'Anybody else in there?' 'Yeah, I could hear somebody moving around in back.' 'Okay, that's them.' They got a look at me when we talked on the phone, and the fed that got into our car probably described us."

Jay said, "You're not middle-aged."

She laughed. "When you've got two kids in school, you're middle-aged. How old are you?"
"Forty-one."

"See, you're middle-aged, too. You're older than I am." To his amazement, her hand had found his.

They kissed, he with his eyes shut; an hour later, turning off the lights in the musty little bedroom hid the stains on the wallpaper and let him look at her face.

Next morning she said, "I want to have breakfast with you. Isn't that funny?"

Not knowing what else to do, he nodded.

"I never used to have breakfast with Chuck. I'd have to get up early to see about the kids and he'd sleep till ten or eleven. After he left me I'd have a boyfriend sometimes. Only we'd get up and go. Back to his wife, or where he lived. They weren't ever around for breakfast."

"All right," Jay said, "let's eat breakfast."

"We don't have to take the car. You don't mind walking three or four blocks?"

He smiled. "No."

"Okay. We've got a couple things to settle, and maybe the safest way is while we're walking. I don't know how serious they are, but if they're serious at all they'll have bugged the place while we slept. The cafe'd be better, but out on the street's probably as good as it gets. Keep your voice down, don't move your lips a lot when you talk, and if it's serious hold your hand in front of your face."

He nodded, and seeing blowing snow through a dirty windowpane, pulled the reversible coat he had bought the day before out of his wheeled duffel and put it on over the hunting coat that still (almost to his dismay) held his money.

Out in the cold and windy street she murmured, "They'll figure we're going back, so first thing is we won't. If they have a man watch it and maybe another guy watch the car, they could get a little short-handed. We can hope, anyway."

He nodded, although it seemed to him that if there were a homing device in the vanette it would not be necessary to have anyone watch it.

"When we go out of the cafe we'll split up, see? I'll give you the address-where to go and how to get there. Don't look to see if they're following you. If they're good you won't see them. Just lose them if you can."

"I hope I can," he said.

The little restaurant was small and crowded and noisy. They ate waffles in a tiny booth, striving to keep his eyes on his plate.

"The way you lose a tail is you do something unexpected where the tail can't follow you," she said. "Say there's a cab, but just the one. You grab it and have him take you someplace all right? Only not to the address I'm going to give you. Someplace else." He nodded.

"I thought maybe you were going to say there's got to be a thousand cabbies, and they can talk to them all. Only every cab's got a terminal in it, and it records when fares get picked up and where they're going. Like if they know you caught the cab at eleven oh two, all they've

to do is check cabs that picked up somebody right about then. It's maybe a dozen cabs, then can find out where you went."

"I understand," he said.

"Or maybe you go to the John. He's not going to come in the John with you because you're too good a look at him. He'll wait outside. Well, if it's got two doors you duck in one and out the other. Or climb out the window, if there's a window. It gets you ten or fifteen minutes to get away."

"Okay," he said.

She had taken a pen and a small notebook from her purse; she scribbled in it, tore out the page, and handed it to him. "Where we're going to meet," she said. "Don't look at it till you're almost there." He was too stunned to say anything. "You're finished."

He managed to say, "Yes, but you're not."

"I'm awfully nervous, and when I'm nervous I don't eat a lot. I look at you and see the two dots, and I know they're seeing what you do, your sausages or whatever. Let's go."

Out on the street again, in the cutting wind, she squeezed his hand. "See that subway entrance up ahead? Maybe you can see the escalator through the glass."

"Yes," he said. "We're going to walk right toward it. When we get there, I'll go in and down. You keep walking."

He did, badly tempted to watch as the moving steps carried her away but staring resolutely ahead.

Soon traffic thinned, and the sidewalks grew dirtier. The vehicles filling every parking space were older and shabbier. He went into a corner store then and asked the middle-aged black man behind the counter for a package of gum.

"This a bad neighborhood?"

The counterman did not smile. "It's not good."

"I heard it was really bad," Jay said. "This doesn't look so bad."

The counterman shrugged. "One and a quarter for that." Jay gave him a hundred. "Where would it be worse?"

"Don't know." The counterman held Jay's hundred up to the light and fingered the paper. "You pushin' queer? I knows what you looks like now."

"Keep the change," Jay said. The counterman stared. "Where does it get really bad? Dangerous."

For a second or two, the counterman hesitated. Then he said, "Just keep on north, maybe three blocks?" Jay nodded.

"Then you turns east. Three blocks. Or fo'. That's 'bout as bad as anythin' gits."

"Thanks." Jay opened the gum and offered a stick to the counterman. The counterman shook his head. "Gits on my dentures. You goin' up there where I told you?"

He did, and once there he stopped and studied the shabby buildings as though searching for a street number. Two white men—the only other whites in sight—were following him, one behind him with a brown attache case, the other on the opposite side of the street. Their hats and topcoats looked crisp and new, and they stood out in that neighborhood like two candy bars.

a brushpile. He turned down an alley, ran, then halted abruptly where a rusted-out water heater leaned against a dozen rolls of discarded carpet.

Often he had waited immobile for an hour or more until a wary deer ventured within range of his bow. He waited so now, motionless in the wind and the blowing snow, half concealed by the hot-water tank and a roll of carpet, a sleeve breaking the outline of his face; and the man he had seen in the street passed him without a glance, walking purposefully up the alley. When it met the next street they stopped and talked for a moment or two; then the attache case was opened, and they appeared to consult an instrument of some kind. They reentered the alley.

He rose and ran down that alley, across the street and into the next, down another street, a narrow and dirty street on which half or more of the parked cars had been stripped. When he stopped at last, sweating despite the cold, he got out Hayfa Washington's card and tore it in two.

Threadlike wires and their parent microchips bound the halves together still.

He dropped both halves down a sewer grating, pulled off his reversible coat, turned it green-side-out and put it back on, then unbuttoned his hunting coat as well and transferred the hunting knife his father had given him one Christmas to a pocket of the now-green raincoat, sheath and all.

An hour later-long after he had lost count of alleys and wretched streets-he heard running feet behind him, whirled, and met his attacker with the best flying tackle he could muster. He had not fought another human being since boyhood; he fought now as the bobcat had fought with the furious strength of desperation, gouging and biting and twice pounding the other's head against the dirty concrete. He heard the bottle that had been the other's weapon break, and felt the heat of the blood streaming from his ear and scalp, and by an immense effort of will stopped the point of the old hunting knife short of the other's right eye.

The other's struggle ended. "Don' do that, man! You don' want to make me blind."

"Give up?"

"Yeah, man. I give up." The jagged weapon the bottle had become clinked on the pavement.

"How much did you think I'd have on me?"

"Man, that don't matter!"

"Yes, it does. How much?"

"Forty. Fifty. Maybe credit cards, man, you know."

"All right." The point of the knife moved a centimeter closer. "I want you to do something for me. I want you to work. If you'll do it, I'll pay you a hundred and send you away. If you won't, you'll never get up. Which is it?"

"I'll do it, man." The other at least sounded sincere. "I'll do whatever you says."

"Good." Jay rose and dropped the knife back into his pocket. "Maybe you can take me down. I don't know, but maybe you can. Whenever you want to try ..." He shrugged. "You bleedin', man."

"I know. It will stop, or I think it will." Jay got out a hundred. "You see this? It'll be all yours." He tore it in two and gave half to the other. "You get the other half when you've done what I'm hiring you to do." "Okay if I gets up, man?"

Jay nodded, and the other got slowly to his feet. His Jeans and plastic jacket were old and cracked, his Capribuk athletic shoes nearly new.

"Listen carefully. If you don't do exactly what I tell you, our deal is off. I'm going to give you a piece of paper with an address on it." The other gave no indication that he had heard or wanted you to read that address, but I don't want you to tell me what it is. Don't say it, and don't let me see the paper."

"What is this shit, man?"

"Do you watch the news?"

"I got no time for that shit, man. I listens to music."

For two or three seconds Jay stared at the blank screen on the other's forehead, recalling that his own was-or had been-equally blank. "There's no point in explaining. Do you understand what you've got to do?"

"Look at the address. Not tell you. Not let you look, even. You want me to tear it up?"

Jay shook his head. "I want you to keep it, and I want you to take me there. If we have to spend money to get there, I'll pay."

Reluctantly, the other nodded.

"When we get there, you give me the paper so I can see you took me to the right place. When you do, I'll give you the other half of that hundred and you can go."

He had expected the subway, but they took a bus; the ride lasted over an hour.

"'Bout two blocks now," the other said when they left it at last. "You wants to walk?"

Jay nodded.

"You going to turn me in, man?"

"No," Jay said. They were walking side by side. "I'm going to give you the other half of that hundred, and shake hands if you're willing to shake hands, and say good-bye."

"You a pretty fair scrapper, you know? Only you catches me by surprise. I wasn't expecting you to turn 'round like what you done."

"Wasn't that what you were trying to do to me? Take me by surprise?"

"Sho'l" The other laughed.

"So that's all right. Except that right and wrong really don't count in things like this. I hunt a lot. I hunt animals to eat."

"Do tell?"

"And for hide and bone to make things out of. Generally I try to give the animals a fighting chance."

"Uh-huh."

"But when I'm hungry, really up against it, I don't. I kill any way I can."

"We here." The other waved at one of several squat concrete buildings. "Got a number of 'n' everythin'. You don' want to look at that?"

"I don't think it matters now," Jay said, and looked.

"Number eighteen." The other fished in his pockets and pulled out the page of notebook paper, now much folded, that the woman who sold guns had given Jay in the cafe. "All right"

says here Greentree Gardens. An' it says buildin' eighteen. Then it says number eight. Have a look."

Jay did.

"Now this here's Greentree Gardens, all right? You look right over there ---- there's a sign on top of that buildin'. What do it say?"

"Greentree Gardens."

"Right on, man. Right over there's buildin' number eighteen, like you sees. Number eight will be ground flo', mos' like, or maybe next up. Places like this ain't bad as some other places you know? Only they ain't real safe neither. You wants me to go in there with you? Be glad you wants it."

Jay shook his head, took out the remaining half of the torn hundred, and handed it to the other. Then he offered his hand, which the other accepted after putting the torn half bill into one of his pockets.

Abruptly his grip tightened. Jay tried to jerk away, but the other's fist caught him under the cheekbone.

He went down, rolling and trying to cover his head with his arms. A kick dizzied him, it was a shock worse than its pain. Another missed, and another must have struck his forearm, because his arm felt as though it had been clubbed.

Somehow he got to his feet, charged the other and grappled him. *I killed that buck like a* he thought; the buck had an arrow in its gut, but that had hardly seemed to matter. His knife was in his hand. He stabbed and felt it strike bone.

Then it was gone.

At once the other had it, and there was freezing cold where his shirt pocket should have been, cold followed by burning heat, and he was holding the other's wrist with both hands, the blade was wet and red. The other's fist pounded his nose and mouth. He did not hear the shot, but he felt the other stiffen and shudder.

He pushed the other's body from him, insanely certain that it was only a trick, only a temporary respite granted so that he might be taken by surprise again in a moment or two. Rising, he kicked something.

It was the knife, and it went clattering over the sidewalk. He pulled it out of some snow, wiped the blade with his handkerchief, returned it to its sheath and the sheath to his pocket.

Then the woman who sold guns was tugging at his sleeve. In her other hand she held a slender and slender rifle with a long box magazine. "Come on! We've got to get out of here."

He followed her docilely between the hulking building that was eighteen Greentree Gardens, and a similar building that was probably sixteen or twenty. Two floors down in a dark underground garage, she unlocked a blue CUV. As he climbed in he said, "Borrowed another friend?"

"This's mine, and if I didn't sell what I do I couldn't afford it."

It reeked of cigar smoke; he said, "In that case, I'd think they'd know about it-the plate number and so forth."

She shook her head. "It's registered under a fake name, and these aren't my plates."

He considered that while she drove eight or ten blocks fast, then up a winding ramp and onto the Interstate.

When they were in the leftmost lane, he said, "Why are we running away?"

She turned her head to look at him. "Are you crazy? Because I killed that guy."

"He was going to kill me." He looked down at his wound, and was mildly surprised to find that it was still bleeding, his blood soaking the two-sided raincoat and, presumably, the hunter's coat under it.

"So what? Look, I can't even defend myself, according to the law. Say you were going to rape me and kill me."

"I wouldn't do that."

"Just suppose. I couldn't shoot you or stab you or even hit you, and if I did you could sue afterward."

"Could I win?"

"Sure. What's more, I'd be defending your suit from a cell. And if I hurt you worse'n you hurt me, you'd be out."

Jay shook his head. "That doesn't make sense."

"Not for us it doesn't." The Interstate sloped sharply down here, but she kept pedal to the floor; for a moment the CUV shook wildly. "For them it does—for the feds. If we got used to the idea of going after somebody who went after us, we'd go after them. *Capisce?*"

"We should."

"Sure. Only for me it's a lot worse. For you, too. I killed that guy. Don't say maybe he's not dead. I saw him when I hit him, and I saw him afterward. He's gone."

"How did you know we were out there?"

"Saw you out the window, that's all. It'd been a while, so I kept looking outside, hoping you were just looking for the right number. I'd stopped off and picked up your gun on the way home and I was afraid you'd come and gone before I got there. You want to see it? It's on the backseat. Only be careful, it's loaded. I think I put the safety on."

Jay took off his seat belt and picked up the carbine, careful not to touch its trigger.

"Keep it down so the other drivers can't see it."

He did. "This car doesn't talk to us."

"I killed that bastard as soon as I got it. It's pretty easy."

Sensing that she was about to cry, Jay did not speak; he would have tried to hold her hand perhaps, but both her hands were on the wheel.

"And now I've killed the bastard that was trying to kill you. There's tissues in back somewhere."

He got them, heard her blow her nose.

"I told you how bad that is. It's murder one. He was trying to kill you, but that doesn't make a damned bit of difference. I should have called the cops and showed them your body when they got there. That would have been when? Two or three o'clock. My God, it's lunchtime."

He looked at the clock on the instrument panel. It was nearly one.

"You hungry?"

"No," he said.

"Me neither. Let's skip lunch. We'll stop somewhere for dinner tonight."

He agreed, and asked where they were going.

"Damned if I know."

"Then I'd like you to take Eighty."

"We need to get off the Interstate before too much longer," she said.

He nodded. "We will."

"Listen, I'm sorry I got you into this."

"I feel the same way," he said. "You saved my life."

"Who was he, anyway?"

"The man I'd gotten to read your note. You didn't want Globnet to get it on the air before we'd left, so I had to have somebody who would look at it for me and take me there. I tried to find somebody who wouldn't call the police as soon as we separated. Clearly that was a bad idea." Jay paused. "How did you think I'd handle it?"

"That you'd guess. That you'd go there and look at my note and see that you were right when you got there."

"No more crying?"

"Nope. That's over. You know what made me cry?"

"What?"

"You didn't understand. You can't kill people, not even if they're killing other people, and I did it with a gun. If they get me I'll get life, and you didn't understand that."

"Who'd take care of your kids?" He let his voice tell her what he felt he knew about those kids.

She drove. He glanced over at her, and she was staring straight ahead, both hands on the steering wheel.

"I'm going back into the woods. Maybe they'll get me in there, but it won't be easy. If the holovid company can't help you, maybe you'd like to come with me."

"You had it all doped out." She sounded bitter.

He shook his head. "I don't think I understand it all even now, and there's a lot of it that I figured out a minute ago. How much were you supposed to get for this?"

"A couple thousand."

He thought about that. "You're not an employee. Or at least, you don't work for Globnet full-time."

"No." She sniffled. "They did a documentary on the gun trade last year, and I was one of the people they found-the only woman. So I was on holo with this really cool mask over my face and I thought that was the end of it. Then about a month ago they lined me up to do this."

He nodded.

"They figured you'd want women or drugs, mostly, and they had people set for those. I was a kind of an afterthought, okay? Stand by for a couple hundred, or a couple thousand if you

called. Another thousand if I sold you a gun. I did, but I'll never collect any of it."

"The bot must have called you after he gave me your number."

"Kaydee Nineteen? Sure. That's how you knew, huh? Because you got it from him."

Jay shook his head. "That was how I should have known, but I didn't. It was mostly the phone call you made last night to somebody who was supposed to be sitting your kids. Real mothers talk about their kids a lot, but you didn't. And just now it hit me that you'd called your friend Val, and James R. Smith's secretary was Valerie. Then I thought about the bot. He took his security work very seriously, or at least it seemed like he did. But he had given me the number of a gun dealer as soon as I asked, and he had been friendly with Valerie."

"So I was lying to you all the time."

He shrugged.

"Don't do that! You're going to get that thing bleeding worse. What happened to your ear?"

He told her, and she pointed. "There's a truck stop. They'll have aid kits for sale." Cutting across five lanes of traffic, they raced down an exit ramp.

That night, in an independent motel very far from Interstate 80, he took off his reversible raincoat and his hunting coat, and his shirt and undershirt as well, and sat with clenched teeth while she did what she could with disinfectant and bandages.

When she had finished, he asked whether she had been able to buy much ammunition.

"Eight boxes. That's four hundred rounds. They come fifty in a box."

He nodded.

"Only we don't have it. It's back in that place in Greentree Gardens."

He swore.

"Listen, you've got money and I've got connections. We can buy more as soon as things come down."

"A lot of the money's ruined. It has blood on it."

She shook her head. "It'll wash up. You'll see. Warm water and a little mild detergent, don't treat it rough and let it dry flat. You can always clean up money."

"I thought maybe I could just give it to them," he said. "Show them it wasn't any good anymore."

She kissed him, calling him Skeeter; and he shut his eyes so that Globnet and its audience would not see her kiss.

He had been after deer since before the first gray of dawn; but he had never gotten a shot, perhaps because of the helicopters. Helicopters had been flying over all morning, sweeping up and down this valley and a lot of other valleys. He thought about Arizona or New Mexico, he sometimes did, but concluded (as he generally had to) that they would be too open, too exposed. Colorado, maybe, or Canada.

The soldiers the helicopters had brought were spread out now, working their way slowly up the valley. Too few, he decided. There weren't enough soldiers and they were spread too thin. They expected him to run, as perhaps he would. He tried to gauge the distance

to the nearest.

Two hundred yards. A long two hundred yards that could be as much as two hundred and fifty.

But coming closer, closer all the time, a tall, dark-faced woman in a mottled green, brown, and sand-colored uniform that had been designed for someplace warmer than these snowy Pennsylvania woods. Her height made her an easy target-far easier than even the biggest doe-and she held a dead-black assault rifle slantwise across her chest. That rifle would offer full or semiautomatic operation, with a switch to take it from one to the other.

Less than two hundred yards. Very slowly Jay crouched in the place he had chosen, pulled his cap down to hide the stars of his upgrade, and then raised his head enough to verify that he could keep the woman with the assault rifle in view. His wound felt as hot as his cheeks, and there was blood seeping through the bandage; he was conscious of that, and conscious, too, that it was harder to breathe than it should have been.

A hundred and fifty yards. Surely it was not more than a hundred and fifty, and it might easily be less. He was aware of his breathing, of the pounding of his heart-the old thrill.

Thirty rounds in that black rifle's magazine, possibly. Possibly more, possibly as many as fifty. There would be an ammunition belt, too, if he had time to take it. Another two or three hundred rounds, slender, pointed bullets made to fly flatter than a stretched string and tumble through flesh.

For an instant that was less than a moment, less even than the blink of an eye, a phantom passed between him and the woman with the black assault rifle-a lean man in soiled buckskin who held a slender, graceful gun that must have been almost as long as he was tall.

A hallucination.

Jay smiled to himself. Had they seen that, back at Globnet? They must have, if they still remember everything he did. Would they put it on the news?

A scant hundred yards now. The little carbine seemed to bring itself to his shoulder.

Seventy yards, if that.

Jay took a deep breath, let it half out, and began to squeeze the trigger.