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Between the Walls (Original writing).

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Between the Walls

by

Claus Anthonisen

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through English and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

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For K, with all my love.
For the first time since the late Paleolithic, the water at the Earth's poles breaks away and runs. Meter by meter, the oceans rise, and fog thickens in the atmosphere. From satellites and space-stations, between the comings-and-goings of soldiers and the super-rich, scientists observe as the Earth's blue-green eye is slowly patched over with a gauze of grey mist.

Passing in and out of third planet's shadow, the Moon, walked on once, is practically forgotten. Out of sight, out of mind, its lure to the imagination dims until the tumbling flash appears just off the pale disc's edge. So close is the asteroid's trajectory, a little push is all it takes to bring it down to the powdery lunar surface. The icy jewel is made into an oasis—air and water for Vertigo Bay, the stopping place on the way to humanity's claiming of Mars.

But the claim is never staked. Just six more times the Earth laps the Sun before the fledgling outpost is abandoned. The uniformed, the brand-named ones, hurtling over the globe, riding their cannons of light, pull their orders from old, dusty envelopes. They bear witness to the deaths of billions, then join them, dissolving in flashbulb pops—the killer fireworks of super-orbital warfare.

Swimming round the sun, the Earth's outermost skin takes on marble-like stripes, the shades of its haze organizing slowly into lights and darks. Cold takes root among the swimming shadows. Water stiffens and scabs into the ice that swathes the continents.

Nearly two hundred times more, the third planet circumnavigates its star. The year is 2242, and the spark of humanity is flung once again across the gravitational gap; the lights come back on at Vertigo Bay.

Then, four years later...

* * *
PART I

Ten Days Before, 1:20 AM—

Movement from elsewhere in the bed has stirred Dr. David Metzenbergen from es slumber. E feels the mattress tremble beneath em, and shifts es head, nuzzling a cheek against white linen. A hint of perfume, petals and cinnamon, squeezes from the stuffing of the pillow e gathers into the crook of es arm. Comfortable with these few adjustments, e’s started to drift off again, when a scrape and a shudder, the sounds of a door sliding open, cut into the stillness. As the room brightens with the dream-like glow of indirect illumination, David’s eyelids flick open.

E rolls, letting es glance slide across darked-out paintings and over the reddish glints of the room’s real-wood cabinet and chest of drawers. The curtains at the balcony doors are being blown into the room by a current of air pushing in from outside. Their shadows billow down the length of the wall. Beverly Toe, wearing one of the Hide-a-Way Remote Resort’s complimentary robes, leans in the open doorway looking out. The wind flaps round the lower fringes of the terry-cloth, lifting it, now and again, to reveal es small, bare feet, and rounded calves.

The incandescence that shines in from the balcony’s deck is the light of antiquity: a tungsten filament superheated by moving electrons—energy generated by the resort’s own windmills. These weak power sources are the only ones within hundreds of kilometers. The resort is the only human habitation in all of Heidi-Gwai Natural Park.

At the balcony’s threshold, Beverly turns to balance in profile. David stares, admiring the way the weak glow brings out the blonde luster of es hair. Shoulder-length, its ends curve inward toward es neck, coming to a point at the cleft above es sternum. The robe’s two lapels are pulled together just below that, and David’s gaze briefly lowers to take in the terry-cloth shadows distributed over Beverly’s torso. Then es look shifts, traveling out into the night.

On the other side of the balcony’s railing, a tangle of cedar boughs stirs with the motion of the damp air. The flutter of the tree’s flat needles, drifting in and out of the
light’s orbit, entrances em. E focuses on the vague, but pervasive whisper created by the
great web of rubbing foliage.

   David pushes emself onto es side, propping es head up with a palm under es chin.
Beverly turns at the sound and David catches a glimpse of the shine on es cheek. E
watches Bev’s hand stray up to wipe it away, knuckles rubbing brusquely across es milky
skin.

   David’s voice comes croaking from es sleep-clogged throat, “Why are you
crying?”

   “I can’t help it.” Turning es face back toward the outdoors, Beverly pulls the
robe’s collar up to press it into es eyes. “It’s so beautiful.”

   David smiles. “But that’s no reason to cry.”

   Beverly looks at em, sniffs a little wetly, then lets es gaze fall to the carpet. “I
haven’t felt this way in years.” E flips es hair back from es face, trying a smile of es own,
managing only a crooked kind of grin. “I’m not sure I’ve ever felt this way.”

   “It’s your new body.”

   The grin falters as Beverly shakes es head, no.

   “You sure? You’ve been wearing that flesh for, what? Not quite six months, right?”

   “I think I’d feel this way even if I was still wearing the original. The park, the
forest—” Beverly gives es cheeks one last pat with es sleeve. “There was an animal
sitting on the rail when I woke up, it had the most cunning face—fascinating little
hands—” e cups es own hands up near es nose, crouching slightly to imply a miniaturized
version of the same.

   “It was probably a raccoon. One came up the last time I was here.”

   “It’s all so—” Beverly’s mind wanders into the abstract. E looks up as if the
world of the intellect had a location just overhead, as if actual flesh ciphers hovered
above em. That their minds are still so much a mystery to them is the thing David finds
most beautiful in the freshborn. Like the fleshborn, but lacking any of their physical
irregularities. E supplies Bev with the missing word, “Unspoiled.”

   “Yes, that’s it.” Beverly’s eyes widen. “‘Unspoiled.’”

   This is the modifier that David has most commonly heard used to describe this
situation. The difficulty first time visitors to a Natural Park always have in finding it is
equally predictable. To be fair, the expression’s completely inadequate to the circumstances. It’s for this reason, David supposes, that some people feel inclined to apply the even less accurate ‘untouched,’ or ‘pristine,’ but David could tell—‘unspoiled’ was the one that suited Beverly. E waits, knowing the freshborn has more to say.

“I look out there, and it’s like I’m waking up from a dream.” The curtain starts to flow out, sucked over the balcony’s threshold by a new gust of air. Beverly pushes off the jamb of the doorframe to grab an edge of the twilled textile in one hand. E spins out to the centre of the small balcony, the sheer material winding up around es body. Once, twice, then half again, before e stops, sheathed in the curtain up to es chin, the electric light straight above. “It’s like my whole life, all my work, all my pain, sickness—and the deaths, my parents, my friends, lovers—all just a bad dream. And not just mine—history—history itself—just a bad dream. Here I am, after all, a boy again, staring out the window at a scene I believed existed only in vids.”

David’s eyes run over the curve of Beverly’s cheekbone, defined by the glow above her. E makes an idle guess at the fractal equation responsible for Beverly’s profile. “First of all,” e says, “You’re not a boy.”

Bev laughs. “How can I keep forgetting?” Under the layers of twill, es arm slithers down es abdomen as if needing to check.

“That’s not what I meant. You’re—what was it you said? Eighty years old?”

“Sixty-eight. I earned the Privilege as a tech in the Organ Banks—the eye and optical—”

“Neither a girl nor a boy, though the flesh is new. You’re a Citizen.” E pulls emself into a seated position. “Didn’t anyone tell you, Beverly? Citizens aren’t supposed to waste energy on tears or fantasy.” The faraway look fades from Beverly’s eyes. Metzenbergen smiles. “At least, we’re supposed to forget how to after a while.”

The freshborn begins untangling emself from the curtain. David aims his voice at the ceiling, intoning somberly, “Diligence and vigilance are the Citizen’s duty. Long life, green life, and machine life are the rewards. Welcome to the green life.” E waves in the direction of the cedars weaving in the breeze. “Say ‘hi’ to the Lifeform, Bev.”

Beverly spins out of the curtain’s last twists and steps over to the edge of deck. “Hello Lifeform! Thanks for everything!” E leans out, over the rail, as if expecting some
reply. The rush of air through the forest’s canopy swells and fades and swells again. The freshborn laughs, pushing emself upright to saunter back through the doors and into the room.

That’s right, David thinks, time to come back to bed. But Beverly stops.

“But—you do still get this feeling, don’t you?”

David flops back onto es pillow. “Which one is that?”

“You know, this elation, this ‘unspoiled’ thing.”

“Sure I do.” The ceiling is one great shadow, nearly uniform except for the unlit chandelier straight overhead. “Bless the Re-construction.”

“But this feeling—this feeling of waking up to a pristine world—”

“Well, no. That really should go away.” E closes es eyes and folds es arms across es chest. “That’s something more associated to a Citizen’s first transpiration. The Natural Park just brings it swimming to the surface.”

“It passes then.”

“Remember where it says in the Rules: ‘Renew the flesh but not the self, for all new flesh shall belong to the Lifeform.’ ”

A few ribbons of hair flop over Bev’s cheek as she cocks es head. “Rule thirty-three.”

Metzenbergen ignores the interruption. “The Lifeform is neither new, nor, sadly, ‘pristine.’ Think about it,” Metzenbergen rolls onto es side again. “You’ve just suggested that your ‘awakening’ has somehow brought the Lifeform into being—a ‘pristine world’ you called it—when it’s the other way round, of course.”

“Rule thirty-three, right?”

“Yes. If you like, we can do some meditations on the Rules of Constructive Engagement.” E pats the bed beside em. “Later.”

David nearly sighs out loud when Beverly turns and wanders over to the dresser. There’s a painting above it that seems to have caught the freshborn’s attention. From where David lies it looks like nothing but a square of shadow.

“Then these feelings are recidivist,” Bev says.

“No, no.” David sees that e should rise, go to the freshborn, but e doesn’t.

“They’re not recidivist—well they are, but they’re also natural. They’ll go away over
time. You’ll see. You may experience them again after your second transpiration—even your third.”

Beverly wheels. “But—” David’s eyes don’t return es stare, flicking down instead to where the knot in the robe’s sash has begun to slip, “—what if you don’t want them to ‘go away’?” The robe falls open.

“It doesn’t matter,” David says, “they will. You’ll even be glad when they do.” The pale strip that has revealed itself between the terry-cloth’s roughened edges is a very smooth kind of path, nonetheless David’s gaze takes its time wandering back to Beverly’s face. “Eventually, you’ll be like every other Citizen. The Natural Park still inspires—I still feel elation. Here I experience first-hand the unity of the biomass. What you’re really talking about is that kind of connection, and, yes, I still feel it, but not as an extension of my ‘self,’ quite the reverse: I’m affirmed within the Lifeform’s greater purpose.”

Bev clasps the lapels of the robe back together. “The Privilege is to serve the Lifeform.” The quote is from rule number forty. “But, I’ve seen trees before, even animals—this is different.”

“Poor, ailing Lifeform Earth exists in fractured bits everywhere, but in the parks you get to see it in healthy abundance. Your first new body, your first visit to a Natural Park—it’s not unusual for awe to cause a resurgence of ego. It’s a kind of displacement. Just don’t cling to it.”

Beverly is staring into the distance above Metzenbergen’s head. “Perhaps I’m not worthy of Citizenship.”

“Your feelings, as I said, are a common freshborn reaction. It’s nothing to be ashamed about. In fact,” David pulls the covers back from one side of the bed, “I happen to find it very attractive.” E pats invitingly on the sheet beside em. “And, trust me, it will pass.”

Es assurances fail to elicit even a twitch from the staring freshborn. Deciding on a different tack, David tries to bring Beverly back onto familiar ground, “How does the first rule of Constructive Engagement begin?”

Bev walks to the foot of the bed. “Humanity is only one differentiated cell within the greater organism. All thank the Lifeform.”
“There, we’ve gotten a start. But we can finish our meditation later, can’t we?” E pats the bed again, but Beverly has reverted back into immobility. “You’ll be a fine Citizen, Bev. With a little luck, you’ll live out all five hundred of your allotted years to practice. Now, really, I think—”

Beverly shows no sign of listening. E’s still looking distractedly just above David’s head, eyes wide and intent. David nearly turns to look up, but then remembers—above the bed’s headboard, framed in wood, thick, dark, and incised with vine-like whorls and curlicues, hangs an old-fashioned glass mirror.

Bev’s hand rises, the tips of es finger grazing es chin. “It’s only been six months. Male for sixty-eight years, and now, for six months—just a slip of a girl.” Beverly’s pulls es hair slowly back over es shoulder, sliding its blonde through es fingers. E turns es face as far to one side as e can without taking es eyes off the mirror. “Sometimes its hard to imagine ever getting used to it.”

“Everyone does.”

Beverly’s head swivels, checking es other profile. “I still don’t quite recognize myself. Even when I was young—” e spreads the robe open as if it were a cape, “I mean, I was pretty, but I was never so—” e swivels on the ball of one foot, “so—”

“Sculpted,” says Metzenbergen. “A work of art, really.” The actual making of bodies is well outside es medical expertise, yet somehow David takes personal pride in every aspect of the transpiration process. “Form, line, desire and function—a DNA spool of data, strung out and made into meat—a step up off the ladder of natural evolution.”

Beverly lets go of the robe and the cape drops, folding haphazardly back over es body. For a moment, while the terry-cloth sways, es arms remain stretched out, above and behind em, then one drops, while the other bends at the elbow. From es forehead, Beverly drags a single extended finger down the bridge of nose, and over es pouted lips. “I think I’m finally getting used to seeing this face as my own.”

The concept of ‘ownership,’ applied in this way, makes Metz think reflexively of a different part of the fortieth rule: ‘To give up the flesh is to surrender all property.’ E stifles the thought. “Yes,” e says, staring at the mesmerized freshborn, “but how about what’s below the neck?”
Beverly’s eyes skip down from the mirror, suddenly aware of David’s gaze. A smile widens across es face. “I hope I never get used to that part.”

“Have another look.” David raises es hand, bringing Bev’s attention back to the mirror. “See if you have.”

Beverly stares at em for a second longer, then laughs, es hands coming up to cinch the robe around es throat as e looks down and away. The total authenticity of the freshborn’s sudden burst of shyness stirs deeply in Metzenbergen’s blood.

“You think I should?” A certain rawness in Bev’s voice indicates the moment of innocence is passed. Bev looks down to watch the flat of es own palms slide over the white ruff of the terry-cloth. Over the rise of es breast, es hands descend to the top of es thighs, where they meet, curving inward as they pull the edges of the robe together.

“‘Diligence and vigilance,’” David says. “You’d be failing in your duty if you didn’t take a good look.” These last words are wasted. Bev’s eyes have already returned magnetically to the reflecting glass.

Pulled taught, the robe’s collar is a tall, narrow vee that opens just below the freshborn’s navel. Bunching the terry-cloth into one hand just below es waist, Beverly reaches up with the other to pry the legs of the vee open. Up and over, e pulls each lapel aside so as to create a neat, diagonal frame around es midsection.

Metzenbergen stares. At least this still works for him, thank the Lifeform. Es juvenile fetish for the freshborn, and all the trouble it causes em—for these moments it seems worth it. Beverly, with es bottom lip caught between es teeth, stands gazing, enrapt in the image of es own forthcoming nakedness. Metzenbergen sees what Bev sees—the robe propped open around two handfuls of perfect esthetic design, contours mirrored across the shadow of their separateness, equalities of curvature, rising to a smear of pink at their tips.

E stares. But it is Beverly’s eyes, es expression, es trembling pose, not the flesh that captivates em. David stares, aroused by the freshborn’s fascination with emself.

The vee of the robe’s collar slackens as it breaks into two parallel lines. Beverly’s hands cup under the swell of es tits, pushing upward. Thumbs and forefingers curl up to pinch and twist the daubs of es nipples into red knots. Es head dips back. For a moment, es eyes close, but they snap open again quickly, fastening once again on the mirror. Es hands
drop and the robe slithers to the ground. More shadows and curves—belly, hip, thighs, and, like a flag demanding attention, the curled thicket with its contrast of colour, of angle.

“Amazing,” whispers Beverly, es voice a distracted croak. “Six months ago I couldn’t get an erection if my life depended on it. My shrivelled, old willy just wouldn’t—” E breaks off, looking down at David, remembering es audience. “Oh, I’m sorry, I’m—”

“No. That’s alright. Don’t think about me.”

Beverly hesitates a moment, but es eyes are inexorably pulled back up by the draw of the mirror. “I was all ashes at the centre. Burnt out. And now—” E raises one foot up and places it on the foot of the bed. Es thigh swings open and es slim fingers slip into the cleft. “Now it’s all fire and sparks.” E removes his fingers, looking down at the shine. “Now, I get ‘wet’—” E giggles, girlishly. “I get wet every time I just think of it down there.”

Metzenbergen whispers, not wanting to distract the freshborn from es self-lust, “Do you like it?”

“Oh,” Beverly sighs, eyes closed, and a hand running back into esself. “Yes. Oh, yes.” Es eyes open. “Do you know, practically the first thing I did when I woke up in the rejuvenation clinic, was masturbate? I didn’t care about the hidey-eyes. I couldn’t control myself. I had to know what it was like for a fem.”

David says nothing.

“And then,” Beverly’s knees bend into the edge of the bed, “I did it again.” E edges forward until e’s kneeling on the mattress. “And then a third time!” E laughs, green eyes flashing.

“What was it like?”

“It was the same, but so different—the convulsions, the pulse through the belly, out to the tip of every nerve. But exciting each time—I couldn’t spend myself the way I remembered—energy was being pulled in more than expended. I was exhausted after three times, of course, and the peaceful feeling was the same, but I wasn’t drained. No, it was more like being repleted somehow.”

“Tell me more.”
Beverly rises to es feet, and walks up the bed to the mirror, planting es feet on either side of David’s torso. David’s palms slide up the thighs spread above em.

Beverly looks down at em. “I lost my ‘virginity,’” e laughs at the word, “within hours after I left. I never even asked the Citizen’s name. I couldn’t help myself. With every step I felt a jiggle of tits—the heaviness of them, I tell you, begging to be shared, made—functional. My nipples were on fire from the rubbing of my shirts.” E gets down on es knees again, and pulls the sparse forest of pubic hairs apart to show David the pink and the swollen clitoris inside. But as Davis lifts es head up to meet it, Beverly laughs again, bouncing away, off of the bed, back onto es feet on the floor.

“Some things seem completely different. Size, mass—I like to be covered, weighed down—I want to reach to get around a partner, not enfold em in my arms, or be able to circle their waist in my hands. I want to be overwhelmed by the whole thing—just taken away, rather than to any specific place, like orgasm. There’s also this feeling of ‘oneness’ with whoever it is—” e turns and walks a few steps away. “I didn’t know it, but I was more by myself before, fucking to slake my own desire, and once fucked, by myself again in a tired kind of completion.”

Metzenbergen, beckoned by the retreating ass, nearly rises and follows, but e stops when Bev turns to look at him again. “The strangest thing though, maybe the biggest change, was after. At least it was one of the things that really struck me. When I was younger, male, I was always scrupulously clean—you know, wiping up, getting rid of the evidence. But now I love to feel the sap running down my leg. I avoid bathing. I love the mingled juices all over me. I revel in the stain spreading between my legs.” E walks back to the bedside, but Metzenbergen feels the change in the freshborn’s mood. “But what about you, David?”

Metzenbergen reaches out to catch Bev’s hand. E tries to haul the freshborn onto the mattress next to him before the heat cools again.

But Bev resists, pulling back from es grip. “You must have some stories to tell.”

“No. None as good as yours.” E yanks again. This time Beverly steps back, pulling David halfway out of the bed to break the grip.

“Play fair.” Bev wags a finger at em. “Your stories must be a whole lot better.”
David pulls emself back among the pillows, rearranging the covers over es body. E says nothing, knowing what’s coming.

“You’re the oldest living human being, David. You can’t tell me you’ve got no stories.”

The beating pressure of es blood dissipates instantly. E clenches es jaw. Es reluctance must be obvious, but Beverly refuses to relent. “I mean, you’re more than two centuries old, right?”

David sighs. E rolls over, turning es back toward the freshbom, in whom e’s suddenly lost interest. “Yes, the facts are quite as you state them. In just over two more years, I’ll be two hundred and fifty years old.”

The mattress rolls slightly. Weight settles down on its edge behind David. A hand alights on es bare shoulder.

“Is it wrong to be curious?” Bev asks. “I mean, who wouldn’t be?”

Nobody, thinks David. Least of all a freshbom like this one, but wouldn’t it be nice, for once, if somebody wasn’t? E rolls over. Es arm falls across Beverly’s thighs. The freshbom is once again kneeling beside em. Es elbow bent, David’s palm absently covers Bev’s breast. It’s curve reduced now back to pure geometry, the flesh of it of no more interest than any other piece of meat.

“No,” e says, responding in a way he thinks of as generous. “It’s not wrong. It’s just that my early experiences with transpiration really weren’t that pleasant. As you well know, being transpiration midwife, I’ve never been able to change sexes. My bodies, aside from minor adjustments, have all been clones of the original. That body being one of the few that could accept the wire.”

“Still, there’s other—” Bev’s words are cut short by a gasp as David squeezes es breast sharply to shut em up. David smiles, as if e has no idea what e’s just done.

“And as the first to get the wire—well, in those days it was agony. An experience I’ll never forget, but would very much like to.” E moves es hand up to Bev’s cheek, brushing the loose hairs back and tucking them behind es ear. “Perhaps I sound ungrateful. I’ve lived a long time, as you say. A quarter of a millennium.” E senses it will be es last opportunity to avoid the inevitable question. E tries. “The body I’m wearing, of course, is much younger.” E pulls the covers aside. Es vat-generated flesh, though in its
tertiary stage and hence aging rapidly, remains svelte. Its skin, somewhat less taught than Beverly’s, is unblemished. E pushes over to make space on the sheet beside him, and rubs a hand over the wrinkled whiteness.

Beverly tilts es head, then es hand flashes up to es mouth as e gets David’s joke. With the most girlish of giggles, e drops and rolls, snuggling all es curves up into David. Their legs intertwine as Bev slides es hand down behind em to find David’s now wilted penis.

Metzenbergen laughs at the intentness of the stare Bev sends sidelong into es face. A hint of stiffness is roused by the manipulations taking place below. David’s own fingers are wandering from the ripples of Beverly’s ribs, over the smooth swell of es belly when the freshbom spits out the request. “If you wanted to, you could tell me about Ditto Straub.”

David closes es eyes, trying to focus on the dendrite trickle-feed that’s running up the strands of his nervous system, on the pool of it spreading in the pleasure-centre of his brain. He fails.


Beverly’s mouth begins to move down, over and across the center of David’s torso. “That’s why I was so excited to meet you.”

David’s eyes are open, now. “Because I knew Ditto Straub?”
Beverly looks up, through her eyelashes, at David's vulnerable frown. How could someone so old, e thinks, be so easy to read? E sees that the answers e needs won't be forthcoming. Not right away. It's good that e's got three more days. E considers Metzenbergen's question. "No," e answers, truthfully. "Well, I mean, that's a part of it." Not that Beverly really minds lying. After all, pretty much everything about her is a lie. How else could she have a preposterous name like 'Beverly Toe'? "It's just that—well, it's been four years since the old guards and cowards of the Council finally gave the go-ahead to re-open the base—"

David can't help interrupting. "The Council's reluctance to open Vertigo Bay has nothing to do with 'cowardice.'"

"Of course—"

"Civilization was totally destroyed because of Ditto Straub and Vertigo Bay. You new Citizens have no idea."

"Thank the Lifeform, I—"

"It's always been the goal, to take the Lifeform into space. The Council had good reasons to be patient about it, though. Calling them 'cowards' because of it, it's plain ungrateful."

"You're right." Beverly resumes e kissing. "I'm sorry." E breasts begin to squirm luxuriously against David's penis, ignoring its unresponsiveness. E pinches David's nipples between e fingers. "But they said a while ago that the repair work was pretty much done. And now they're delaying the mission to Mars. There's a rumour—"

"A 'rumour'? Beverly, please—"

"But—"

"Why ask me about it anyway? I long ago gave up any interest in what goes on at Council."

Beverly straddles David's hips, bringing the flesh of esself squarely down on em. David feels the heat of those soft folds, but the swivel of Beverly's pelvis moves nothing inside em.

The freshbom bends to run her tongue wetly over the rim of David's ear. "I'm sorry," e whispers, "it's just that you've had so much experience." Beverly sits up, eyes closed, thrusting, squeezing e own breasts. "Who wouldn't just—" E reaches
behind to get a hold of David’s scrotum, “—the chance—” e’s rolling David’s balls like dice in es hand, “—to share it?” Bev’s eyes open. “Tell me about Ditto and Babe Solomon.”

Abruptly, David pushes the freshborn off of em. E rises from the bed and walks toward the balcony doors, where the curtains still flutter, spreading their rippling shadows over the wall. Memories begin spilling around the meticulously arranged partitions in es mind.

David remembers Ditto Straub rolling, then coming up to cut a guard in half with a bolt from his lazz. E remembers Babe, her contorted face peering up from behind the desk in the corner she’d squeezed herself into for cover, “Kill them! Kill them all!” And then another lazz, flung loose from the fallen man’s hand, spinning across the floor to bump into the toe of David’s shoe.

Metzenbergen turns to the dresser. Stretching out es arms to lean against it, e gazes at the painting just above. ‘Still-Life of a Bowl of Fruit’. E sighs. Heidi-Gwai isn’t the place for such violent recollections. They generate none of the constructive energies to which a Natural Park is a monument. But e also knows that Beverly’s questions alone could never have been enough to make him re-live any part of es scarred history. These memories have been floating very close to the surface for a while. Indeed, this is why e’s come to the Park. Ever since e got the order—

“You know,” e says it quickly, before e can think better of it, “they’ve asked me to go back up there—to Vertigo Bay.” E’s astounded. E’s just transgressed about ten sets of protocols. E wasn’t supposed to tell anyone. Not even Altavera, es married—es wife, as they used to say.

The painting, e thinks, still staring up at it, is a bad one. E turns to look at the impeccably crafted body of the freshborn, curled on the shadowy white of the real cotton sheets. Maybe—maybe this is what e really needs. Es head gives a barely perceptible nod. E decides that e will tell Bev a story. After all, they’ve got three more days together—they’ll have to spend it somehow.

E walks back to the bed and, after once again brushing the hair off Beverly’s cheek, back behind the perfect smallness of es ear, e lies down beside the freshborn.
A few minutes later, the murmur of David’s voice is traveling through the room. It creeps by the curtain, and out onto the balcony where it’s absorbed by the rustle of the cedar tree whose uppermost boughs droop, cone-laden, above the wrought-iron rail.

A cone drops. An ant is thrown from its woody scales as the cone bounces once on the floor of the balcony, then rolls under the palings to disappear. The ant scurries left until it’s stopped by the sheer edge of the stone deck. Turning, it scurries back to the right. The trail it’s been following all its life, up and down the trunk of the tree, is nowhere to be found. Up and down the cedar, the traffic of insects continues as usual.

The cone, meanwhile, tumbles end over end, ricocheting off one branch, then another, and then another, before skipping off the bicep of the man squeezed up against the cedar tree’s trunk. Reflexively, the man glances at his arm where the cone hit, just below the epaulette that labels him as one of Heidi-Gwai’s waiting staff. He scans the ground in search of what it was that struck him. He can see everything quite clearly through his night-goggles, but the cone has rolled completely into the brambles. After a moment, the man turns his gaze back up in the direction he’d been looking beforehand.

If someone had seen this man, they might have thought he was a lover waiting for the object of his devotion to appear from above so he could deliver his supplications. Of course, the way he’s positioned himself, it’s virtually impossible that anyone could really pick him out from his surroundings. The man adjusts his posture against the tree at the same time as he reaches up to adjust the small transmitter that’s inserted in his ear. His hand freezes, then backs away from the device, having positioned it perfectly. “That’s right, Metz, tell that one.” The man smiles. “I like that story.” His whisper, practically inaudible to begin with, vanishes, absorbed by the murmur of the wind gambolling through the cedars, firs and hemlocks that blanket the area for kilometers around.

End of Part I
The day before, 11:40 PM—

There's a lazz-pistol in my hand and I'm peeking round the edge of a window-frame, gazing through pillars of rising smoke, into the street below. I'm supposed to be keeping a look-out, watching for cop-like motions to appear around the wreckage of the overturned public-transport, or among the bodies strewn between burning market stalls.

It's hard to pay attention, though. I'm supposed to be scrutinizing every detail—looking out—but no, inward's the only place my mind will go. I keep wondering, even as I pull the trigger once, twice, five, six times, blasting away at some pathetically maimed bystander, "Who's doing this? Really, who? Who the spam am I?" I know, in part, it's just because I've got the Total-Vision on—right now, of course, about halfway through this week's segment of The Fastened Nation, I'm supposed to be Cerberus R. Kayne.

I thought participating in the episode would distract me, but I was wrong. These weird thoughts just keep coming and coming. For instance, the real Cerberus R. Kayne really wouldn't give a fixing pix about R17. But me? Well, I just can't seem to help myself—I just keep thinking about it. Thinking and thinking and thinking about R17 getting tagged yesterday.

I walked by on last night's shift, like I usually do, and there it was, the little chip, hanging off by a wire. Tagged.

It's funny—I never thought about R16, or R12 when they were tagged. Or any of the D's, or L's, or even any of the B's for that matter (and the B's are a very sleek template). But last night I noticed the little chip attached to R17, and now I can't stop thinking about it.

Really, I should have known it would happen. I thought things couldn't get much worse, but it turns out I was being a bit too optimistic.
In the T.Viz show, Randy Lammquist torches the Sandersons' master bedroom. Incandescent globs of thermite spray from the nozzle of his Endless Flame and the show's invisible chorus bursts out in their digital chorling. As Cerberus, I'm supposed to join them. But I don't—Randy's brand of mayhem's getting just a bit too predictable. Besides, *The Fastened Nation* has been nothing but repeats lately. I've been in this storyline before.

I know Egan Stakk, the inept captain of the sububban Judges League (our foil and arch-nemesis), has managed to close the circle around us outside. The rest of the Liberation Front has already slipped away to safety. Randy and I (playing the role of Cerberus, his number-one sidekick) are on our own, once again, with a half-hour of blood-slick slapstick ahead of us. I can't stand it.

I toss the lazz onto the melting yellow shag of the carpet. I reach up to my temples. Randy, his Endless Flame, and the screams of the wounded all vanish. Now, instead of the Sandersons' bedroom suite, I'm looking down at my hands. They're propped on the thighs of my splayed legs. A long, thin cable, my T.Viz connection, snakes from a black box in the wall to the tangle in my fingers—the neuro-net I've just taken off my head. I'm alone, slouched on the burst and sagging love seat amid the close colourlessness of my compappartment.

It's a bit past 5:30 in the afternoon. Most days I'd be getting ready to go to Sigma Rejuve right now, do the job I've been doing for twelve years. Tonight's my night off.

I suppose if these thoughts had been going through my head a few years ago, that's exactly what I would have said: 'Who am I? Well, I'm employee two-four-four, working down at Sigma Rejuve.' But somehow that just won't do it anymore. I mean, can that really be it? Is that all I am? All I was ever meant to be?

When I think about it (as if I needed to think even more about it), it wouldn't really have been true back then either. After all, when I landed the job inside the Walls—actually inside the Industrial Park—I believed I was one of the lucky few with a real destiny. I thought I was going to be a Citizen. Then, when they asked, I might still have answered 'Who am I? Night security,' but everyone would've known the truth: 'He's—that is—E's a Citizen, that's who. Now show some respect.' That would have been the real answer. That's a real somebody.
Better not to think about it.

There's not much in my surroundings to help with the mood, though. The air is stifling. Rank with the lives and deaths of the previous tenants in their thousands. My T.Viz addiction, like most people's, springs directly from the fact that I can't stand to sense the place where I'm really living. My compact is really more of a decrepit cube than a home—four flat walls held apart by a few meagre paces worth of floor-space. Rather than really brightening anything, the dim wattage of my single lamp just creeps around and makes the stains that permeate everything seem to flow. Staring at them now, it doesn't take long before one mutating shadows or another has reminded me, once again, of R17's long shape.

All this thinking! I used to be able to rely on my mind as a refuge from the cesspool of my environment. I was sure my intellect would be my ticket out. Talent, I was always told, would be rewarded. 'Meditate upon Rules of Constructive Engagement'—knuckle under more like it. Obey, be diligent, work hard, lose the self through duty to the 'Lifeform'—this is the way to the chrysalis—the great transformation: transpirition, eternal life.

Well, I obeyed every rule, I worked, I wrote their tests, and all I got to do was watch the second skin, the immaculate coat of many colours drift ever further out of sight. What don't I know about Miller? About Beltane? And still I wear this rotting flesh, choke on this mantle of disease.

It's true that maybe I could never quite buy it all—I mean, 'God is Word, never more than just a word, but forever all words too. those spoken and those impossible to speak,' what does that mean (Beltane wrote that—it's from the Council Constitution, and not the Rules at all)?—as if anyone could really care besides. But the plain truth is, talent and hard work never had anything to do with it. It's all who you know. I don't give a fixing eff-pix what anybody says, rule number eighty-eight limits Citizenship to a hundred and forty-four thousand at any given time, and that means it's all down to who's ass you've just finished tongue-washing.

So pix Miller, and pix Beltane too. It's not my fault that I'm too smart to gobble up all their turds. Smart enough, in fact, to figure out there's more than one way to peel
the flesh. Buried in the meat of rule one-twenty-one there’s a shortcut to acquiring Citizenship. One that doesn’t include ‘diligence’ or ‘vigilance.’ It’s called marriage.

Which, of eff-pixing course, makes me think of my girlfriend now—my hope, my heart, my dream—Lisa. My real ticket. E’s a Citizen. I met em in Alberni, after I started working behind the Walls. And then, about nine months ago, e got emself a job at Vertigo Bay. On the Moon. I haven’t seen em in the flesh since.

The Moon! Only forty-six septillion or whatever k’s away—

Better not to think about it.

Nearly six o’clock. Randy and sidekick Cerberus should be winding up their antics about now. I fiddle with the neuro-net, thinking of putting it back on and resuming my fictional identity.

As I recall, this episode takes it’s usual twist when a biological weapons lab is discovered in little Jimmy Sandersons’ bedroom. Egan Stakk’s righteous (and highly violent) indignation is defused by Randy’s heroic (and inadvertent) containment of a plague. His rampage with the Endless Flame is redeemed when it turns out that the neighbourhood (not to mention the neighbours) were already awash with a deadly contagion and would’ve had to be reduced to cinders anyway. In the show’s signature ending, Randy shoots Stakk’s balls off when they get splashed with something infectious. The running gag has the Captain of the Judges ending up at the organ bank with his prick in hand while the nurses all fail to stifle their rambunctious laughter.

I toss the neuro-net to one side and stand. It takes five steps to cross from where I’m seated to the far wall of my compapt. I take the requisite strides, my feet falling alongside the wave of cable on the floor. I stretch out my arms and feel the plaztick bow as I lean into the wall above the small black box. At least my compapt has a variable energy wave receiver. It picks up the e-beam that emanates from Alberni Industrial Park. I don’t have to depend on black-market battery chargers to power my little lamp, or my hotplate, or my T.Viz. My job pays just enough for me to partake in the vestiges of civilization that trickle out of from behind the Walls.

I’m not allowed to live there though. And “partake” is clearly the wrong word. The rites of passage that would make me a full Citizen are apparently beyond my abilities. Who, then, am I now?
I shake my head, watching my hair dangle in front of my eyes. My intellect, my last refuge, invaded, occupied by doubt—the cesspool has found a crack and seeped straight through. I'm sinking into the mire. There's got to be a way out. I've got to find it.

I always liked the rules where they talk about the future for humanity being in 'the heavens.' Of course, Constructive Engagement has to put it all in terms of 'duty'—our 'duty' to 'go forth and multiply,' to bring the eff-pixing 'Lifeform' to the stars. Whatever. I just like the idea of all that clean, empty, infinite space coming between me and the scum I presently swim through all day long.

I kick the wall. The rubbery material vibrates but doesn't break.

I've seen the stars. Twice now. Once when I was a kid and once when I was twenty. I mean really seen them, too. In the flesh, and not on screen. And not just the few that are visible in spring and fall when the haze thins out a bit. Both those other times the fog cracked open and slid away and there they were—spilled across an infinite bowl of black satin. People still love to talk about that last time, in 2231. They do every chance they get. I cried. All those little specks of pristine white, an endless cloud of never-changing lifelessness—

I love the idea of being out there. And even if I didn't, I'd pretty much do anything to get the fix out of here.

I kick the wall again, a little harder.

I live on the twenty-third floor of a block-building on VanCity Island, the Manaimo suburb. The building was built to hold up to three thousand families. At one time it probably did, but the catastrophes of the twenty-first century did an excellent job of thinning the numbers out worldwide.

Medical advances, genetic manipulation, wholesale organ transplants—I guess people felt they'd annihilated death. I've heard there were forty billion when the population peaked. Some of those were more machine than human, of course. And I guess that number also includes a lot of gen-eng'ed creatures, prehensile dolphins (dolphands, I think they called them) and whatnot, that really weren't people at all. But none of that makes the thought any less awful. All those stinking, sweating, festering pools of rubbing flesh—
I resist the urge to kick the plazttick wall as hard as I can, knowing I would probably only break my foot. This place has withstood a whole lot worse. I straighten and begin to wander in a tight circle at the centre of the room.

In this whole block-building where I live now, there’s probably only about five other people. And I practically never see them. I like it that way. Spam it all, I didn’t used to really mind this little compapt. That was when I was sure I’d be leaving it one day to move behind the Walls. Now, of course, it’s just another part of my permanent prison. I turn around to pace out my loops in the other direction. I have to every so often, or my ankles start to hurt.

Before I moved here, I lived with the rest of the Manaimo sububbanites, wiggling together in one big knot around the market, like so many maggots stuffed inside a corpse. But I was never interested in living like a worm off the dead. The instant I finally got work in Albermi Industrial Park I came straight out here. This was as close as I could get to the IP without having the gloating exclusivity of its Walls looking down on me everywhere I went. Being a plebe is bad enough without my face being constantly rubbed in it.

I stop my circles to change directions again. but freeze when the smallest flash of blue and white catches my eye. There, on a little shelf next to where my bed pulls out, sits a small mottled sphere of glass. It’s turquoise sheen sets it quite apart from the various yellowish grays that comprise my compappartment’s central colour scheme.

Who am I?

The ninth Rule of Constructive Engagement says ‘There is no part that is apart.’ It says there is no ‘I’, there’s just the sum of my relationships—a moment from amidst the series of all relationships.

I cross the room to pick the sphere up off its stand and weigh it in my palm. The glass is cool, surprisingly heavy for its size. As I roll it in my grip, the rounded unevenness of its surface massages the tightened muscles of my hand. I turn it until I find what I’m looking for: the dot of red.

Suddenly, focussed on that tiny point of scarlet, all this thinking coalesces—maybe there is a way out, after all.
Underneath the red spot are some tiny letters. They read: ‘Vertigo Bay.’ The small blue-white sphere is a globe of the Moon. Lisa gave it to me before she left. So I could see where she was, she said, even if I could never really see the Moon itself.

Who am I?

I let the sphere roll from my open hand and falls to the ground, shattering in every direction. I’m someone who’s lost all interest in relationships.

I kick the shards aside and get ready to leave my compapartment.

*   *   *

Eight Weeks Before, 4:14 AM—

Joseph Regent and Zimon Trunk work night security down at the bodyshop. They both love the night-shift because they really don’t have to do very much, aside from play cards, keep their eyes on a few dials, and talk about their co-worker, Delano Jones. There’s a few other things involved in their actual job-description, but these three things are what they tend to focus on. They especially like the last one, talking about Delano Jones, since they both agree so thoroughly on what a spam-jamming, eff-pixing, six-fixer he is. In fact, that’s what they’re doing right now.

“Whadda zpam-jammer,” says Joe.

“Eff-pigzing zigz-figzer, ya mean,” mumbles Zimon, with a frown on his round, red face. He rearranges his hand of five cards for the sixth or seventh time.

Del has gone to do the safeties—again.

Del’s a tight-ass. The wetsacks aren’t going anywhere and he knows it. But up he comes from his stint prowling around the lobby, “You gays checked the coolers like you’re supposed to?” And Joe with a full house, Zimon with a little more money than brains, and the antes looking lonely at the centre of the table.

So Joe told him, “Eff-pigz-it about th’ coolerz already, wud ya, Del?” He pointed over his shoulder at the viewing monitors. “I don’ zee any publig menace goin on. No pardies, no danzing, no revolushunz or anythin. Do you see any revolushunz, Zimon?”
Zimon answered, “No, Joe,” then threw down two cards and pointed two fingers in the air. “No revolushunz.”

Of course, Del was the only one of them to actually look at the screens. Joe watched out of the corner of his eye as irritation compressed Del’s already pinched features. Del can’t stand it when either Joe or Zimon are right. There was absolutely nothing going on downstairs. There never is at night, unless it’s one of the three of them down there that’s doing it.

So off he’d gone, Del, with yet another bug up his ass.

“Whadda zpam-jammer,” says Joe.

“Eff-pigzing zpam-jammer,” mumbles Zimon, rearranging the cards in his hand yet again. “Dwelve creds do ztay?”

“Yeah. I razed ya four.” Joe waits for Zimon to finish making up his mind. He watches Zimon count out his chips and push them slowly out onto the table. Eventually, his thick, stubby limb retreats from the pile of plastic.

Joe slaps his full house down onto the table’s gray metal surface. “I juzz godda dell ya, Zimon,” his long, bony fingers reach out to rake in his winnings, “thad Del-bone iz drivin me bonzo.”

Zimon blinks for a moment longer at the cards still clamped in his own sweaty mitts, then, with a rasping sigh, he tosses them down on the table. He leans back in his chair and swivels to his right. From under the swell of his forehead, his beady eyes look out, over the dials, levers, monitors, diode bio-read-outs, and other luminous displays that cover two of the room’s four walls. He folds his stained white-coated sleeves across the bloat of his belly.

Joe, meanwhile, stacks his chips, trying but failing to focus on their satisfying cumulative height. He stands abruptly. “I mean rilly, Zimon,” his chair goes skittering backward. “Bonzo-gonzo!” He points at the screens again, “Affer all, we god hidey-evez,” he waves at the dials and meters, “we god bio-zenzors,” he waves at the air, “we god nanotech all over th’ plaze. Bud zumhow thad eff-pigzing Del-bone thingz he’z alwayz godda be on th’ lookoud fer evil.”

Zimon’s round head rotates slightly on top of his invisible neck. “Agtually, there’s not much nanotech aroun today.”
Joe frowns and takes a quick glance around the room. Zimon’s right—the faint rainbow shimmer of the Industrial Park’s overseeing nanotechnology seems conspicuously absent at the moment. “Thad’z not th’ point,” he says, and slaps the table top. “I mean, Zimon, doesn’ thad guy juzz drive ya gonzo?”

Zimon slips down in his seat, resting the back of his head on the top of his chairback. “Yeah,” he says, “gonzo, Joe. Bonzo-gonzo. Now deal th’ zpammed cardz, wud ya?”

“Hey, no. I mean id. He rilly geds my goad.”

“Yeah, yeah, whateva, Joe. Zo mebbe I don’ like ‘im. Zo whad?” He shrugs his shoulders. “Mebbe we’ll ged luggy and Zatellite Detroid Four will fall oudda th’ sky an’ eraze the eff-pigzer. In th’ meantime whad’re you goin do do aboud id? Deal th’ zpammin cardz.”

“I godda do zumthin aboud id.”

Joe’s statement is delivered in a flat tone that makes Zimon lose interest in the screens. He does a foot over foot shuffle and the chair turns slowly back toward the table. He finds himself staring at the ragged slice of Joe’s sharp-toothed grin.

“What ya gonna do?”

+.+.+

Ninety minutes after, 10:50 AM—

The dead have already been counted by the time Chief Detective Daniel MacAfferty gets to the Sigma Rejuvenation Clinic. Seven. The number itself is bad, but MacAfferty has the feeling things are going to get worse. Central hasn’t reported any positive ID’s yet, and MacAfferty doesn’t want to jump to conclusions, but murder at Sigma Rejuve can really only mean one thing.

He emerges from his personal vehicle into a sea of people, scattered in clumps, milling, and parsed through with a speckle of blue IP police uniforms. The confusion is exacerbated by the wafting clouds of nanotech, its shimmering more pronounced in proximity to the local disturbance. The street, flanked by the clinic on one side, and the
Public Organ Bank on the other, is blocked at both ends. Passing unnoticed under the barrier, MacAfferty can’t help but observe how little the demarcation affects the composition of the mob on either side of it. He bulls his way forward.

Non-official bystanders, a mix of both Citizens and daytime sububban employees, have infiltrated the entire area. They stand, gabbing at one another, gawking at the dark, placid front of Sigma Rejuve. Officers of the tiny IP police force strut about, sensing a swelling of their authority at the scene of this evidently cataclysmic event. Sidearms flash here and there, still recklessly out of their holsters. Order, which MacAfferty likes to think of as the Lifeform’s abiding principle, is everywhere being assaulted. When he sees Sergeant Wallace talking to a sububban vid-journalist not twenty meters from the entrance to the crime scene, MacAfferty decides to take the assault personally. He approaches his second-in-command from behind. “Wallace!”

The sergeant jumps and wheels. MacAfferty leans his two metre tall frame over the stockier man. “Is this how you secure a crime scene? Get those officers in line!” The vid-journalist edges forward to try to get the scene for the record. Keeping his glare focused on Wallace, MacAfferty brings a finger flying up, pointing into the lens embedded in the sububbanite’s eye. “Get these people out of here!”

“Yes, sir!” shouts Wallace, watching MacAfferty steam past. He turns to the reporter who’s still muttering his play-by-play into the mike at his chin. “Ya heard the man.” The sergeant looks around to be sure he’s got an audience, then, putting his palm into the man’s face, shoves him onto the ground. “Clear off!”

MacAfferty is about to start up the steps into the clinic when he notices an oddly parked Bemo-taxi angled against the curb to his left. Few non-official vehicles are allowed behind the Walls, but here, in front of the organ bank, there are bound to be some. Two other Bemos are mixed in among the various police transports farther down the street, and an ambulance rests on the opposite curb. But MacAfferty’s attention is drawn to this particular vehicle by the nervous twitching of the young officer standing beside its open driver’s-side door. The officer, a young sububban fem, is dodging left and right, trying to keep the curious lookers-on at bay. Her job is being made all that much more difficult by a richly dressed man who keeps yammering in her face.
MacAfferty comes up alongside, and at a glance takes in the delicately etched features of the fellow’s profile and recognizes the signs of Citizenship. MacAfferty endeavours to be polite, “I must strongly recommend that you allow the officer to pursue her duty.”

Not polite enough. The Citizen’s glare intensifies as it fixes itself on MacAfferty. “I am Citizen Engalepa,” e splutters, emphasizing on the word ‘Citizen,’ “I have important business inside the clinic.”

From under his coat MacAfferty pulls out a short black wand. “Nice to meet you, Citizen. I’m Chief Detective Daniel MacAfferty.” He pushes a switch and the stun-gun crackles as its tip begins to glow. “And this is a crime scene. Check the protocols why don’t you, and see who’s got authority around here.” He jabs the wand forward and the Citizen jumps back. “Now, vacate the area immediately, or this officer will be dragging your unconscious flesh into lock-up.”

Stillness ripples into the nearby crowd as disbelief floods over Citizen Engalepa’s face. It takes just one more flourish of MacAfferty’s stun-stick to send them all scattering.

MacAfferty turns back toward the Bemo’s open door. The young officer is stuttering an incoherent combination of thanks, apology, and officiousness. MacAfferty, feeling much better, decides to take it easy on her. “Just remember your duty Officer. We may be standing outside Sigma, and, yes, I guess people have really been killed. But it’s still just another crime scene. Now let’s get this circus under control.”

Not listening to the fem’s response, MacAfferty ducks past her to peer into the Bemo. It takes just a second to see what he needs to—he straightens, then heads up the steps, through the propped open door, and into the Sigma Rejuvenation Clinic.

Threading his way past Sigma’s reception desk, MacAfferty sees the first fatality. The medicals are standing around the body, either taking their pictures, or waiting to take it away. It’s a woman, sububban—probably the receptionist—late twenties, with auburn hair. Opening just below the breast of her azure blouse, the lazz-wound that killed her has made a window of her corpse through which MacAfferty gets a fairly broad view of the floor.

Two other bodies, both male, are sprawled over a couch in the waiting area. Their hands are locked together—married maybe, lovers at least. Seeing them, Daniel knows his worst expectations are about to be fulfilled. He crouches to get a better look.
One of them appears quite young, es features smooth, unblemished and clearly tank-grown. MacAfferty notes the hollowness of the other’s cheeks, and stands. They were both Citizens, of course—this is Sigma Rejuve, after all. The signs of the rapid deterioration in the second male’s body are those that would precipitate transpiration. Why else would they be sitting in the clinic’s waiting room?

Wallace, after putting a bit of the fear into his troops, has followed MacAfferty into the building. MacAfferty is still studying the unfortunate pair, when he comes up alongside.

“Looks like he got to Sigma Rejuve just a bit late, eh, sir?”

“That’s not funny, Wallace,” says MacAfferty.

“Sorry, sir.”

“And it’s ‘e,’ show some respect.”

“What?”

MacAfferty sends a withering glare in Wallace’s direction. “It’s ‘e.’ They may be dead, but they’re still Citizens.”

“Oh, right. I mean, ‘Looks like ‘e’ got to Sig—”

“It’s still not funny, Wallace.”

The sergeant steps backward. “No. Course not. Sorry, sir.”

MacAfferty looks once more at the couple spread across the couch. He has the feeling he should recognize the one on the left—Donsacker? He lets his eyes slide across the bits of them that have been sprayed against the metallic sheen of the wall above it.

“Eff-pix,” he says, “it looks like a scene from The Fastened Nation around here. What happened?”

“It’s really a bit hard to say. Apparently the guy just walked in an’ started blastin’. He left a pretty clear trail though. He killed these folks here,” Wallace moves from the rust encrusted couch, around the reception desk, and turns a corner to where a doorway stands open. “And then came over here to take care o’ security.”

The walls of the little room are covered in banks of vid-displays. Partway under the table in at its centre, a young woman in a Sigma security uniform lies in a pool of liquified tissues. Her body has been separated into two distinct halves. MacAfferty stands
over her, scrutinizing the killer’s handiwork. He observes that the security staffer’s gun is still firmly strapped in its holster.

Wallace has crossed the little room and stepped through its second exit. “There’s three more bodies upstairs, including the killer.”

“Did the perp have any identification?” Asks MacAfferty.

“Nobody’s checked the credit chip in his arm yet. The driver-ID in the cab says he’s Alfonso Gargaglione, but I’d say this whole thing looks more like an inside job.”

“You think?”

“Well, I don’t see how a Bemo driver coulda got through the security doors. He’d of had to blow’em open, but here’s this one, for instance,” he gestures at the second exit in which he’s standing, “Good as new.”

“Alert central,” says MacAfferty. “Put a search on the whereabouts of Gargarg—whatever you said.”

Wallace smiles. “You figure I’m right?”

“Two things Wallace. Actually three.” He sends a hard look in the sergeant’s direction. “First: when I ask you to do something, don’t stand here asking stupid questions, just do it.”

Wallace stares for a moment before getting the message. He fumbles with the mike at his chin and then sends the message into Alberni Police Central.

“Second,” MacAfferty continues, “if you’d looked around the cab a little more closely, you wouldn’t have to be standing there guessing at all—you’d have seen that the cabbie’s lazz has been broken out of its lock-down. Why would a cabbie have to break his own lock to get at his own lazz?” He crosses the room to look past Wallace into a short white hallway. “And third, he didn’t shoot the ‘folks’ in the lobby first. He must have taken out security before he did anything else.”

Wallace’s eyes widen briefly, then blink shut as he gives his head a shake. “Of course,” he points toward the severed woman on the floor. “How else could her lazz still be strapped in its holster? The perp was probably even familiar to her.”

Without changing his grim expression, MacAfferty nods succinctly. “Find out the names of anyone with access to that entrance. And of everyone who knew the dead security guard.”
Wallace sends the message off to Central, but MacAfferty doesn’t wait for him. In cutting across the security booth, the killer had walked straight through the puddled tissue surrounding the security guard’s corpse. Prints from a medium-sized set of rad-boots lead Daniel down a short hall, past an elevator, into a stairwell at its far end.

Wallace catches up to his boss again at the top of the second flight, where the trail disappears under a door. MacAfferty lets him past, and with a gloved hand the sergeant pushes it open. MacAfferty finds himself staring down a long, cold, and completely antiseptic hallway.

The killer’s footprints peter out after a few paces into the passage, so MacAfferty lets Wallace keep the lead as they continue down its length. At about fifteen meters along, there’s an open doorway on the left. Wallace stops in front of it. “This way leads into the transpiration theatre, Chief. First there’s the pre-ops rooms—where the midwives get ready for an operation—then the theatre itself. The power for the doors is shut down—we can go straight though.”

MacAfferty gives everything a cursory glance as they pass through the series of small rooms. He’s seen them before, the sanctums sanctorum of the transpiration midwives, but only on the T.Viz.—thanks to the hidey-eyes, most of the Industrial Park is readily available for public viewing. Looking around, he sees nothing out of the ordinary, but isn’t sure he’d notice if something were. He knows, for instance, the final closet-sized chamber before the theatre proper is the Hamm’s vestibule, but Daniel finds its appearance inert, lackluster—not at all like the place he’d visited on the T.Viz.

On the other side of the vestibule, he emerges, Wallace in tow, into the large white space of a transpiration theatre. Machines, linked by a complicated array of tubes and cables, hum and blink in a cluster to one side. Halfway between them and where MacAfferty’s standing, a doctor, fem, lies headless on the floor.

Wallace walks past the doctor’s corpse. He waves toward three hospital beds that seem caught at the center of the plastic and metal web spun out between machines.

“There’s another victim over there, behind the beds. Some kind of technical staff.”

“What’s this about?” asks MacAfferty. He’s pointing to a long, continuous smear of rust on the floor.

“That’s from the other doctor. The midwife who called it in,” says Wallace.
“Called it in?”

Wallace walks to a wall at one end of the smear. A comm-link, its faceplate covered with bloody handprints, is embedded there in the wall’s whiteness. “Yeah. He was gut-shot but managed to crawl over here to the comm anyway.”

“Why the fix would he have had to call it in? After all—” MacAfferty points his eyes up into his forehead, using the physical shorthand for the Industrial Park’s surveillance systems, the hidey-eyes.

Wallace shrugs. “The perp had an eye-jammer.”

“An eye-jammer? Must have been a pretty good one.”

“I guess so. At first they didn’t even believe the poor guy—no alarm, nothing from the hidey-eyes—but then, all the blood—”

MacAfferty’s eyes have fallen back down to the wide, reddish-black path painted over the white of the floor. He’s followed it farther into the room. “Strange route e took.”

“What’s that, Sir?” Wallace steps away from the wall and joins his boss, stepping around the feet of the headless fem.

“For a guy intent on making a life-or-death call, e seems to have taken quite the roundabout route to the v-phone.” MacAfferty points. “See how the streaks of blood crisscross here?”

“Now you mention it,” says Wallace, “it even branches off over there.” Once again he’s pointing toward the triumvirate of beds.

“And where’s this midwife now?”

“The first of our officers stabilized him when they got here. He’s unconscious at the hospital now.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Nothing very helpful. Before he shot em, the perp was apparently ranting about his baby this, and his baby that. Nothing that makes much sense.”

“A hole in his belly and for some reason this doctor’s wandering hither and yon. What do you figure, Wallace? Sightseeing?”

Wallace shrugs. “Trying to save the other victims?”

MacAfferty’s eyebrows rise.
“Well, see how the trail kind of skirts by each of the bodies?” Wallace points. “Past the dead doc, here.” With MacAfferty in tow, he traces an outer edge of the long thick scab, across the room, to the first gurney and its computerized entourage. “Next the dead tech,” his chin juts at a figure lying in a tangle of hoses and surgical implements. “And here,” he fords the blood-trail to go and stand at the foot of the central gurney, “is the scumbag himself.”

MacAfferty steps up beside Wallace to look down at a figure propped against one of the machines. The equipment’s screens are blank, and the grey metal of its surface is scorched just above the killer’s head. A lazz pistol lies in his open palm and his lower jaw is missing, along with most of the back of his head.

“He killed himself?”

“That’s right. Didn’t even have the decency to wait and let one of our boys do it for him.”

For no particular reason, MacAfferty turns to let his eyes travel over the bed by which he’s standing. The mound that pushes up from under the sheet makes it look occupied—so does the small red spot that darkens the white material at the mound’s far end. MacAfferty takes a corner of the sheet and pulls it back. He finds himself looking down at a naked fem body with a neat little lazz-hole between her breasts.

“Yeah. That’s right,” says Wallace, nodding. “He even shot the template. Weird, eh?”

“Yeah,” says MacAfferty. He looks back at the body of the murderer. “Weird.” Inside the Walls, the crime of murder, thank the Lifeform, is pretty rare. But MacAfferty wasn’t always stationed behind the Walls. He’s seen other murderers. This killer looks pretty much like all the rest of them had—pretty much, that is, like anybody else. MacAfferty reaches down and gingerly pulls open the killer’s green rad-leather slicker.

“Lifeform preserve us.” The exclamation falls from Wallace’s lips as an arm, severed well above the elbow and attached to the perp’s shoulder by a wad of what looks like medical tape, materializes from behind a lapel. “Where’d that come from?”

“Well,” says MacAfferty, “did you notice any of the victims on the premises missing one?”
“Um—”

“The answer is no, Wallace. The answer is ‘No, sir, and I promise I’ll pay more attention in the future.’”

“No, sir. And I promise—”

MacAfferty cuts him off with a wave. He points at the credit chip embedded in the arm’s wrist, “It could be he needed this to get by the IDeye in the door downstairs. But I bet it belongs to the driver of the Bemo-taxi. It was the perp’s passport to get by Wall Security and into the IP.”

“Think so?”

“Just a guess. But a simple scan will find out for sure.”

“Heads are going to roll in Security Division.”

“Yes,” says MacAfferty. “A Citizen or two will be losing the Privilege this weekend.” He pulls the dead man’s sticker farther open. Underneath, the black radiation leather of his rad-suit is plainly visible. Street clothes are often worn over the rad-leather, but not always. Clearly this person never did. His suit’s as beat-up as any MacAfferty’s ever seen—scuffed, even torn. In fact—MacAfferty looks a little closer—a lot of this damage was recently inflicted. Here and there the abrasions in the suit are matched by tiny cuts—punctures, really, and fairly fresh—in the skin beneath. A struggle of some kind?

MacAfferty starts to stand up, but stops, dropping instead into a full crouch. Just inside the body’s upper thigh a thimble of something strangely bone-like protrudes. MacAfferty doesn’t think its human, maybe not even really bone, but either way it’s no part of the killer since it’s obviously been stuck into him somehow.

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Five weeks before, 2:45 AM—

Coming off the last step, I pause to catch my breath a bit. I turn to look back down the way I came, the last flight behind me descending to a turn where it connects with the ten previous—white, like everything else in Sigma, and sterile to the point of looking
totally unused. Of course, in this particular case, the look is actually an accurate reflection of reality.

I bend, rest my palms against my knees waiting for the oxygen I’m heaving into my lungs to resuscitate my flagging muscles. Usually I take it a bit easier when I come up these steps. Really, what I usually do is take the levitator like everybody else. Lately though, I’ve taken to using this emergency stairwell—it gives me time to make the transition from the security station’s close quarters downstairs (rubbing limbs with Joe ‘Jerk’ Regent, re-breathing Zimon Trunk’s freshly-squeezed air), to the expansive peacefulness of Sigma’s upper levels.

I take a final, deep gasp of the surrounding cleanliness, then push through the fire-door into the hallway beyond. Already, I feel the excitement, the slightest electricity in the roots of my hairs, one that descends over my scalp and down my spine with each pace of the hundred or so it takes to arrive at the cooler doors. Giant, square, molybdenum-reinforced—isolated in this stretch of gleaming white hallway—the door seems like my own secret entrance to another dimension. I key in my number on the ident-pad to the left of the door, then lean one wide-open eye into the IDEye above it. A cool, feminine voice emerges from the air.

“Thank you, Mr. Jones. You may now enter.”

There’s a metallic snap as the door to the coolers unlocks, and then with an almost magical silence, it swings inward. As I step into the sterilization chamber, the tingle that’s been growing at my core leaps suddenly to my extremities. It’s kind of like being submerged—my body is buoyed up by a delightfully low-level, full-body numbness.

The room is small, unremarkable, a scrub area everyone has to go through to prevent any toxins, chemical or biological, from bollixing up the works beyond. It’s all a bit more serious than that to me, though. After all, what lies ‘beyond’ are the mechanics that enable the alchemy of eternal life. I feel like an embalmer to the pharaohs when I pass through this room, performing ablution rituals, the first of the many sacraments involved in the great ceremony of accessing the after-world.

To one side of the room, stacked on a shelf, are a few dozen pairs of insulated overalls. Taking the set on top, I tear off their cellophane wrapper and shake them out. They cover every inch of my body. There’s a heavy kind of slipper attached to their ankle
that slips over my feet, and gloves dangling from the sleeves that I pull over my hands before sealing the wrists. Watching the singularity of my palms, the transitory exclusivity of fingertips vanish in the anonymous white of those gloves—it feels good, part and parcel of the whole experience. There’s a hood, too—it pulls up over the back of my head and down over my face. When I slip the filters up into my nose, it’s with considerable pleasure that I welcome the disappearance of smells. Sonic showers wash over me as I pass through the final short hall to the coolers, brushing away the last dusty microbes of the outside world.

Chrome and steel glisten here and there down long empty halls and in semi-illuminated laboratories. The snowy white of everything else shines like a blank vid-screen. It’s twenty degrees below room temperature in here. If it weren’t for the overalls I’d probably have to listen to my teeth chattering. If it weren’t for the nose filters, I’d certainly see my breath.

The bodyshop’s closed, of course. It always is when I’m here. Once or twice, during the day, I visited the coolers on the T.Viz.—the hustle and bustle I saw in the halls, in the growing-rooms—all over—made the whole place seem unappealingly foreign. In fact, when I say ‘once or twice,’ I really mean once. It was enough—I wouldn’t have risked tainting this whole nighttime experience by looking at it any more that.

Right now though, everything’s calm, unpopulated, silent. I stand still, taking it in, feeling the white of my overalls fading into the white of the background. It helps me relax. It makes me feel like a ghost wandering through a long dead world—all my problems suddenly fade away, as if they’ve all become somebody else’s. As I check the locks on the freezers in Sigma Rejuve’s cryolabs, I can smile about the uselessness of the two men with whom I share the night-security shift. I’m pleased to think of the millions of genetic imprints locked safely away behind foot-thick alloys—away from the meddling of idiots like ‘Jerk’ and Simon.

It’s always like this as I approach the heart of Sigma’s operation. Each narrow passage I push through, penetrating from one of layer to the next, scrapes away another skin. In the growing-rooms, where the seeds of flesh are sown, anxious thoughts about Lisa give way to an idea of patience. Among the aquariums, whose bubbling fluids
nurture the pink and meaty stuff that floats at their centre, I think of es last vid-transmission. E’s been on the moon for nearly eight months. Four weeks ago e called to tell me that e’s found someone else. But what does that matter? I decide I’ll call her again tomorrow, despite the expense, despite the fact she hasn’t returned any of my other calls.

I’m back at the levitator, stepping on as the doors open for me. “Bottom deck,” I say, and the lev drops. Moments later, I’m opening my eyes wide for the final IDeye’s retinal scan.

“Thank you, Mr. Jones. You may now enter.”

A shiver runs through me as the door for the cryo-freezers slides away. Yes. Stepping forward, I seem to dispense with the last of my weight. I’m carried into the stocks by what feels like the breeze, even though, of course, it’s still just my feet. From the center of this great chamber it’s easy for me to imagine that the walls are horizons. The ductwork and the motion of the fluids inside it seem like clouds methodically swimming through the brightest of white skies. Tangles of automation click and scurry across the floor, or whirl overhead like so many creatures of the field and air. I do pirouettes, appreciating one view after another, admiring the orderly mind that sends this machine-life purposefully around on their errands.

And the best of it all? What else but the templates. Three thousand of them electromagnetically suspended, fed, cleaned and bred to Council standard. I imagine them to be people, peaceful now that all their needs are being taken care of. It’s not hard to do, since that’s exactly what they look like—some kind of sleeping master race, all so young and healthy, polished and toned (aside, that is, from the two rows of spare parts).

The regular throb of the fans and the hum of the cooling systems vibrate through everything as I walk between the aisles of multi-cathetered and floating human shapes. Mine is the only free will in this world right now, among this multitude. The rest are templates, wetsacks, organ repositories, mind-wiped and grown for those who live behind the Walls. Grown for those who no longer have to rely on the public parts bin, who’ve gained Citizenship and the right to live forever young (the Rules say only five hundred years, but aren’t rules made to be broken?).

At the head of B row I look over some of the vid-charts posted there. I note with some dismay that three more of the B’s are scheduled for tomorrow (two for dismantling,
and one for transpiration). The B’s are always the first to go. So beautifully manicured, and so hardy, their vital organs are in almost constant demand.

I head down the row, past the numbered berths where the templates hover. I note the male and the two fems that have been tagged to go downstairs. Lately these incursions from the invisible hands of the daytime have come to irritate me more and more. They seem like violations of this perfect nighttime world.

I zig-zag down the alphabetized rows and across the files of ‘plates lined up head to toe. It has occurred to me that the feeling of elation I get in this room is the feeling of being a god wandering among his people. Those tags certainly do spoil the illusion. It occurs to me now that if I were a god I could end these cruel raids on my subjects. I hear a different kind of noise from somewhere behind me. I come to an abrupt standstill. I whirl, still thinking of things amiss in my perfect garden.

Bodies hover, floating in their pillars of blue, one after the other, lining up in great straight chains in every direction I look—I see nothing out of the ordinary. I wait, frozen. I hear the sound again. There’s a crackle followed by a low, scarcely audible moan. My attention leaps to the left. I recognize the ‘plate in front of me. I’m in the R’s. I unsnap my lazz from its holster and take a few steps. The wetsack next to me is R17.

Lately, I have stopped here often. I look again at her bursting shape, floating in the milky mist of photons that crackles through the cradling e-mag pulse. In a way she reminds me of Lisa. Mostly the wetsack features, seamless and bland, pudgy from lack of experience, are quite different from Lisa’s. A few, though, the black curls, the tapered hands and tiny feet, are fairly similar.

I wait a few more minutes and decide the sound must have come from some machine I’d failed to see. I step closer to template R17. I take off one of my white gloves. The thinnest sheet of light rolls over the surface of my hand and up my the wrist as I reach to place my palm upon the genetically pre-arranged shape of R17’s breast. I press down and feel the cold knot in its wide aureole squeezed between two of my fingers.

“Delano!” Low and desperate, from very close by.

I turn my head, but I feel I know where it came from.

“Delano, can you hear me?”

I look back, snatching my hand from her breast. Has she moved?
Hesitantly I reach out again, poising my palm above her belly. I watch it descend, like a feather on the air. Her skin brushes against my fingertips.

"Delano, it’s working—"
Her eyelids flutter.
"Quick, touch me again, it’s wearing off. Delano, I—"

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Six weeks before, 4:40 AM—

They stand side by side in front of the bank of screens, looking like they were both pinched out of the same tube. Both with the same strange air of viscosity, but the one, Joe, is long, ribbon-like, as if freshly squeezed, while Zimon, the other, squat and bulging, looks more like the goo that’s fallen from the nozzle’s tip and compacted on the floor.

"Whad makez ya zo zure?" says Zimon.
"I dell ya, id’z gonna happen with thiz one."
"Bud, Joe, whad makez ya zo zure?"
"Reasonz."
"Thad’z good, Joe. Thangz fer explainin thad do me."
"I god good reasonz."
"Well, thoze’re alwayz th’ bezt kind."
"I been watchin. I been watchin th’ figzless figzer. Onna vid-zgreenz. While you been agonizin over yer bets. While you been zleelin, I been watchin: Del. Del-la-morethannl-can-take-eff-pigzin-Jonez; stonez-onniz-zpamjammed-grave! A month ago I gaught th’ figzless figzer cryin. Weepin real zalt tearz all over hizzelf in thad very zpot."
"Ya zaw ‘im."
"Onna zgreen. A couple timez zinze, I zeen ‘im ztandin there jabberin. You shudda eared ‘im. Onze or twize id god priddy heated."
"Heated?"
"Yeah, heated. Ya know, like ‘e wazn’d geddin along."
“With who?”

“Thad’s when I knew there had t’ be a way.”

“Hey, Joe. How’d ya ear thad?”

“Imagine. Even thad godzpammed Delbone there haz passion.”

“Yeah. Bud, Joe, there’z no audio on th’ vid-zgreens. You cudn’t of eared.”

“Hiz girlfrien.”

“Whad?”

“His girlfrien, Zimon. Thad’z who ‘e waz talkin aboud when ‘e god all heated. Zome figzin story aboud th’ man in th’ moon gettin in ‘er. Id’z all very comical I can azzure you. I zeen id many timez. Thad’z why I thing id’z gonna happen with thiz one.”

“Yeah. ‘Reasonz.’ I remember.”

“Yeah. Thad, an’ alzo I zeen ‘im touch thiz one.”

“Rilly?”

“I guess I zaid zo, didn’t I? Lazd weeg, an’ again a few dayz ago.”

“Well, zpam me.”

“Yeah.”

“Zpam me up an’ zpam me righd bag down again.”

“Yeah, yeah. I gods my own equipment.”

“Id’z good t’ be equipped.”

“No, ya eff-pigzer—I mean I gods my own equipment, Zimon. Hangin in th’ bodyshop. Ya azked me how I eared, righd? Thad’z how.”

“Yer own equipment?”

“I thing I remember zayin thad. Yeah. How elze’m I zupposed t’ make zure I zee the weasel-man when I wanda zee ‘im?”

“AUDIO equipment?”

“I godz my own camera, doo. Eggstra spezhul, in caze ‘e’z god a eye-jammer. Afder all, everyone’z god a eye-jammer theze dayz, righd Zimon?”

“Yeah. Everyone’z god one.”

“Courze they do! Godzpammed hidey-eyes ever’where. Ya’d never ged a momend of privazy without one. There’d be no more nap-dime ad worg. No more, well, you gnaw whad, don’d ya, Zimon?”
“Whad’re ya talkin’ aboud, Joe?”
“Funny thing iz, I still don’td know if ‘e’z god one. If Dela-nofuckin-use-at-all
doez gods a eye-jammer, ‘e hasn’d uzed id.”
“Joe, whad did ya mean when ya zed ‘you gnaw whad’?”
“Imagine. ‘E doesn’d figzin use one! No wonder I can’d figzin stand ‘im.”
“You been watchin me?”
“Haw!”
“You been watchin me, Joe?”
“Ya zure do zome amazing things in there, Zimon. Haw!”
“You eff-pigzer!”
“Hey, hey. Are you blushin, Zimon? Thad’z amazing. From what I zeen I
wouldn’a thoughtd ya had any shame.”
“Shud up.”
“Haw! Haw-haw!”
“I zaid shud up, you effpigzin figzer!
“Hey, take id eazy.”
“Eff-pigzer!”
“No, zeriously, Zimon. Id’z no big deal. I haven’d had the camera up all thad
long. Besidez, I do id too. Though, I admit, you given me some ideaz! Haw! Yer
ztyle iz yoo-nique.”
“Figzer. Shud up.”
“Take id eazy. You an’ I been worgin here a long dime, righd? With a lod of
differend guyz. An’ I waz worgin here even before thad, with a lod of other guyz, right?
Righd?”
“Well—”
“Righd?”
“Yeah, yeah. Righd.”
“Didn’d ya gnaw thad, all thad time, all thoze other guyz were doin id, zame az
you?”
“No.”
“Well, how ‘boud thiz: did ya gnow thad oud of all thoze guyz, all thad dime, there’z on’y one guy whad doesn’ do id. An’ who do ya thing thad iz, Zimon?”

“I don’ gnow.”

“Who, Zimon, iz the on’y guy aroun’ here who don’ zeem do have any use fer a eye-jammer?”

“Del?”

“Thad’s righd. Mizter figzin-zo-high-on’is-bedderthanyou-figzinhig-horse Delagoin’-down-now-Jonez!” shouts Joe. “But thad’z all gonna change.” He taps on the screen displaying the elevator that Delano Jones is riding back down to security. “If,” he says, “I can ged a liddle help oud of you. Whadda ya zay?”

Zimon stares at the screen. Slowly, barely perceptibly, a change comes over his flaccid features. He looks up at Joe. “Alrighd. But whad if ya’s wrong?”

Joe smiles. “Oh, don’ worry aboud thad. I’m righd. Id’s gonna happen with thiz one.” He bends to look at a different screen. Zimon stoops beside him. Floating at the centre of the square display, is the suspended form of template R17.

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Three hours before, 6:20 AM—

I step off of the curb and into a pothole, sinking the boot of my rad-suit well past its ankle in water and the sludge beneath it. I shift my weight onto the one leg, and wiggle my toes, working my foot a little deeper before pulling it back. The sucking sound that gurgles up as I drag the boot out isn’t all that interesting, but for some reason, I repeat the whole process with my other foot. Pretending I’m back in my compant, I circle a few times in the wide mouth of the pothole, watching the water splash away from each footprint. I stop, thinking I hear the sound of an engine—ears strain, but no, nothing.

I survey the pavement that nature’s begun taking back—these small pothole ponds outnumber by far the morsels of intact roadway, and they’re all joined together by a web of tall, healthy grasses that fill each of the long, infinitely-fingered cracks in the concrete. I take a fist-full of the long stalks and tear them up. Pretty tough stuff. Errant
clouds of toxicity mean, if I want to survive, pretty near every millimeter of the flesh I was born in has to be covered with rad-leather, but these ugly little weeds are thriving. I step out of the pothole and take a few paces. Stopping on a patch of moss, I grind my heel into the shallow earth, then I’m shouting at the general emptiness of the early morning.

“What’s the pix-fisting big idea?”

(I’m not sure, I’m not sure, I’m not sure—am I making the right decision? Maybe it’s not too late—if only I could be clearer—)

I’ve been hacking a little juice (quite a lot really). The narcotic’s jolting buzz is having a serious effect after all the alcohol. Really, I stayed in that bar way too long.

That eff-pixing bar. This eff-pixing city. Ghost town!

I pry my night-goggles up from my eyes, pulling them over my rad-leather hood and off. I stuff them into a pocket. The impenetrable dark of the Manaimo night has begun its early morning retreat. Visibility infiltrates the air, bringing out the fine details of decay that permeate the scenery.

I bend to heft a chunk of broken pavement, and then aim it through the windowless front of a deserted store. I hit a tree instead—a tree! One of the few survivors of the ancient city that lives outside of the Natural Parks. Its age-thickened roots have lifted and fractured the asphalt all around it. Well, that’s the eff-pixing subbus all over—from drainpipe littered seashore to just below the peak of Mount McQuilla and beyond. Crumbling. All of it. All of it outside the Walls that is.

Blocks and blocks in all their thousands stretch away from me, fading into the distant murk. A tunnel of mortar, brick, steel, and glass (broken, mostly), and only a handful of lights glimmering along its entire length. The old-time cars that dot the curbs have all been rusting there for something like two centuries. Public-Trans and the Bemo-taxis are the only transportation outside the Walls the Council approves for variable-energy receivers—if anything else in the subbus moves with something other than foot-power, it attracts fairly instant attention from the local judges.

To the east, this hallway of buildings curves down and away, into the mist coming off the Georgia Straight. Above the point where it all fades out, the coming day announces itself as a long, thin gash of light above the horizon.
On a clear day (later on, not usually before midday), the Outward Wall gives the horizon a different, much wider kind of gleam. Whenever I see it, that vaguely luminescent band always makes me think of snow in the wind, blowing in drifts up against a fence. Of course, the word ‘fence’ doesn’t really do justice to the impenetrable Outward Wall, a nanotech containment field three kilometres high. Besides which, the ice on the other side doesn’t so much ‘blow’ as just expand continuously.

Right now, though, the night’s lingering shadows, combined with the morning fog, obscures the Wall’s breadth. All that’s visible is the glint off the glacier’s topmost edge.

They say the glaciers are poisoned, mostly (pretty much entirely). Sometimes it’s a bit hard to believe since it always looks so white and fresh and endlessly huge from here in Manaimo. Still, all the clean agua that’s pumped out to the sububs is filtered first through the IP, where the machine-life wrings the isotopes and the chemicals out of it.

For a while I just stare, watching the gash of the horizon slowly widen. A semicircle of sky to the south flashes suddenly just a hair more brightly. It is the aurora of VanCity, still smoldering from when it was hit by the Mexican States near the end of the Third Water War, in 2073.

(I’m not sure, I’m not sure—yes I am, yes I am—maybe—)

I turn to contemplate the rise of the street in the other direction. I’ve covered a lot of distance in the last few hours. Propelled by the juice I took, blowing off steam after that eff-pixing bar (eff-pixing bar-tender!). What was that eff-pixer’s big fixing idea?

I remember his twisted, blood-filled face with its missing teeth, leaning out, handing me a drink. I could practically see his breath, “What’s yer name?”

I close my eyes, blanking him and his stupid questions out of my head. When I open them, I’m looking back down at the moss under my feet.

It’s been a while since I stopped walking. Got sick of it. Sent the signal for a Bemo-taxi. I seem to have gotten pretty far from any of Manaimo’s populated zones (not to mention that eff-pixing bar-tender), but still—where’s that spammed Bemo?

The juice sends a bit of voltage up my spine. “Yoo-hoo!” I holler, leaping for the next puddle, “I’m over here, Mr. Bemo,” the pothole’s just a shallow one, and I land
making little more than a ripple, “where are you?” my little singsong seems to die, crashing to the pavement as soon as it leaves my lips. Ghost town!

I stare for a while at nothing, abandoned buildings, swinging, illegible signs, appliances rusting on the corner. I’m hypnotized by the lifelessness surrounding me. (I’m not sure, I’m not sure, I’m not—) Then an answer comes to my call.

The sound arrives from not too far away—the snarl and shriek of fighting dogs. About three blocks away, I’d guess. A chorus of yapping goes up—sounds like a full pack.

I pull my LSTR 450 from underneath my radiation-leathers and check the lazz’s charge. Still full, just like it was when I left the compappartment.

The juice I hacked is kicking in pretty good. I can’t help shouting some more.

“Dogs! Dogs of the rich! Dogs of war! Dogs in dog’s clothing!”

I bring LSTR up to eye-level and, pointing it with my arms rigid, I do a sweep of the area in front of me. My turn is halted as the sights line up with the wooden weave of bark—the ancient tree. There’s a crackle and a burst of smoke from its trunk after I pull the trigger.

“Hot-diggety-godspammed DOGS!”

I stumble over what are probably roots under the water as I splash to the curb, leaving the broad, brown leaves, floating everywhere like desolate little rafts, bobbing away in my wake. Stepping up onto the splayed foot of the tree, I look into the black, smoky hole I’ve burned into it, then laugh—this sure is a big improvement on jumping around in puddles. I put my fist and arm into the cavity, getting it in up to the elbow before the heat becomes unbearable. When the lips of the hole meet my armpit, I still haven’t touched the back. My arm jerks itself out on the same spasm that pulls the scream from my guts, and sends the cooking rad-leather of my glove plunging into the cool, sludgy water of the curbside stream. Standing up from the puddle, watching the tendrils of steam rise from my forearm and dissipate on the air, I become engrossed, wishing I could watch them forever. But I can’t.

So far from any populated blockhouses, all the noise I’ve been making will likely bring the dogs running. The liquids around my mind surge strangely and I spin my head
to look for the enemy up and down the street. I realize that I’m grinning madly, that I can hardly wait.

"Come and get it Fido!" I shout, "I’ll teach you who’s master around here!"

I wish I’d felt like this at that eff-pixing bar.

All those blindly contented lotus-eating pixers. Anachronisms. Too stupid just to die out.

I remember the bartender’s twisted, blood-filled face with its missing teeth, so unlike a ‘plate’s, and his finger pointed in my face: "Just what the hell is wrong with you, anyway?"

Worms in the apple. "Not even apes trying to be people," I said, "just people succeeding in being bacteria."

He spread his arms and took hold of the edge of the bar. Over his shoulder a mirror reflected the bar’s holo-sex show from behind shelves of clear and coloured bottles. "Look, I seen you in here before. You allus seemed like such a quiet guy. Last coupla times, though, you been disturbin the cust’mers. Can’t have that."

"It’s not my fault you’re all genetically obsolete. With all they’ve got behind the Walls, you’d think they’d just gas the sububs. I wish they would."

"What you gots is a bad attitude. You wants to be behind the Walls? Work hard, get upgraded. Me, I don’ see why anyone’d bust their balls to live under the glare o’ the hidey-eyes. I seen em’ on the T.Viz—none o’ them Cit’zens look like they had a decent crap in years."

"I guess living in your own filth is good enough for some people."

"Hey, what’s in there I need so much? There’s so much gear lyin round out here—you need somethin, alls you gotta do is pick it up. You don’t look like you’s in want—"

"Of course, a hunter-gatherer—evolution’s passed you by. No wonder you can’t understand the significance of the Privilege."

"Hey. I’m doin fine inna local Manaimo pub. I gots my family, an’ we all gots the public body bins. Guess I’ll live long enough."

Imprisoned in the decay of his own flesh. "You can’t even see the bars."

"An’ we gots peace. Bless the Re-Construction. My Granddaddy used to tell me this story—"
Ears like rad-leather, crooked eyes. "You’re so ugly I can hardly stand to look at you."

The man straightened (as much as possible), pulling back his sleeves. "Well, you won’ be doin it much longer."

And then his naked hands all over me.

A canine scurrying out into an intersection up ahead awakens me from the memory. It stops, scouting me out. I carefully point my lazz in its direction. The pooch is some kind of husky cross and, as it sniffs the air for me, I squeeze LSTR’s trigger. The dog shrieks as a piece of its hindquarters melt and splash away. Its pitiful howling disappears among the useless lampposts and skeletal frames of ancient mailboxes.

"Looks like hot dogs for dinner," I say and try to spin my lazz like I can in all my favourite Total Vision shows. It goes spinning off my index finger and vanishes in the black water that oozes over the road.

Two dogs leap over the vine-encrusted sill of a shop about forty feet away. They haven’t seen me yet. But I’m upwind, I’ve probably only got a few seconds—I think of climbing the tree. Five more dogs come skittering around the corner up ahead. Two of them sail into the maimed husky as it tries desperately to get to its feet. Its howls are cut short in a tearing snarl as the other three come headlong in my direction.

Concentric ripples are spreading from the spot where my lazz disappeared. I run and dive at it. The dogs nearest to me are in motion instantly. The street behind them seems filled with the large and small shapes of quiet running dogs.

I get my hand around what feels like a pistol grip. Pulling it from the water, I point it at the nearest animal’s low charging head. I can see its dangling tongue and the petal-white of its bare teeth. The safety on my lazz has been knocked into place.

I leap up and backward just in time to see a long brown Doberman nose streak by my face. My hand is on the tiny safety lever of my lazz. The second mutt has come in low and gets an edge of my slicker. The weight of the flying dog pulls me from my feet, and I fall hard on my back with both hands on the smooth shape of LSTR deluxe. The dog has been spun around on the corner of my slicker. It starts to run directly up my body with its jaws snapping and spit flying. Its own momentum carries it over my head after a pulse from my lazz punches a hole out of its middle.
I twist over and onto my feet, and run, semi-crouched, straight into a parked and corroded remnant of the age of fossil-fuels. After glancing off the car’s quarter panel, I end up bent over its dipped hood. I feel the Doberman’s jaws clamp onto the flesh of my thigh. I swivel my torso up and roll my waist against the edge of the dead vehicle. The dog gives its square head a shake to set its teeth, then its body falls away from its snout as I shoot most of its head apart. I’m left staring down in amazement—the dog’s disembodied mouth, its teeth thoroughly embedded, is somehow still clamped to my thigh.

I smack it with the butt of my lazz. Paws splash in the water nearby. I look up. Dogs everywhere. There is the click of nails on steel behind me. I move, but not quickly enough. I’m knocked forward by a canine coming off the ancient car’s hood. I stumble into the middle of the street, then I’m down and they’re all over me. Rad-leather is tough, but still, it won’t be long.

With their teeth in my clothes I become the object of a tug-of-war. The thought that I will be torn to bits to feed civilization’s pets-gone-bad has asserted itself quite thoroughly, when a terrific screech and thump makes most of the canines scatter.

I sit up, and my arm, freed of the weight of too many dogs, brings LSTR round to eviscerate a straggler that’s still attached to my boot. I see the Bemo I called parked on the neck of some deserving mutt. An emaciated Collie, on its way back for more, falls in two as it lunges at my unguarded throat. The Bemo driver has stepped out of his vehicle and has put his own lazz to use cooking dogs.

I get to my feet and start firing indiscriminately at the animals’ wild retreating shadows.

“Hey, man, they’re gone.” It’s the Bemo driver. He’s standing next to me, his belly protruding grotesquely from beneath his green rad-leather slicker. He’s about to put his hand on my shoulder—I step away.

His hood is off and the long strands of an unwashed black mane roll off his head.

“Close call,” he says.

I put my lazz back into its holster next to my ribs and survey the damage. My favourite black slicker is in tatters. I take off the pieces and drop them onto the water. My hemp pants and beige blazer are soaked and torn, so the rad-leather beneath shows through everywhere.
“Are you alright?” asks Mr. Bemo. He’s looking at my thigh.

One of the many black stains in my pants seems to be spreading. A nub of ivory protrudes from the rad-leather that’s stuck to my leg as if stapled there. Crimson seeps from around the nub’s edges.

I realize it’s the root of one of the Doberman’s fangs, the slick white of it glinting like the peak of some iceberg—thick as my middle finger, though most of it’s buried beneath the skin. My hands move instinctively to pull it out. Something stops me.

“Yeah, man, you might not want to touch that,” says the Bemo driver. “We’ll get you to the Emergency and let the medtechs do it.”

I straighten and look at the blotched round cheeks and wide eyes of the driver.

“Did I say we were going to the hospital?” I walk toward the passenger side door of the Bemo.

“No, but—”

“But what?” I open the door. “I’m going behind the Wall, to the Alberni Industrial Park.”

“Alberni Park? Hey, man, you don’t need any new organs, just a few stitches is all—”

“Alberni IP. Let’s go.” I get into the vehicle and shut the door behind me.

The Bemo hums and vibrates under the influence of the same variable wave energy that runs my T.Viz. Its interior light is on—the driver’s door is still hanging open from Mr. Bemo’s timely exit. When I look back out into the night I see my reflection in the glass instead.

The black and mottled hood of my rad leather is drawn tightly on my skull and down my forehead. It’s scuffed and scratched. There’s a scrape on my chin and a cut on the bridge of my beaked nose. In the dim reflection, the darkness around my sunken eyes, and the hollows of my hollow cheeks melt into the black background: the ghost of Delano Jones, night-security man at the Sigma Rejuvenation Clinic.

“Hey, man,” says the driver as he creaks onto the front bench behind the wheel of the Bemo, “Alberni’s a long way away. You really should go to the emergency in Manaimo Central.”
I just look at him. Above the turned up collar of his green slicker his mouth hangs wetly open.

"Well," he says, "If you really gotta go into the IP, it'd still be a whole lot cheaper if you just let me take you back. Catch the Public Trans, man."

I say, "Are you gonna pix-fisting drive, or what?"

His thick sweeping eyebrows kick upward. He turns and picks up the lazz he’s dropped beside him on the bench. My hand is moving toward my own gun when he slaps his upright into the metal cage beside the steering column. He snaps the frame shut with a flip of his wrist, locking it up for safe-keeping. He fumbles underneath the lock-down for another second, then turns around to rest a square white box on the back of the seat between us. It’s a first aid kit.

"Kinda jumpy, ain’t we? You on juice or somethin’?"

I take the box, and red smears onto its white lid as I pop it off—my glove has been punctured, too.

He watches for a moment. "Hey, yeah, sure, no problem mister," says Mr. Bemo, and turns to pull his door closed. The Bemo’s interior light blinks out. "All in the line of duty. No need to thank me for savin your life, or nothin. Nothin I like better than tanglin with a pack o’ wild dogs, anyway."

I pull a disinfectant towel from its package.

He turns around again. "You got the credit to get all the way to Alberni?"

I pull the sleeve of my rad-leather up over my wrist. He places his contact wand against the chip buried there and a read-out comes up on a screen in the console. He looks at it.

"Okay, Mr. Jones. We’re off to Alberni Park." He puts the vehicle into gear.

The disinfectant towel is reduced to a red, crumpled ball within moments—useless. I let the tattered thing fall to floor of the Bemo, and lean back in my seat. I close my eyes as the vehicle weaves its way over the broken road, and picture our destination, looming into view as we come over that last rise. The colossal dome of Alberni Industrial Park, stretched across the horizon as if it were an egg being pushed from the Earth’s planet-sized womb. The shimmering surface of the shell, smooth, grey, shadows pulsing over it in evidence of the machine-life trapped beneath.
A cold vacuum expands in my chest. My eyes snap open. In the past, the thought of passing through the Walls into Alberni always excited me. That was before Lisa went to the Moon. Back when I still thought I had a chance at Citizenship. Back when I thought the IP would soon be my home.

Who was I kidding? How could I have imagined the owner of a perfect rejuvenated body would want anything to do with a genetic throwback like me?

Not that it matters anymore. Zeta, R17, told me she’s pretty sure I knocked her up. They’re bound to find out. They’ll do tests before they dissect her this afternoon. A pain stabs through me as I envision scalpels slicing into Zeta’s white abdomen. I’m for the parts bin, for sure. Some pixing bar-tender will be wearing my kidneys soon enough. Even worse, they’ll probably grow our baby for organs too.

How did this happen? How can I have fallen in love with a floating corpse?

“Hey,” says Mr. Bemo, “Does Wall Security know you’re comin’? You on the schedule?”

He looks back, interpreting my silence as a negative answer. “You better have some serious business in Alberni then, man. They’ll never let you by, looking like that. Carryin’ that lazz.”

“I’ve thought of that,” I say, looking at the shoulders of his green slicker. A bit big but it’ll do. “Stop here,” I say, and pull LSTR from beside my ribs.

I’m still not sure it’s such a good idea, but I just can’t seem to think of a better one.

* * *

Ninety minutes before, 7:50 AM—

David Metzenbergen smiles as e lets es gaze slide over the charts and requisitions before the morning’s operation. E hardly sees them; es mind is too full of Beverly. Es week-long holiday at Heidi-Gwai had been wonderful.

E rises from the stiffly padded rolling chair in the pre-ops room of Sigma Rejuve, and stands straight-legged in concentration. E presses the tip of es forefinger against es
upper lip. The well-established lines in es forehead deepen. Metzenbergen is looking in the direction of a bisected portion of a young, black-haired woman that revolves to one side of the uncluttered room. It is a computer-generated image of the template e’ll be working on shortly. Es eyes are fastened to the charts that hang on the air beside the rotating side of nude fem. E’s thinking of being alone, in the green, with Beverly—her hand sneaking through the fly of es Bermuda shorts as they lagged behind their tour-group.

David forces himself to concentrate on the numbers, ratios, and graphs being displayed. The template is still pristine. Good, because someone wants to be young again. They’re after the full set of pipes and hoses, valves and reservoirs. Straightforward, but the transpiration process is exhausting—it’s going to be a long day.

E’d seen Beverly in the lobby of the Remote Resort, flipping es fresh-flesh blonde hair. Doing rounds in the Public Organ Banks about a month before, e’d seen the same hair, the same action from a hall’s-length away. Someone he’d been chatting with had told him who the freshest was.

Apparently, Beverly had been hired after some other orderly got caught up in the scandal of an up-load addiction. One person’s loss is another’s gain, as the saying goes—the addict had lost the Privilege, of course, and Beverly’s name was chosen from the pools to replace em—or rather, to replace him. Despite frequent, and frivolous return trips to the Banks, David had seen the new Citizen only a couple of times since, and e hadn’t talked to em at all. Idly, David wonders who it was that performed Beverly’s first transpiration.

During their few days together, Beverly had told David e’d been working in the Public Organ Banks for years—Metzenbergen must have run across ‘him’ on numerous occasions before e got es first new body. If e had, though, it’s unlikely e would have given the hairy, age-dried, fleshborn homunculous a second look.

At Heidi-Gwai, Metzenbergen had started plotting the minute they’d said hello to each other. Their paths had crossed while e’d been on es way to breakfast. Beverly had just finished eating, but had seemed delighted, eager even, to stop, say hello, and drop a few clues about es itinerary for the afternoon.

Ah, Beverly—
Inevitably, the freshborn reminded Metzenbergen of many, many other fms. These similarities, though, couldn’t fully eclipse the spark of sheer originality that’s always there after a primary rejuvenation.

Standing in pre-ops, David trembles slightly at the thought of Beverly’s body, its slopes and gullies, a pinnacle of esthetic engineering, all still controlled by the impulsiveness of first-flesh individuality. The way e’d gotten David to roll around with em all over that bed of moss, for instance—the stuff had ended up itching in the crack of es ass all day long, but so what?

E pulls the rolling chair across the unscuffable tiles of the room. E drops into it. Scrub-up can wait for a bit. Pix the hidey-eyes—for the moment, outside of any scrutinizing eyes of flesh, e feels no compunction about relaxing and reviewing the week at Heidi-Gwai. It is these biannual visits, after all, that inspire es best work. ‘Diligence and vigilance,’ the thought rolls like a banner through es mind, ‘are the Citizen’s duty. Long life, green life, and machine life are the rewards.’

Oh, the green-life—

Fleshy knots of earth and fiber, the straight, solid firs with their wide rough skins, the abundant chantrelles and chipmunks—David always finds Heidi-Gwai utterly refreshing. There, in es favourite of the world’s natural parks—the largest of the eight—es participation in a greater being becomes physically real. E feels es role as one cell among the many that make up the ailing body of the Lifeform. It makes em feel vital. E pictures the seed of Earth spurting into space as death recedes before it. E’s glad the decision was made to re-open Vertigo Bay—it won’t be long now before the first of the great star-arks will start their swim through the void.

David’s always had an affinity for Miller’s idea of people as the ‘thumbs of nature’—‘tools grown by the Lifeform to forge the bridge between the stars,’ enabling it ‘to take its proper place among its interplanetary cousins.’ Glad the plan is forging ahead, yes, but that doesn’t mean Metzenbergen emself wants to go—where, eff-pix-it-all, did the Council get the idea to send em up anyway? It may only be Vertigo Bay they’ve got in mind, but David’s already done es time up there, e’d gotten his belly-full of space long ago. If he was going to perform the unexpected duty without serious resentmnet, getting some kind of a boost had been essential.
Heidi-Gwai hadn’t failed em either. He’d spent three nights re-dedicating emself
to the principles of Constructive Engagement and then, zotz—the karmic pay-off:
Beverly—and em—body-to-body, and the unbridled green all around. For the last
century or so of David’s life, touching the freshborn is the closest e gets to the feeling of
having touched a separate person.

What a pity, e thinks. What a pity it can’t continue. Es fingers skate through the
wisp of es hair. Soon, Beverly will be just like the rest—an automaton of duty, wearing
es flesh just like it was any other set of work-clothes. Looking at es hand, David sees a
silver strand caught between es fingers. Three years, e estimates absentely, and this body’ll
be ready for mulching. That’s well before its time—the template’s past-due date isn’t for
another six. He shakes the hair away, resuming es thoughts about Beverly.

Even if the freshborn’s future were not so drably predictable, there’s David’s
married to consider. Altavera has saved es life a dozen times. David owes em. And
Citizen Altavera Cruz just hates it when Metzenbergen’s bad habits find their way into
the open.

David sighs and stands. With es hands locked behind es head, e arches es back to
shift es spine. E finds emself gazing once again at the revolving image of a bisected
template, pale pink flipping to incarnadine and back to pink. E’s about to tell the
computer to blank the image, but e stops emself. E takes a few steps, and then a few steps
more, until he’s crossed the room.

“Well, spam me,” he says, and hunkers down in front of the holograph. The
template’s hymen—it’s broken. And it’s the second time in the last six months e’s found
this defect in a template. E ponders the statistical probability that accident could explain
the phenomena. E quickly runs through a series of checks, perusing holo-readouts and
zeroing-in on particular physiological sites.

No sign of other damage. No zygotes lurking in the fallopians.

What could explain it? Many different things, of course. But, to the patient, Dr.
Metzenbergen would explain the problem as he had the other times, as the result of a
procedural quirk. A third time meant that e’d have to make inquiries later, but e’d be
spammed if, in the meantime, e’d postpone the transpiration for something so immaterial.
E won’t even mention it.
E straightens, wondering how e can investigate without drawing attention to himself. E paces once across the room, and is swivelling on es heel when the computer speaks.

“Admitting. Dr. Saunders,” it hums in monotone. “Announcing the arrival of Dr. Ellen Saunders.”

The outer door of pre-ops slides aside and Metzenbergen’s surgery-second for today’s transpiration breezes into the room.

“Hi, Metz,” Ellen says. “How was the holiday?”

David smiles, tersely at first, but then es eyes brighten. E doesn’t actually like Saunders, but e’s very glad to have the chance to tell es story. “I had a great time,” e rolls the ‘r’ over es tongue, then grins even more widely. Besides, there’s that little problem of the busted hymen that needs adressing. “Do you want to have a look at today’s ‘plate?’ E jabs a finger toward the image of the bisected body.

“Full transpiration, isn’t that right?” Ellen slips out of es tasseled slicker and pulls es peach-fringed rad-hood back from es smooth forehead.

“Yes.” David watches as Ellen shakes out es bobbed, auburn curls.

“Any surprises?”

“Not really.” Es gaze returns to the revolving holo. “But maybe you should have a look at it yourself.”

“That’s okay. Seen one ‘plate, ya seen ‘em all.” Ellen directs es next words irrelevantly up into the ceiling—a quirk that David always finds irritating in other people, a tendency e caught from Altavera. Saunders, for no reason, even feels compelled to add volume to es voice as e gives the command, “Computer, shut down the holo.”

The human segment blinks out of existence. David stares at the empty dias on which the sectioned template had been displayed. E can’t help but note Ellen’s disregard for procedure. Normally, e’d comment on such an unprofessional display, but, today, e’s just as glad to let it go and get on with the morning’s operation. E pulls es face into a smile and turns to Ellen. “Seven glorious days.”

Ellen saunters across the tiled floor while undoing the top buttons of es blouse. E steps up to some lockers in the wall across the room from David, and begins to strip down for scrub-up.
“Seven glorious days in Heidi-Gwai.” Still no response from Saunders. David shrugs, and then starts to undo the buckles of es suspenders. E shakes es head, resorting to entertaining emself in private—it had been a remarkable coincidence—only two weeks per year, and somehow, at the end of this last visit, e’d lucked into a four day overlap with the beginning of Bev’s.

When Metzenbergen looks up again, Saunders is seated on a padded bench by the lockers with es pants halfway down the thighs of es rad-suit. E’s looking at David. “You know, I never really could take those places.”

Metzenbergen freezes—‘can’t take those places’? What’s Saunders mean—the Natural Parks? E struggles to find es tongue. “Really? I don’t understand—”

“Most people don’t.” With a sigh, Ellen resumes removing es pants. “Most people come back talking about ‘feeling rejuvenated,’ or ‘understanding the nature of our sacrifice,’ or similar clap-trap.”

David, who’d been about to use exactly those expressions, looks down, es eyes alighting on the buttons of es shirt, which e begins undoing. “The Constitution, Mars—everything depends on the Natural Parks,” e speaks into es opened collar, “on rejuvenating the Lifeform—we’d be nothing without it.”

“I know. I’ve read the Rules, too.” Ellen folds es pants and puts them neatly on the bench beside her. Looking back up at David, e has to stifle a little laugh. “You’re looking at me as if I’d lost my mind.” E turns in es seat as David stands and walks past em. “The psychosis of individuality has gained no foothold here, Metz—don’t worry. I’m happy to find purpose in the needs of the Lifeform. Still, those Parks completely depress me.”

Metzenbergen pauses after hanging es shirt on a hook inside es own locker. It must be this attitude that explains Saunders’ lack of professionalism. David tries not to react, unsure of whether e really wants to have this conversation. While watching Ellen’s fingers work at es rad-suit’s VelCling and clasps, David looks for a way to change the subject.

“You’ve got your leathers on,” e says. “Were you out in the sububs?”

“Yeah. I’ve got family outside the Walls.”

“Family?” David asks, though really he couldn’t care less.
"Yeah." Saunders, however, refuses to be diverted. "There are more people that feel the way I do about the Natural Parks than you'd guess, Metz. For obvious reasons, though, they don't like to talk about it." E turns and looks at Metzenbergen, who turns to fiddle pointlessly with the latching mechanism of es locker. "For instance, I'm making you uncomfortable right now, aren't I?"

David resumes undressing for scrub-up. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on, Metz," says Ellen. "I guess we must know each other better than that. I can see you thinking about demotion. About losing the Privilege."

David kicks es pants from es ankles. "I am not."

"Things have changed since the first rejuvenations." Ellen stands. "You can't lose your Citizen's rights for idle chatter anymore." E begins peeling the rad-suit off es body, revealing a pinkened shade of cinnamon beneath.

Metzenbergen has dropped down onto a bench to pull es hose down to es thighs. About to roll the sheer fabric over the knobs of es knees, es hands stop in mid-motion. E sits up, turning es head toward es surgery-second. Saunders, stooped over, about to step out of the crumpled rad-leather at es feet, is too preoccupied to notice the stare.

David is used to people—younger Citizens, mostly—speaking offhandedly about the past and its horrors, but to be so fast and loose with the facts—e finds it reprehensible. Saunders, like every Citizen, is well aware that David was present at the first transpirations, that Citizen's rights weren't even a dream when the first body-banks were created. Back then it was only money that mattered, the Privilege was something you bought, and losing it was the least of your worries. Trying not to be killed in some horrible way is what kept most people busy.

Certain that Ellen must be trying to provoke em, Metzenbergen focusses once again on the rolled-up band of hose strung round es knees. E pushes the elastic material over the balls of es calves, then starts pulling it from es feet.

"Why should you be afraid of demotion?" Saunders says, carefully folding es suit, "You work hard. You're a good Citizen."

David gathers up es own clothes, bringing es slippers together, and bundling pants and hose around them.
Ellen, with one foot up on the bench, is hunched over to examine es ankle. Es pokes at the skin above the socket there. It's one of the four outlets e's got embedded in es body: one in each ankle, and two more under es arms. Metzenbergen's got them too—all transpiration midwives do. Saunders has noticed the yellowish stain that spears up from the plastic all the way to the bottom of es calf—e probably hadn't taken es protein adhesives after es last transpiration. Otherwise, of course, Metzenbergen's fellow doctor is another flat, sculpted example of genetically guaranteed good health. To a less informed eye, Ellen, es green eyes glowing against a background of occidental accents, is no doubt spectacular. To Metzenbergen, though, the down on Saunders' arms, the cleft between es breasts all appear as little more than data streams.

Saunders looks up. "Those Natural Parks, though—"

Anger rises in David's chest. "Look. This is hardly the time or place for a history lesson, but you seem to need one. Your longevity treatments are owed to millions who died—"

"Longevity treatments'? Maybe you mean 'mandatory public organ donation'?"

"—to millions who died trying to get the process from—"

"—out of the control of the twenty-first century's ultrarich." Saunders waves es hands as if David's words were insects e's shoowing away. "I'm no freshbom, Metz. Commodification of life, empires of ego, complete disregard for the Lifeform—I remember my education. But what's that got to do with how I feel about the Natural Parks?"

Metzenbergen slaps the clothes in es hands down onto the bench beside em and stands. "Have you no gratitude? From the burnt out fossil of civilization a few visionaries—miracle workers, really—manage to synthesize whole flesh—and you, mindlessly complaining—"

"Hold on there, Doctor. Just because I don't fall down and worship like an imbecile doesn't mean I don't appreciate what the Natural Parks mean for the future."

Metzenbergen's gaze locks onto the jade of Ellen's eyes. The stillness is sudden, complete.

Saunders picks up the clothing that has accumulated in a neat pile beside em, and puts them into es locker. The locker door seals itself quietly while David looks down at
es hands. E’s plucking at the elastic of es jockstrap. Saunders strides toward the exit that will take em into the second of the four pre-ops rooms. Metzenbergen is angrily unhooking the harness from around es groin when e hears the computer confirm Saunders’ identity. “Thank you, Dr. Saunders. You may now enter.”

Metzenbergen looks up, but Ellen is already gone.

Left alone, the tangle of es jockstrap dangling from one hand, Metzenbergen can’t help but recognize how puerile emotion has gotten the better of em. E shakes es head. Es vigilance always has been weak. One minute nothing but beautiful holiday thoughts about Beverly, and the next e’s shouting with misdirected passion at Ellen.

David tries to reverse the process—recapture one of those delicious, humid moments—Beverly and the lush boudoir of the forest—

All e can see, though, is Ellen Saunders with es pudenda belligerently on display. The arrogance of the fem! Promoted to a station behind the Walls only eighteen years ago, and already e thinks e knows it all.

Citizens were all the same these days. Every trace of imagination wiped out by duty—surely this is not what Beltane had in mind when he first envisioned Constructive Engagement, or Miller when he wrote On the Rights of Nature. Metzenbergen picks up the knot of es clothes, adding the jockstrap to the mix. E thinks of Saunders spitting out quotes, ‘empires of ego’, ‘commodification of life’—as if being able to say them meant you could actually know what they meant.

E pushes the ball of material into es locker. Metzenbergen knows. E’d lived through it, e didn’t need imagination to dredge up image after image of wanton cruelty, bloodsport, cannibalism. E smacks es palm against the button that closes the locker door. E’d had choke-chains put round es neck, been made to bark for other people’s pleasure.

The door slides halfway across the opening, bumps against a stray pant-cuff, and automatically opens again. The brown and white tangle of pants and undergarments tumbles out and onto the ground. E looks down at the snarl on the floor, staring. E remembers the gurneys and the bodies exploded all over them, the cries for help, the water clouded through with blood rising up to es hips. Reflexively, es hand comes up to es ear. E remembers the scalpel peeling the skin from es muscle. E blinks, squeezing es eyelids together until colours swim through the darkness.
E realizes e’s holding es breath. Es eyes flick open as e slowly lets the air hiss out of es lungs. E pulls es hand away from es ear. Vivid, he thinks, so vivid. Perhaps it was a mistake to have been so candid with Beverly over the holiday. The freshborn had inspired em to such detail in all those old stories that e seems susceptible to re-living them in a way e hasn’t for a very long time. Bending to pick the clothing up from the floor, Metzenbergen wonders if maybe this is the reason e lost es temper so easily with Ellen. Then e remembers the dismissive way Saunders had waved es hands at em.

David pushes the ball back into the locker. It may be true that e’s overreacted—maybe even behaved in a fashion unbecoming of a Citizen—nonetheless, Saunders is in need of an attitude adjustment. Holding es clothes in place this time, Metzenbergen once again depresses the button beside the locker door. The panel slides forward, and at the last moment e yanks es arm back. As the compartment seals, David is already considering what opening salvo might best serve in es forthcoming effort to edify es surgery-second.

E meanders toward the entrance to the second pre-ops room. “In my experience—” e murmurs, testing, but trailing off as e angles es head, and opens es eyes wide for the IDeye beside the solid polished surface of the door.

“Thank you, Dr. Metzenbergen,” says the cool monotone. As if it were being blown away, fleck by fleck in a strong wind, the door’s smooth metal-grey coarsens first to graininess, then fades into a shallow clarity. “You may now enter.”

David walks through the gluey energy membrane that ensures separation between external and internal environments.

In the second pre-ops room, Saunders is leaning forward, hands above es head against the slick white wall of the scrubstall farthest from the door. Es head sags between es shoulders, and es arms and back are stretched out to luxuriate in the pulse of the ionizer. The blue sparkle brushes over es skin, invisibly cleaning in es ears and es eyes, under es nails and into the cups of each of es pores.

Four of the roof-to-floor, eight-by-seven scrubstall ionizers line the wall of the long and narrow scrubroom. David walks halfway down the black mat-tac avenue that joins them, stopping in front of a keypad across from the second one. E taps in his choice of subsonic wave, style and temperature, then steps into the cooking current that’s blinked on behind em.
Metzenbergen turns toward Ellen, intent on the transmission of the insights e’s been mulling. E’s denied the opportunity.

Still leaning forward, Ellen speaks out, “I’m sorry, Metz.” Es arm drops to a waist-level chromed bar as e half-turns to face David. “I didn’t mean to imply that you were an ‘imbecile.’” E shakes es short hair and sends a shower of sparks into the air. “You know I didn’t mean it.” E turns again stretching es arms back, the muscles tightening through es abdomen as es hips push out. “I just meant that I get tired of remembering all that hard learning.” Es stretch collapses and e stands, rubbing es face and neck. “Billions of dead and still we have to have ‘longevity austerity’ because the two billion left are still too many.”

David leans back, perching es buttocks against the chromed bar in es own stall. It’s a shame, e thinks, how careless Citizens have become of their history. Longevity austerity exists, not because two billion are too many, but because two billion would quickly become thirty otherwise. That’s how it happened before. E looks through the dancing azure pinpricks at the figure two stalls over. E decides e can afford to be magnanimous. “Apology accepted.” Metzenbergen spreads es toes as e stretches es feet out in front of him. “When you’ve lived a little longer—”

“Jeez, Metz, are you just trying to press my buttons today? Do you really not know how patronizing that sounds?”

This time David recognizes the adrenaline surge of anger and shuts it down. E thinks about what Ellen’s said. “You’re right. I guess it’s my turn to say sorry.” E turns es hands over, then flips them, palm up, stirring grains of sapphire sand. “What I meant was that I think that time—I am two hundred and forty-eight years old, after all—”

“I know, Metz, and, believe me,” Ellen leans toward David, into the transparent barrier between scrubstalls, “I respect that. But before we get back to what you meant, why don’t we stick with what I meant for a while.

“Like I said, the lessons of the past just depress me after a while. I don’t need that kind of inspiration to get lost in my work.” E turns away from the wall, crosses the short space of the stall, then comes back again. “Take the Natural Parks, for instance—well, the only way my poor old dad—may he live forever in the Lifeform—even got to experience a Natural Park was on the T.Viz. The Lifeform, the Council says—and I
accept their data—is still too fragile for large scale human visitation. But really, my poor old dad—

“And machine-life—in here nanotech takes care of most things, makes my clothes, cooks my meals. Out in the sububs, my sisters—and they’re getting old too—have to hustle and scrounge if they want to be sure their air detoxifier keeps going—”

Ellen’s fingers tap impatiently against the invisible wall. E shakes es head. “Anyway, that’s what I see when I visit the Natural Parks. That’s why I don’t like going there.”

David and Ellen stare at each other through the gap of the empty scrubstall between them. The quiet hum of the ionizers is all that fills the silence until, several seconds later, a delicate chiming tone cuts into it. A light in the wall across from Ellen comes on—es scrub is a minute from completion.

“Well,” says David, clearing es throat, “I think my point still applies. I think you’ve gotten a bit muddled, if you don’t mind me saying so, between some kind of pedantic ‘lessons of the past,’ and the simple facts we live with because of it.

“When you’ve lived a little longer—I’m sorry, but there’s no other way to say it—you’ll see the difference.” Metzenbergen lifts emself off es chrome perch and leans forward against the scrubstall wall, mirroring Ellen. “Besides, is it really so bad out there?” David pauses, realizing e’s straying from what e wanted to say, realizing, moreover, that e’s moving onto shaky ground—e hasn’t stepped foot out in the sububs for years. E plunges on, “There are freedoms, after all, in the sububs that Citizens don’t have. We have our duty, to serve the Council, nurse the Lifeform, provide clean water and a steady energy supply—by comparison sububbanites get to do whatever they want. And then there’s the hidey-eyes—sububbanites can watch us pretty much anytime they want. They could be watching us right now. We have control, yes, but they get to keep their eye on us.”

The ionizer in Ellen’s scrubstall shuts off, the cloud of blue scintilla fades, and e steps out onto the mac-tac floor.

“Anyway,” says David, “What I meant to say was that time—long life—gives a person patience. Forgive me, I know you’ve heard it before, but you’ll see, patience resolves the urgency of the ‘I’—of immediate personal needs.” David resumes es seat against the chromed bar. “When I’m in a Natural Park there is no more ‘I think therefore I am,’ there’s only being.” E closes es eyes, tilting es head back, basking in the warm vibrations of the
ionizer. "Where you see an injustice of the present, an injustice for—" your family, e was
going to say, "—certain people," e says instead, "I see a victory for the one flesh of the
future. We are the white blood cells of the Lifeform that beat the cancer of individualism.
What could be more uplifting than that?"

Ellen’s laughter makes David’s eyes spring open. E turns to look at Saunders who’s
standing in front of the scrubroom’s exit.

Saunders’ disinfected hand comes up to stifle the sound, covering es microscopically
cleansed teeth. "Sorry, Metz, but I have to tell you, I know the real reason you had such a
good time on your holiday."

Metzenbergen feels es heavy eyebrows condense around the bridge of es nose. "Eh?"
"Beverly caught up with you in Heidi-Gwai, didn’t e?"
"I don’t understand." How had Saunders found out about es weekend tryst?
Saunders is laughing again. "Oh, Metz, if you could only see your face!"
E feels colour invading es cheeks.
Ellen turns to let the IDeye get a view of es retina. "How did you think she found out
you’d be there, anyway?"

Staring at the long shadow that runs down the center of Saunders’ back,
Metzenbergen suddenly envisions a scalpel sliding along that smooth valley, laying open the
white of a spine. "What are you talking about?"

"Thank you, Dr. Saunders—" says the computer.
"That little freshborn was asking me all about you." Ellen shrugs. "I let it slip that
you’d be going to the park." Then e turns and sinks into the door’s viscous surface.

Metzenbergen stares as blue-black opacity leaks back into the gel of the exit. Es mind
is disturbingly silent as e waits for the light to signal es own scrub’s completion. The enigma
this particular colleague represents to er has suddenly found new depths of unpleasantness.
When e hears the chime, David is thinking of es married. E counts to sixty, and then starts
counting again. E’s made it up to twenty-four when the ionizer finally cuts out.

Es bare feet pad down the mat-tac.

"Thank you, Dr. Metzenbergen. You may now enter."

* * *
Two days after, 1:10 AM—

Daniel MacAfferty is seated on a stool in his own kitchen. His legs are crossed alongside the counter that juts into the room, separating its cooking and its eating areas. A salmon-shaded wall supports his back, and his heels are hooked into the legs of another stool. It’s the first time he’s been off his feet for hours. Despite the expansiveness of his posture though, MacAfferty’s not relaxed at all.

He arrived home a short while ago, after two days and a night of running down leads and bullying officers into double-and-triple-checks. It’s late, and he’s exhausted, but sleep will be a while in coming yet. His thoughts are still doing the most complex of gymnastics, even if his legs have stopped pursuing their manic criss-crossing of the kitchen’s tiled floor. That’s what he’d been doing pretty much since he got back and put a light on in his darkened house—pacing in the kitchen, trying to get the spring that’s twisted in his head to unwind. Then Suzy came down, told him to stop mumbling to himself, scolded him, saying she didn’t want him waking Bobby. Dan said he didn’t know he’d been talking. Suzy got him to sit down. She’s going to fix him something to eat.

“Dinner?” Suzy asks. She’s standing in front of the fridge. “There’s the bean salad Bobby and I had. Or would you rather have breakfast?”

The kitchen of the MacAfferty home is spacious and clean, though not excessively orderly. Avocado and mint fixtures contrast neatly with the textured, pinkish swirls of the walls and the grey speckles of the countertops. Dishes are stacked precariously around the sink, waiting to be put away, and toys, building blocks and little molded animals, are scattered here and there over the black-and-white checkered floor.

Suzy swings the door of the fridge closed. Its latch clicks as she walks to the pantry nearby. She pulls it open. “I could fix you sandwich, if you wanted.” She sends an inquiring look in Daniel’s direction. He nods, eyes closed.

The rustle of Suzy’s rummaging fills the kitchen. When MacAfferty opens his eyes again, his married’s unwrapping a home-baked loaf of bread on the countertop in front of him. Suzy gets the flour from a fifteen-level underground parking garage
somewhere between the Alberni IP and here. UV lights, recycled air—that’s how most agriculture is done these days.

MacAfferty watches his diminutive married bow her head as she unwraps the bread on the other side counter. Links of black ink in viny swirls swim up off her forehead and across her scalp. She got the tattoo shortly after her last transpiration—something to mark this ultimate epoch of her life. She decided on a wreath around her crown—her seventh chakra—signifying her dedication to a final, permanent departure from this plane of existence. Sometimes, MacAfferty, as a major component of that existence, can’t help but see the symbol as a personal slight. But he’s never said anything about it.

“It was as bad as anything I’ve seen. As bad as Lumsden.”

Suzy leans sideways to reach under the counter for a knife. Quietly, she cuts four slices from the end of the whole grain loaf. Infused inside the wreath is an image of a tiny open book, its ragged pages lined with illegible, letter-like scrawls. She tells people different things, depending on who they are, just what the book is. Sometimes it’s The Book of the Dead, others times it’s Miller’s Rights of Nature, or the Koran—sometimes she even says it’s the Council Constitution.

Daniel’s married goes back to the fridge. She searches briefly, then turns, holding up a jar in each hand. “Vegespread or meatmix?”

He points at the one whose grey is of a slightly deeper shade. “Meatmix.”

Suzy’s heard Daniel tell a lot of bad stories. She’s got a few to tell herself. She was around, that time, in Lumsden. He doesn’t really expect her to say anything. Still, after forty-eight years, reasonable or not, it irritates him that she can’t just spit up the magic words that will soothe away the awful tension built up inside him. As if there were any. Daniel sighs.

Suzy selects a few more containers from the fridge and brings them back to the counter. She hands Daniel the new jar of meatmix.

“There’s been a lot about it on the broadcasts.”

There’s a pop as Daniel turns his palm against the lid. He twists off the cap, his gaze settling on the label. Cartoon animals, a pink pig and a polka-dot cow—not that
anything on legs ever went into this stuff. Dan’s visited the vats on the T.Viz. Livers the size of a house. Sheets of muscle.

“What’d they say?”

“Not much. Madman at Sigma Rejuvenation. Horrible massacre. Seven dead—probably some Citizens.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t in touch. You got my messengers, didn’t you?”

Suzy pulls apart some lettuce. “Yes.”

“I was pretty pixing busy, Suze.”

“I know that, Dan.” She slices tomatoes—products of their own greenhouse.

“How come you guys are stonewalling the media?”

“Citizens were involved.”

“Yeah. They say three Citizens killed. But ‘no one will confirm.’ That’s a stupid thing to hold back. Everyone knows Citizens must have been killed—it happened at Sigma.”

“That was how the Captain was told to play it.”

“Told?”

Daniel dips his finger into the creamed goo inside the jar on the counter. “Erin got it in the ear all day yesterday from various concerned Council members.” He speaks around his finger. “Just as well. E couldn’t have made a decision emself—e was useless.”

He’s got her attention now. He pulls his finger from his lips with a smack, and examines it morbidly. Suzy used to be a cop too, when they met. “It was a slaughterhouse. An old-time deathfest. Citizens Mustafa Donsacker and Morris Levar both got it.”

“Donsacker and Levar?”

“You remember that couple on the air-maintenance committee?” He waits for the light of recognition to blink on in the dark of Suzy’s eyes. “Yes—them.”

“Who else?”

“A doctor, Citizen Ellen Saunders. E was—” he stares at the spattered grey slab of the countertop. “Well, you’ve seen what a lazz can do to people. There was a medtech, too. A receptionist. And then the eff-pixer himself. Offed himself.”

“Yeah. The broadcasts said so. Thank the Lifeform.”
He doesn’t want to speak it, but the nightmare, restless in his skull, finds its own egress. “What a mess. Donsacker and Levar were married for seventy-two years. Their innards—just spattered all over the goddamn place. I had to tell the parents of this girl, the receptionist, that their daughter was dead. Her chest—you can’t imagine—”

“And I don’t really want to.” Suzy joins the two pairs of sandwich halves together, and goes to get a plate from the cupboard. “I left the force with enough memories, thank you.” She slides the plate, with two sandwiches on it, across the countertop.

“Still,” MacAfferty swings round to face the meal, “you’d think a person would get used to it—”

Suzy’s hand reaches out to touch his as it takes up a sandwich. “That’s what makes you good though, Dan. You never do.” Her tiny hand clamps onto his great, dark mitt. “But we agreed. Leave the meat at the door.” She squeezes once more then lets go.

She’s referring to a conversation they had shortly after Bobby was born. MacAfferty doesn’t actually remember ‘agreeing’ to anything. But it’s true, he doesn’t want his son exposed to this stuff any more than his married does. Some things just don’t belong in a six year-old’s imagination.

Daniel pulls the sandwich away from his open mouth. “How is Bobby?”

Suzy comes back from the fridge again, this time returning with a two-litre bottle of home-brew. She walks round the counter, stopping at its end where their mugs are hung from their hooks.

“He’s fine. He missed his Dad this weekend.”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“You’ll make up for it.”

“Yeah. I’ll try.” MacAfferty puts the sandwich down, untasted.

Standing beside him now, Suzy unscrews the cap from the bottle and gently, so as not to disturb any of its yeasty sediment, pours the beer. She places the glass down in front of him.

“You’re too good to me, Suze.” MacAfferty tries to relax, but the pictures start flowing back. “Eff-pix!” He smacks a fist against the counter-top.
Reaching round his broad shoulders, Suzy starts to massage the muscles in his neck. MacAfferty’s eyes close and his head drops down. He loses himself in the kneading of Suzy’s small, strong hands.

“So who was the guy?” she asks.

“The killer?” Daniel mumbles into his own lap. “He was nobody. A night-security guy at the clinic. Sububbanite. A loner.”

“So, I still don’t get it. A news black-out is a pretty extreme measure. You guys would have had to invoke some of the small print in the Council Constitution.”

Suzy’s right. The reticence of the IP Police in this particular case has pushed the limits of legality. The eightieth rule of Constructive Engagement provides for ‘transparency in the activities of the Citizen class,’ which the hidey-eyes and nanotech help make possible. Theoretically, sububbanites, or anyone else can observe, through the T.Viz, any activity that takes place behind the Walls. For practical reasons, certain exceptions were made within the Council Constitution—crime scenes for instance, or private domiciles. Although MacAfferty never likes it when the letter of the law supercedes its intent, at least in this case there’s a reason for it. Not one that MacAfferty necessarily agrees with, but—

“There was a eighth victim. A survivor.”

Suzy lets her hands fall from Daniel’s shoulders. “Who?” she asks, sitting down on a stool beside him.

MacAfferty takes a huge bite out of his sandwich. He chews for a bit. “Well, a ninth, actually. There’s a Bemo driver that’s gone missing, too. His body’s probably in the sububs, though. The Manaimo District Judges’ll have to find it.”

“A Bemo driver?”

“Yeah.” After Daniel takes another bite, the sandwich is more than half gone. “The killer cut the guy’s arm—sorry. He appropriated the guy’s currency-chip to get past the guard at the Walls.”

“Lifeform preserve us.”

“Yeah. In a way, it was only a matter of time—Wall Security is so comatose these days. Hidey-eyes make the job too easy.”

“You’ll be better off when you start working with the Judges.”

66
MacAfferthy nods, mulching another portion of bread and meatmix. Lately he’s liked to tell Suzy how tired he is of working behind the Walls. He takes a swig of his beer. He turns the glass in his hand, watching the light glint off the bubbles rising through the amber liquid.

Interesting cases behind the Walls are exceptionally interesting, but they occur so rarely—usually it’s just a process of working through data, examining brainscans, reading lie-detectors—

He’d rather be back out on the street where the crime may be dirtier, but the detective work is more honest, direct. He’d rather be a Judge again, patrolling the sububs like he had in Zealand decades ago. Or so he’s been saying lately—though after the last two days, he’s not so sure anymore.

Putting his drink back down, Daniel notes Suzy’s round, black eyes fixed in his direction.

“The guy also shot Dr. David Metzenbergen.” He picks up his second sandwich. Suzy’s hands jump up to cover her mouth. “Lifeform preserve us!”

“Yeah. The David Metzenbergen. E’ll live though. E’s under the knife right now.”

“The oldest person alive. A household slave of Ditto Straub’s—wasn’t he there when Babe Solomon was rejuvenated?”

“He’s the guy who killed Ditto Straub, Suze. And he wasn’t just ‘there’ when Babe Solomon was rejuvenated, he was the transpiration midwife.”

“That was an eon ago.”

“Two hundred and eleven years ago, in 2035.”

“Wasn’t she the first?”

“Well, not quite.” He pushes an escaping tomato back between the slices of bread.

“There was a lot of experimenting going on. They were doing lots of horrible things to people, they were property back then, after all.” He chews. “Metzenbergen was the first to survive the infusion of the wire. It was through him that rejuvenation was made possible. Babe Solomon was just the first famous person to try. She was an endorsement queen, a brand onto herself, and then rejuvenation made her an immortal.”

Suzy sighs. “I’ve tried on the Solomon Styles on the T.Viz. The B-Solos were incredible, so elaborate—almost ridiculous.”
Daniel pushes his empty plate away. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Thanks, hon. That's just what I needed."

Suzy wanders to the other side of the counter, absently picking up the plate. "I remember being in a TViz version of that famous play about Straub and Solomon. Steamy stuff—" she puts the plate back down as she searches through her memory.

Daniel leans back again, supporting his shoulders against the wall. "The Song of Solomon-Straub, I think it's called." He pulls his beer off the counter and cradles it in his lap. "There's a character in there based on Metzenbergen, I think. The rest of that bunch are long dead, though." His feet hook round the legs of the other stool. "It'd be bad for a lot of people if it turned out David Metzenbergen was aced by an apparently random act of violence. The Captain wants to be positive the doctor's going to survive before he goes releasing any information."

"Well, I guess that makes some sense. But it makes me—" Suzy trails off, her gaze turning to the right. Daniel pushes off the wall to get a glimpse of what's distracting her.

It stands in the doorway, knee-high, wearing shorts and nothing else, though the rest of its body is covered in tiny brown curls. Squat, and kind of roly-polly, it lifts one arm and waves. "Hello, Bobby's Dad," it says in a coarse, but not unfriendly voice. "We missed you today." A smile breaks out over the creature's face, stretching impossibly wide, revealing square teeth that are impossibly white. It takes one uneven step, then tumbles onto its face. It lays, prone, legs kicking deliberately.

A small sighing sound emerges from behind the doorjamb. Bobby, the tight coils of his black hair pressed against his head where he's been sleeping on it, jumps into sight, pouncing onto his toy. He picks it up and stares into its eyes, scolding, "Oh, you Gurzly! Haven't you learned to walk yet?"

Gurzly's answer goes unheard. The sound of its voice is muffled by Bobby's arm as he stuffs the bear up under his armpit. Dan MacAfferty's son takes a few steps into the kitchen, wiping the sleep from his eyes with his free hand.

"Hullo, Dad," Bobby says.

"What are you doing up, pumpkin?" asks Suzy, leaving the edge of the counter to go crouch beside their boy.

"Did somebody shoot somebody, Daddy?"
The look that Suzy flashes across the room at Daniel is designed to peel the skin off his face. This is where MacAfferty pretends that the two of them have agreed to disagree. Homicide is MacAfferty’s life, and it is a fact of life. It’s one thing to ‘leave the meat outside’, as Suzy likes to put it, but it’s something else entirely to try to protect Bobby from all of reality. He’s going to be alive a long time—potentially for centuries—in a society that has a history of getting pretty grim. Daniel doesn’t mind leaving out the gory details, but he refuses to lie to his own son about the world and what he does in it for a living.

“Yeah Bob. Some people behind the Walls—”

“Behind the Walls?” Bobby’s brown eyes, round and wide to begin with, widen still further.

Daniel beams at his son. “That’s right.” He’s pleased Bobby recognizes that the fact has significance. “Some people were murdered behind the Walls. They were on their way to get rejuvenated in Alberni Industrial Park.”

“Were they shot in the head?”

Daniel grimaces. He stands up and walks to the doorway to crouch beside his married and their son. “They were shot and killed, Bobby. It doesn’t matter where they were shot. The important thing is,” he says and gives his son a kiss on the cheek, “that the bad man didn’t get away.”

“Did they—”

“It’s past your bedtime, Bobby,” says Suzy, and with a last, black look in Daniel’s direction, Suzy picks Bobby up to carry him back to bed.

Getting to his feet, Daniel catches Suzy by the elbow. Over her shoulder he plants a kiss on Bobby’s cheek. “Nightly-night, Sport.” He ruffles his son’s dark, tangled hair, then leans against the doorjamb, watching the small head bob as his married carries the six year-old out into the living room.

“G’night, Dad,” Bobby calls out just before Suzy rounds the corner to go up the stairs to his bedroom.

A smile spreads across Daniel’s face like the hush after a dying wind, and the springs in his head unwind a notch or two. It had been a tough decision, of course, but not once in seven years had Daniel or Suzy regretted it. Eight years ago they’d both
undergone the last rejuvenation process that they’d ever be entitled to. It had only taken a few weeks of trying after that, and then, from the second Bobby had been conceived, their Citizenship had ceased to be valid. They’d broken Rule number six, to abide by the terms of longevity austerity, ‘Citizens, in exchange for long life, shall forfeit their right to procreate’.

Daniel turns slowly and meanders back to the kitchen counter. He picks up his beer and the empty plate. Draining the first, he takes them both over and puts them in the sink. He has resumed his seat, and is staring at the fridge where there are a couple new examples of Bobby’s unsteady artwork, when Suzy gets back.

“Trying to give him nightmares?” she asks, glowering at him from halfway into the kitchen.

“Oh, baby. Let’s not go there. It’s already been an awful day.”

Her fingernails click on the end of the countertop. She keeps her frustrated gaze locked on the motion of her drumming fingertips. In the expression’s subtle creases, Daniel recognizes a hint of the old age that is the future they’ve chosen together. A not too distant future either. Templates rarely sustain a quality existence much past twenty-five years. He reaches out and puts his hand over the top of his married’s, quenching the sound of her clicking cuticles. He gives a gentle squeeze. “Thanks, my love.”

Suzy shrugs off her anger and looks at him for a moment. “So you got the guy?”

“Well, yeah.” He pulls his married round the end of the counter toward him. “He offered himself at the scene, anyway. Delano Jones.”

“So that’s it? Case closed?”

“I don’t know.” He turns her gently with one hand on her waist, and sits her against his knee. “Certainly that’s what the word from upstairs is going to be. Do the brainscan, certify Mr. Jones as the one-in-a-hundred-thousand—a madman in the IP—and forget about it.”

“But?”

“Well,” he kisses her just under the ear, “we went through his compappartment. He was living at the edge of the Manaimo District. You wouldn’t believe the place. Why anyone would have chosen such a dive for a home is beyond me. A T.Viz, a couch, a
bed—nothing on the walls, no personal touch whatsoever. A broken lunar globe was the only evidence that a real person had been living there.”

“A broken globe?”

Daniel stares into the dark pool of her eye, and feels as if he could peacefully sink forever into its depths. “Yeah, not much of a reason to go on a murder spree, is it?” He kisses her again, this time at the base of her neck, alongside the hollow of her collarbone. “Still, I think somehow it started there. His co-workers said he had a girlfriend who had been stationed at Vertigo Bay.” Suzy turns to meet his next kiss with her lips. How much Bobby looks like his mother, he thinks. How grateful he is for the fact.

Suzy’s arms travel up around her married’s neck. “A Citizen?” she asks, sitting down on a stool beside him.

“ Weird, eh?” He tucks an arm under Suzy’s thighs and picks her up. “I tell you. It’s all just a bit elaborate if you ask me. Cutting someone’s arm off, arriving just as the transpirition’s beginning, destroying the template—”

He walks from the kitchen, turning sideways as they pass through the door. “It’s all pretty crazy, sure, but there’s something almost planned about it, too.”

He steps onto the stairs. “I should be able to talk to the girlfriend soon. I’m on pretty high priority for a lunar communication. And, you know,” he unfolds one arm, lowering es married’s feet onto a step, “talking to you and Bobby has been good. It’s actually given me an idea.”

“Dan—”

MacAfferty, on his way to the vid-phone, turns to look back over his shoulder.

“Don’t worry Suzy. One quick call—two minutes.”

* * *

Ten minutes before, 9:10 AM—

Soft splash, flash and sizzle. They melt away like fog from a blast of hot air. What a colourful puddle (and the smell! Cook the Lifeform, what a smell!). Nothing like those hermetic little bursts on the T.Viz. No, not at all. The two Citizens downstairs were the
best—the shock, so alive in their faces, fading as I bored out their chests with my lazz. (That fantastic stink ejected from their centers—I can still smell it!)

I almost wish I could have explained to their corpses how they’d done the all they could, how our being together in that instant was the only thing possible—how really it’s too late for explanations.

(Sigma! My sanctuary! My eye in the storm! Its cornea’s split—its interior of soft and horizonless white is in tatters. I’m squeezed from my womb at the heart of the maelstrom—pushed into the cold, into tearing, cyclonic change.)

Where is that spam-fixing screaming coming from? Is it me?

No. However ragged, my own breathing remains whole, unpierced. Those shrieks must be coming from elsewhere.

My eyes fall upon the white coat of the doctor-slug. It squirms along, dragging its red smear across the polished floor behind it. Its clawed fingers stretch out to pull it forward another foot, its jaw clenched—shut.

That screaming, then? Who the spam is doing that screaming?

There! There she is, trying to fold herself up into herself and disappear. Too bad, green-eyes, that way out looks temporarily clogged by your flesh.

My lazz (oh, LSTR, I miss you) is hard as a bone in my hand. I point it at the ridge between her eyes as she sinks, hoping to push herself into the floor. She’s babbling, or begging—speaking some language I refuse to understand. She cowers behind one of the other things I’ve just shot. (I imagine she’s just finished eating the inside of its head—I blame her for the chaos of meat that’s disturbed my peace at Sigma Rejuve.) I squeeze the lazz’s trigger. “Shut the eff up,” I say, and her head runs off her shoulders.

Somehow this is the shot that completes my transformation. The storm condenses to slow liquidity and, inundated by sudden calm, I sink to my knees.

The ceiling is paneled edge-to-edge with glow-sheets. Looking up at them now, I feel adrift below some placid, unreachable surface. My sobs are choked off, my chopped breathing stifled. Against the machine-hum of my surroundings, I listen to the thump, thump—the shuddering drum of my heart.

Other sounds come to me viscously—the slug still wriggles nearby. Through the thickened air I can hear it drowning.
I take a breath but nothing seems to come.

I lift my gaze. It rises to a profile of the vague hills and valleys in the sheet that enshrouds the template-shape of Zeta. Stretched out on the transpiration table, she's been reduced again to the anonymity of her number, template R17. My drifting slows. Perhaps it’s really ice, not water, that has replaced the atmosphere—thick as a continent, a weight of frozen oceans inexorably advancing. I imagine myself somehow spread-eagled, chained and stretched across the glacier’s prow, destined to be torn to pieces with its next shrug.

I stagger to my feet. “Oh, Zeta,” her name emerges inertly from my lips. I trudge toward the transpiration table, dragging ten thousand frozen tons of death. At the end of my green slicker’s sleeve, my hand, black within my rad-suit’s glove, reaches out with all the hideous speed of some flower pushing from my shoulder. It pulls the white away from the body of my love, leaving her naked on the metal surface of the table. Machines blink along the walls. The web of cables spun out between them grasps her delicately at her temples, tocs, and fingertips.

I breathe in her untouched beauty, reveling in the unblemished clarity of her skin. Her face remains unchanged by changing weather, her body unscarred by scything nature. Unformed by opinion, un tarnished by experience—no trace of sordid life mars her features. At one time that look sickened me completely. (In some way, does it still?)

My lazz pulls downward on my arm. It takes nearly all my strength to keep my hand clamped round the pistol’s grip. With my teeth, I pull the rad-glove from my other hand. The glove dangles from my mouth for a moment, then drops as I tumble across Zeta’s body. My bare fingers caress alongside her neck as I bury my face in her bosom and soak the valley there with my weeping.

“Oh, Zeta,” I say into her sternum, “I’ve come. I’ve come—”

It bubbles up in my mind with a clarity that I can’t speak: I’ve come to die with her. The thought floats suddenly so free of everything it gains a reality it hasn’t had before: I’ve come to shoot my true love and then kill myself.

I’ve come to die with her.
Instinctively, I turn left, then right, looking for the way out that I forgot to leave behind. I see only the twisted remains that mark my passing—a pool of blood, an emptied chest, a spray of meat rustling the whiteness all around.

Death! Death all around! All my life—so afraid of the darkness I hardly knew how to live. But now I see that it was always me, this self—me that was the shadow. This meat was never mine. It was always the monstrous property of death.

I look again at the body on the table. I remember Lisa. I remember the years of careful plotting, of scheming to attain Citizenship and escape my flesh. E was right, I realize, when e said I wouldn’t have made a good Citizen. I was meant for something else.

I step up, once again, to the transpiration table. I climb up onto it. Straddling Zeta’s perfect template-form, I place my palm gently against her cheek.

"Zeta?" I say, "I’ve come for you, my love."

I wait, expecting to see her eyes open—to hear her whispering voice once again. My hand moves down to her throat.

"Why don’t you answer me?"

I bend down toward her lips, as if bringing my ear closer could somehow make her thoughts more audible. The templates communicate with each other telepathically, but the door between their mental existence and our mobile world is thick and thoroughly sealed. There is no key to open it, but the touch of a certain types of people is a keyhole through which the templates whisper.

"Are you afraid? You needn’t be, I—"

I move my hand down between her breasts and bring it to rest on her belly where she’s told me our baby is growing.

"Zeta?"

Why today? Perhaps she needs to be closer to the other templates. Perhaps the DNA emulsifiers—

My other hand comes up to rest upon her shoulder. My lazz crosses her collarbone. The blood-soaked bandage tied around the wound in my palm smears crimson across her alabaster skin.
I remember how changed this flesh I now wear has become. In cutting myself off from everything else, I’ve cut myself off from Zeta, too.

It doesn’t matter. Our eventual dismemberment is the only fact of any significance now. I think of Zeta, my seed, and myself as spare parts for some eff-pixing Citizen, and at last I understand my destiny. I will spread the flesh of death among the immortals.

I pull down the groin-zipper of my rad-suit and move the template’s thighs apart. I climb up onto the table and kneel between R17’s legs. As I place the muzzle of my lazz-gun against the center of her chest, blood drips into the cleft where my tears are still drying. With my other hand, I reach inside my rad-suit and pull out my eye-jammer to turn it on.

* * *

One hour and fifteen minutes before, 8:05 AM——

David Metzenbergen staggers into the Sigma Rejuvenation Clinic’s third pre-ops room. In es haste to get through, David’s been pushing too hard against the gluey force-field of the room’s entrance. The room is so small, the pent-up momentum of es effort nearly sends em sprawling into Ellen Saunders’ lap. Saunders, however, is so engrossed in what e’s doing, e doesn’t even look up.

Ellen holds a hypodermic disc at eye-level. E depresses its pressure-release with es thumb while carefully observing the level of the dosage. In a few tiny beads, flecks of diamond in the light, the narcotic arches through the air. Metzenbergen guesses by the glint that it must be the cronenglasser serum. Cronenglasser is the second of the seven inoculations they each have to take in order to enable them as transpiration midwives. A scoured, alloy slab just in front of Saunders serves as counter-space beneath the medications cabinet. Thirteen other syringes lay spread out over its surface.

After a moment, standing naked, staring at Ellen, David suddenly feels foolish. From a shelf by the door, e grabs one of the white sets of surgery-greens and starts putting them on.
The third, and last of the pre-ops rooms is barely as long as the second room was across. It only has space for the cabinet arrangement along the wall, and the Hamm’s vestibule at the far end, and that’s about it. The final pre-ops door, the entrance to the operating theatre, lies through the vestibule, out of sight.

Ellen puts the disc she’s loaded with cronenglasser down next to a group of three other hypodermics e’s got segregated to one side of the metal counter. E looks at Metzenbergen, who’s tying off the waist of his pants. “Do you want to fix each other, or do you want to fix yourself?” E waves es hand above the four prepared syringes.

According to the protocols, they should give each other the shots, but Metzenbergen knows these rules are often regarded as over-cautious. Still, e hesitates to give an answer, and then, having done so, e wonders at es hesitation. E’s making a mental note to do some repetitions of his mantra for diligence when a reason for the indecision bubbles up from his subconscious. Protocol also says that there should be two properly qualified people in this room at all stages of the inoculation procedure.

“Speak up, Metz,” says Ellen, reaching up to take two of the tall, emerald phials of metrious fidelac down from their row in the medications cabinet. “There’s only the two choices, really.” E selects another syringe, and loads one of the green, pyramid-shapes into it. “That shouldn’t be too many for a Citizen of your great experience.” Saunders keys in the dosage on the side of the disc, then holds it up to watch if the needle emerges smoothly. Es thumb flexes against the pressure-release and the spike appears, puffing a mist of chartreuse from its tip.

David reaches out as Ellen picks up the second green phial and another syringe. E takes hold of Saunders’ wrist, squeezing gently.

“Dr. Saunders,” e says, “You know you shouldn’t have filled these syringes on your own.”

“Why, Metz,” says Ellen, looking up from the hand wrapped around es wrist. “I think your age-encrusted reserve may be slipping.”

Long ago, David thinks, e probably would have had to fight the urge to squeeze even harder. “Look, Doctor,” e says, letting go, “This isn’t fun and games. Citizen Donsacker’s a hundred and eighty-seven years old. I think e’d appreciate it if we took es transpiration seriously.”

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“I think I know how to gas up a syringe by now, Metz.”

“Apparently not, since here you are, preparing them by yourself.”

“Metz—”

“You know the protocols, Citizen Saunders.” David scoops the four loaded syringes out from under Ellen Saunders’ hand. “You were right, though, when you said in the other room that times have changed.” E walks the short length of the alloy slab. “At the first rejuvenations, you probably would have been horribly killed for ignoring the protocols, but these days—” with es thumbs, e pushes the charges out of the syringes one by one. E looks up at Ellen and smiles. “Well, the consequences tend not to be quite so serious.” With a flourish, e slips them through the disposal shoot at es waist. When e’s done, e directs another lop-sided grin toward Dr. Saunders. E even adds a slight stoop to es posture to connote an impression of weakness.

Ellen laughs. Metzenbergen allows a heartbeat for em to believe that e’s joking, that a trip to the trash was really all he’d been talking about.

“Or, at least,” e continues, “they tend not to be quite so immediate.” E points es eyes upward, rolling them into es head, reminding Ellen the hidey-eyes are watching—collating the permanent history.

Ellen’s bright, green eyes close to a slit. “Nobody cares who loads the fixes. It’s insignificant, and everybody knows it.”

Metzenbergen stares into Saunders’ pupils. E looks down the tunnel of es gaze as if it’s an irrigation pipe, feeding the weed of doubt that’s cracking the paved surface of Saunders’ reserve.

David straightens, shrugging. “If you say so.”

Ellen’s expression is slow to change. The hairline furrow in es forehead vanishes and the roundness returns to es eyes. Es short curls bob as e es head shakes subtly back and forth. Her mouth opens pointlessly for a moment before closing. Metzenbergen gets a brief glimpse of the soft, vulnerable red of its interior.

“Are you trying to threaten me, Metz?” Saunders asks.

Metzenbergen lets es shoulders move backward, adding to the rigidity of es posture. E says nothing.
“Because if you are, you’re not doing much of a job. Such a minor infraction of the protocols—” Ellen turns her gaze back toward the rows of multi-coloured phials lined up on the shelves of the meds cabinet. Her head shakes more visibly now.

David walks up to Saunders’ profile and, adopting a very particular pitch, e speaks in a quiet, reed-like voice. It’s one of several vocal techniques Altavera has taught em over the years. “How many grains of sand make a mountain, Ellen?” Its sound is designed to cause a particular autonomous response from the human nervous system. “Diligence and vigilance are the Citizen’s duties. Long life, green life, and machine life are the rewards. Taking the Privilege for granted is a slippery slope.”

David watches for the shortening of Ellen’s breath in response to the tonal communication of near and present danger. It fails to appear—David never was as good at the voice as Altavera.

Metzenbergen does, however, see Saunders’ sculpted nostrils flare as e turns to face em. “You are,” e says, “you really are threatening me.”

Metzenbergen reaches up into the medications cabinet to take down two phials of hydrolyxol to replace the ones e’s just incinerated.

“Not really, Ellen,” e says, and relaxes es posture. “It’s not really up to me to threaten. This is Citizen Mustafa Donsacker’s eighteenth transpiration—e’s one hundred and eighty-seven years old.” Metzenbergen stresses the numbers. The phials clink as e places them down on the counter’s alloy surface. E leans against its polished edge, waiting for Ellen to see the implication, thinking how much shorter the wait would have been if es surgery-second had discovered the template’s absent virginity.

If anything were to happen during the transpiration, any small thing Donsacker might decide to take a disliking to—a broken hymen for instance—it could lead to an investigation. Then Ellen’s meaningless indiscretion might become anything but meaningless. One hundred and eighty-seven years represent vigilance of a very high order. Donsacker might well do an investigation just for fun—just to be sure that everyone involved in es eighteenth transpiration comported themselves with the appropriate decorum. David knows Mustafa Donsacker—e’s petty, the kind of person who might do exactly that.

Which brings Metzenbergen to the real point e’s trying to make.
E takes down a second pair of phials and then checks to be sure Saunders is still looking at em. Once again, e rolls es eyes up into es forehead. “The eyes and ears are always wide open in Sigma Rejuve. The permanent history is available to any Citizen. You must watch what you say.” E looks straight into the green of Ellen’s eyes. “Mind me well,” e pauses before continuing, “you must watch what you say.”

E places the phials alongside the syringes still on the bar. E looks again at Saunders, who, it appears, is appropriately puzzled by es use of the word ‘say’ rather than ‘do.’

“Oh.” Ellen’s gaze falls to the floor. “I see. I’m sorry, Metz, I didn’t think.”

It appears, then, David thinks, that Saunders is Citizen enough to understand the subtleties. E might live a while yet, after all.

“Do you know Citizen Donsacker?” Ellen asks.

“Yes. My married, Altavera, and I know the Mustafa and es married, Morris, very well.” David smiles. The gambit has worked well. Not only has e managed to put Saunders in es place, but e’s also gotten es surgery-second to shut up about es fling with Beverly. And e’s done it without overt threats. More importantly, though, e’s done it without admitting anything about the girl to the permanent history. E reaches up to take down two new phials of cronenlasser serum. The protocols were intact and Altavera would likely remain in the dark. It’s not entirely by accident that e, emself, has managed to survive through twenty-seven transpiritions.

E takes Doctor Saunders by the wrist again, and places the phials in es open palm. “You load.” He smiles up into the green of Ellen’s eyes. “And then fix us both.” Relax the protocols for now, e thinks. E’d deal with Mustafa if anybody asked.

* * *

Three days after, 12:05 AM—

When Joe Regent arrives at the bodyshop for his midnight shift, he finds Zimon slouched in front of the bio-read displays. He’s got his chin and mouth covered with his balled-up fists. His eyes, wide, red, peer unblinking over the top of his knuckles. He’s
totally engrossed with something clearly, because when Joe says, “Hiya Zimon,” he
jumps straight up and jiggling onto his feet.

Joe can’t help but laugh. It pours from him like he’s just learned how. He throws
his head back and lets it go at the ceiling, then bends and thumps the table in the middle
of the security office.


Joe looks up at the white-faced Zimon and spits out a few more ugly guffaws. In
the last couple of hours it’s occurred to Joe that his life would be a whole lot simpler if
Zimon were to suddenly, somehow, die.

“Eff-pigz, Joe!” Zimon lurches toward him, running into the table between them
as if he didn’t know it was there. “Didja ear? Didja ear whad habbened?”

The shock of Zimon’s collision with the table flips a day old mug of wake-up
onto its side. Joe watches as the liquid flows in a neat orange path toward him, then runs
off the edge.

“You mean aboud th’ Waderboyz geddin kiggked oudda th’ derby finals?” says
Joe, looking down at the boots of his rad-suit as they’re spattered with orange.

“No! Aboud Del! Del—he—” Zimon starts waving his hands, apoplectically
trying to paint words onto the air.

Joe observes for a moment, then slits his dark eyes and shakes his head
imperceptibly. Reaching into his clothes, Joe flicks the on switch of his eye-jammer. He
tosses the rod onto the table, then leans over it, sweeping a stack of report-screens, the
tipped mug, and two cups onto the floor. “A courze I eared!” His shout is punctuated by
the crash of glass and computer disks. “I worg here doo, idjit! Copz came by my houze
yesterday, juss lik they came by yerz!”

Zimon backs up a step, away from the intensity of Joe’s face. He stammers. “H-h-
how’d’ya g-gnow they came by, Joe?”

Joe walks slowly around the table. “I haf d’ dell ya, Zimon—” He stops when
he’s centimeters from the other security guard. Bending to put his face sidelong into
Zimon’s, he speaks in a low rasping voice, “thizz kinda thing’z goin d’ be a problem.”

Zimon steps backward. “Whad? Whad’s thad?”
Joe follows him, keeping his narrow, furrowed features inches from the shocked pinpricks of the other man's eyes. Step by slow step Joe backs him up.

"Taw-kin. An' not thingin."

"Eazy, Joe."

"Ass-kin zdupid gwuestions."

"Dake id eazy—"

"Zip id."

"Juzz—"

"I zedd zip id." Joe's hand chops down through the air as he turns.

He crosses the room to sequester himself in front of the rows of closed-circuit views: Sigma-Rejuve, inside and out. After a moment the tension drains from his shoulders. "Ah, eff-pigz, Zimon. I'm zorry." He shrugs. "I'm all zlithered out."

He looks at the uppermost viewscreens: the building's exterior with it's small, sans-serif letters—Sigma Rejuvenation Clinic; the waiting area in the lobby, graced with brand-new sets of plush, deep-cushioned seating. The old ones, Joe guesses, would have been covered in bits of Donsacker and Levar, whoever the spam they were. Looks like the same old reception desk, even though the daytime receptionist got it, too. There's no one there, now—Sigma's closed.

Joe pinches the bridge of his nose. He really is, too—all slithered out. "I juzz need d' thing fer a minud, Zimon." Joe points at the eye-jammer. "We shudn'd risg havin thad thing on doo long. Peeble might be payin eggstra-speshul 'tenshun."

The corridors, seed-vaults, and grow-rooms of Sigma's topmost floors fill the screens in the lower rows—pink aquariums where seeds become meat, and the vats where meat turns to wetsack—

"I been thingin all day alreddy, bud—"

Joe's eyes find themselves glued to the display of a conspicuously barren white room. It's among a third group of screens that look onto patient preparation labs, transpirition theatres, and all the pre-ops rooms. Joe knows the transpirition theatre he's looking at is the one where Del cooked all the rest of that flesh. That's why it's so barren—practically sand-blasted. "Who'd a thought thad Del-Bone had id in 'im." Joe turns. "Whad ya zay do 'em?"
"Who?" Zimon looks like a rat in a trap.

Joe’s neck sags. He shakes his head at the ground. "Th’ eff-pigzing copz, Zimon."

He looks back at his partner. "Th’ zpam-jammin priv’lege-pigz."

Zimon’s tiny eyes seem to come closer together across his big round head. "I din’ dell ‘em anythin, Joe!"

"Nuthin? Ya muzzda zed somethin, Zimon."

"No!"

Joe throws his fists into the air. "Zo, leds zee if I godz thiz ztraight. They zed—" his eyes close in concentration. "Whad waz thad priv’lege-pig’z name? Sar-gent—sar-gent—" he rubs his palm against the top of his head, "Walluss!" He wheels back on Zimon. "Zo, thiz Walluss zez, ‘Hello, Mizzder Drunk,’ an Zimon Drunk’s on’y anzwer waz do glam up, play the fife, zpit vaccuum—"

"No! No, I—they juzz wanded do gnaw about Del—if I’d noticed anything—"

"I don’d thing I waz askin whad id waz they waz askin you, Zimon. Whad’d y eff-pigzin dell them!"

"I dold em he’z allus th’ zame—I din’d nodice no differenz! They dold me whad he done an’ I din’d gnaw whad do zay—an’ then thad waz id. They lefd."

Behind Zimon’s head, graphs and meters keep tabs on the life functions of the wetsacks in the cavernous cryogenic chambers under their feet. Joe watches them pulse and snake.

"Yer zure thad’z all ya zed?"

"Yeah, yeah. Bud, Joe—"

"Yer zure yer zure?"

"I’m zure, Joe! Bud—"

"Well, thad’s priddy good, Zimon.” He walks slowly to the table and, half-sitting, slips one skinny thigh onto its surface. "An’ ya didn’t call me afder. Thad’s good doo. They’d of prolly been lizzening."

"I didn’t thing of id. Bud Joe, there’z zumthin ya shud gnaw—"

"I tol’im a zame thing. Our ztoriez’re th’ zame. Zo far.” He drums his long fingers where his wrinkled uniform smooths over his knees.

"Joe—"
“I’m thingin, Zimon.”

“Bud Joe, th’ wed sack—”

“Whad cud thad copper be thingin?”

“Th’ wed sack—”

“They’d be thingin Del waz gonz. Zim.”

“Joe!”

“An’ he waz! Gonzo–bonzo. Zo, there’z on’y th’ small madder of thad wed sack—”

“Joe! Thazz whad I’m tryin d dell ya!” He whirls around and smacks his palm against some bio read-outs high and on the left. “Id’s here! They pud id bag! Th’ templade, they pud id bag!”

Joe’s eyes focus in on the area beneath Zimon’s hand. “Whad?” He sweeps up off the table and leans into the view screens on his side of the room. On the bottom row are the screens that display the cryo-chambers. They’re filled with the images of various human shapes hovering, supine, at about waist-height in their e-mag suspension beams. At the bottom of each screen is a series of buttons. Joe’s hand flashes forward to tap out a particular sequence below one of the screens on the lowest level. The image above it shifts and mutates, moving down among the motionless shapes. It sweeps through their numbers and closes in on the details of one particular template.

“Wull, eff-pigz. They pud id bag.”

“Yeah, Joe. I thing I remember zayin thad.” Zimon comes up to look over his shoulder. “Id’s R17.”

“Yer right. Id’z R17.”

* * *

One hour before, 8:20 AM—

Metzenberg feels the needle slide deep into es spine, probing between cervical vertebrae to find es fifth chakra. E stiffens as its narcotic contents traverse the barrier of es flesh.
“It was my wife, Altavera, who piloted the only shuttle that got out of Vertigo Bay, you know.”

“Of course,” says Ellen. “What Citizen doesn’t?” E holds another hypodermic disc round to the back of es own neck, and waits for the needle to find its target. It is the third of the seven required inoculations. The shot for the third chakra, in the abdomen, is the second one, administered after the first, for the sixth chakra, located in the skull’s frontal bone. Fire, in this way loosed from the anahata-chakra in the transpiration midwife’s omphalos, spreads, rising freely to immolate the sense of ‘I-ness’ narcotically isolated by the first shot in es ajna chakra.

Metzenbergen hears the hiss of injection. “The transpiration process might have been lost if it hadn’t been for Altavera.” E proffers the next pair of syringes toward Ellen.

“What you really mean,” Ellen takes the discs, “is that Citizen Cruz saved your life.”

“I suppose you mean—” David feels es vishuddha chakra dilate, “—to imply—” e’s mind reels with the cogent ideas about two elephants, one light and one dark—e rolls es head to chase them away, the vision always accompanies the opening of the MNDL chi-vesicles at the top of es spine. It’s the only time and place that Metzenbergen expects anyone will ever see elephants again. They always appear as the barrier between es lower, material self, and es sense of spiritual connectedness begins its dissolution. E gives es head a final shake. “You mean to imply that transpiration could have survived without me.”

“No offense, Metz, but there were other transpiration midwives by that time.” Ellen waves a circle into the air, trying to get em to turn around.

David shrugs, then rotates on es stool until es back is facing Saunders. E’s thought about all this many times. It’s true some of the other midwives probably survived the first days of total conflagration, but there was only a handful to begin with, and, in the game of power, the life-expectancy of such a useful pawn was poor at best. Metzenbergen emself is the only really consistent feature in all the short history of transpiration. The point is hardly worth debating, even so—“At the time, I can assure you, Altavera’s only real interest was in saving a core part of the process.” Behind him Ellen is tugging on the
hem of es top. “As it happens,” Metzenbergen takes hold of the fabric emself and pulls it up over es shoulders, “that part was me.”

There’s pressure between David’s shoulder blades. E imagines a bead about to be strung—then feels it. The needle slides back out and the sensation becomes one of a stiff breeze passing through es centre.

E lets es shirt fall back down. “The difference makes for an interesting quibble in history—one that even I can’t resolve, and I was there.”

After a moment, David turns to help Saunders with the injection in es own anahata chakra. Ellen lifts es smock.

“That’s the most interesting thing about attaining great age,” David says, placing the disc on Saunders back, behind es heart. “As a part of history I should be able to say exactly what happened—pinpoint motives, true intentions—” the syringe discharges, and David drops it into a tray with the other used hypodermics. “But, really, after re-visiting the past so many times, I’d almost trust your opinion as much as my own.” David rotates again to receive es next shot—Saunders’ response comes from over es shoulder.

“I have no interest in history."

Metzenbergen shakes es head. “Most Citizens don’t.”

“Why dwell in that morass? Better to think of the future, which is ours to mold.”

“But the past forms us.”

“It formed you perhaps, Metz.” E taps em on the arm. “Stand up, please.”

Saunders pulls down on the waistband of David’s surgery pants. E drops the next syringe down over David’s second chakra, just above es coccyx.

A needle chunks into David’s tailbone. “Please,” continues Ellen, “don’t implicate me in your history.”

David is instantly filled with the need to urinate. E stands and slaps a button on the opposite wall, untying es pants so that they fall the rest of the way to es ankles. A large bowl emerges from the wall at about knee height. David shuffles over and the sound of running water fills the tiny room. David looks back at Ellen. “I’m not implicating anyone in anything. I sometimes think you new Citizens protest too much—”

“You’re incredible, Metz.” Saunders has es arms held behind em to place the syringe over es own second chakra. The image of a woman, wrists tied, dishevelled,
flashes through David’s mind. Ellen continues, unaware that Metzenbergen’s attention
has been stolen away, “You flip out the protocols with one hand and then glorify history
with the other.” Saunders takes es turn at the bowl. “The Lifeform has outlived history—
it exists in spite of it.”

From when had the vision come from? From where? It could have been so many
places—a basement in the Urals, a transport by the Kura river.

Turning away from the squatting Saunders, David picks up the second to last of es
own hypodermics. “I’ll do my own muladhara chakra, thanks,” says Metzenbergen,
lifting es thigh to place es foot on the edge of the seat nearest em. With one hand, e takes
a syringe from the counter-top, while e pulls es scrotum to one side with the other.

Ensign Doe, e thinks, that’s who it was. In the cockpit of the escape launch, arms
pinned behind her as Altavera punctured her chest with that rivet gun. Where had the
ensign got that tool from? Even after all these years Metzenbergen still can’t figure it out.
No matter, she’d produced it just after the Wall that enclosed Vertigo Bay had
disappeared, after the infinity of outer-space began its quick-freeze of the water set loose
in the colony’s corridors.

Metzenbergen tucks the hypodermic in the space between es genitals and es anus.
Poor Ensign Doe—Altavera had spotted the second ship struggling to get off the surface,
away from the catastrophe. The ensign had thought that Altavera would be too occupied
with the other life-boat to defend emself.

Metzenbergen’s reminiscence is interrupted by something more primal. The
strong urge to defecate is purely a side-effect of the drug infusing es earth chakra—e
hasn’t eaten anything in forty-eight hours. E looks over at Saunders, who’s stooped,
pushing a hypodermic of es own under es pants and into es groin. David speaks to the top
of es head. “I’m as at one with Beltane’s ideas as you are—‘The present should be
created out of the future’s unlimited potential, not dictated to from the prison of the
past’—but you younger Citizens take the idea too far. Even Beltane said that history—”

“Believe me, Metz,” Ellen stands, fidgeting from foot to foot, “I’m in no danger
of forgetting our history. Neither, however, do I suffer from your need revel in it.
Particularly when you’re interest seems to lean more toward revisionism than re-
visiting.”
“What?”

“You said it yourself. I quote: ‘After re-visiting the past so many times, I’d trust—’”

The drugs have begun dissolving es sense of division from the world—es skin begins to have less and less meaning with each moment. Still, e can’t let Saunders get away with such temerity. “I never said I was a historian, Citizen Saunders. My memories are mine to examine as I please—they have little to do with the permanent record.”

“So you say.” Ellen mumbles, but there is no mistaking what e’s said.

The wisps of Metzenbergen’s self are drawn briefly back together. E remembers quite clearly why he doesn’t like Citizen Ellen Saunders. “If you have something to say, Citizen—”

“Why not? It’s time someone said it aloud—to your face,” e looks upward, “and under the vigilance of the hidey-eyes. Not all of us believe your married to be the hero that you say e is. I’m glad for you, Metz, that you managed to survive, but it changed nothing about the end of civilization. You and your married survived, but billions of others perished.”

“Citizen, you tread on thin ice. It’s true Altavera’s mission—it’s true we were too late to save anything, but—” e loses es focus. The organic aspects of es physical self ebb and flow too completely now with those of the Lifeform. The idea of emself as an individual actor in history seems too absurd—

“Yes,” says Saunders. “That’s enough talk about ‘history.’ Thank the Lifeform.”

E approaches Metzenbergen with the last syringe. “The Hamm’s vestibule is ready for us,” e gestures toward the area behind Metzenbergen, to the chamber that represents the final phase of pre-ops. Pulling David’s head forward slightly, Ellen lowers the final syringe onto es crown.

* * *

Three days after, 12:20 AM—

“Bud, Joe, I don’t wanda go down there.”
“Someone-of-uz godz do.”

“Why don’d you go!”

“Cuz someone-of-uz alzo godz do keep an eye on you. Now shud id.” Joe Regent flashes his glance up into his forehead, warning about the hidey-eyes, for about the hundredth time.

He shoves Zimon into the sterilization chamber. Zimon stumbles against the white metal bench that runs down the room’s center. He watches as Joe strides over to the shelves where the cellophane-wrapped overalls lay stacked. The door seals with a swish and a click and Zimon collapses onto the bench.

“Bud, Joe, shud’n one of uz keep n eye onna zgreens?” Cellophane crinkles as his arms close automatically around the package Joe’s tossed at his chest.

“Th’ zgreens can loog afer themzelvez.”

“I don’ gnaw, Joe,” Zimon stands. “Why don’d I—”

Joe’s long fingers slap down onto Zimon’s shoulder. Fingernails dig in below Zimon’s collar-bone and push him slowly, back down into a sitting position.

Zimon looks up from the sagging bundle in his arms at Joe. “How come you gotta shove me aroun so much, Joe.”

“Onna zgreens, Zimon, I cud’a watched ya, bud ya won’d go down by yerzelf.” Joe tears the cellophane off a second set of sanitary clothing. “I ain’ gonna leave ya upztairs by yerzelf, zo ya gimme no choice—I guess I godda go down wit’ you.” Joe shakes out the bundle of white fiber in his hands, and it unfolds into a pair of overalls.

From somewhere deep behind the mass of Zimon’s face a glimmer of fire leaks into his eyes. “You better stop all thad pushin, Joe.”

Joe’s gaze breaks away in amazement from the snowy spread of material he’s holding up in front of himself.

“Zimon—loog, fer now I juzz god do gnaw whad’z goin on.” He sits on the bench beside Zimon. “Ev’rythin—ev’ry liddle thing thad’z goin on. Don’d ya zee? We don’d wand no more zurprisez.” Joe grabs the unopened packet from Zimon, tears it open, and hands back the sanitary-suit inside. “Id ain’ th’ dime now do be dizcuzzin id, though. Juzz ged theze on, an’ led’z ged down there alriddy.” He pats Zimon on the shoulder.
Zimon watches Joe slide a bony limb into the leg of his overalls, and then, sighing, he stands to do the same. He's fidgety though, and the process of getting them on takes far longer than usual. First, as he tries to get a foot in, he steps on a pant leg and trips across the room. Then, he puts the buttons of the suit's inner seal into the wrong holes so that he has to redo them all.

When he's finally finished, he notices Joe leaning by the door that leads into the heart of Sigma Rejuve. The crisscross of lines that map Joe's face have converged to create a geography entirely new to Zimon. It frightens him.

"Eff-pigzit, Zimon—"

"Zorry, Joe. I'm juzz nerviss—"

"No, no. Thad's ogay. Id's nod thad." The lines deepen. Joe takes his eye-jammer out again. "Id'z juzz—juzz thad—well, eff-pigzit, Zimon, I rilly like ya."

"Whad?"

"All thozearz of worgin with line-toein', prodocol-lovin', zocial-climbin', priv'lege-puzziez, an' then, somehow, you show up. Juzz like me—safe, well-fed, an' worgin, somehow, behine th' Wall—no hope of promoshun, bud, somehow—"

Zimon looks at his white-booted feet. "Thangs, Joe," he rolls one foot onto its side so that its white, textured sole is visible. He says quietly, "I like you doo." When he looks up Joe tosses a pair of nose-filters to him.

"Yeah well, look, Zimon. Thiz zituashun we're in—id's zeriouz. They fine oud whad we done, an' we're fer the organ binz fer zure."

Zimon's round features elongate with dismay. "Ya rilly thing zo?"

"Oh, I gwow zo, Zimon." He stuffs his own nose-filters up his nostrils.

"I gnew id, Joe. I gnew we shud'a juzz ztuck with th' plan. We wend doo far."

"Yeah, well. Id'z doo lade—"

"We cud'a juzz turned Del in. God 'im fired, like we planned."

"Waiz a minute, there, Zimon. Who gnew th' guy wud go zo dodally gonzo?"

"Ztill, I gnew we—"

"I didn'd ear ya complainin gwite zo mudge when I found thad buyer fer all our speshul liddle home-vids. I didn'd ear ya whinin aboud all thad eggstra cash."

"Well—bud I—"
“Alright, alright, Zimon. If id makez ya happy, I’ll admid id. Mudge az id painz me, I’ll admid id: We shud’a gwit while we waz ahead.”

Zimon’s pinprick eyes widen into little black beads.

“Zo,” says Joe, “thad’s whad id takes do shud ya up. Good, I’z glad I done id then. Cuz there’z zumthin I godda make ya unnerztan. Ya lizennin?”

Zimon blinks.

“Make zurz yer lizzenin, Zimon, cuz I don’z wanna hafta zay thiz agin. Afder we do thiz one liddle job, the on’y way anyone’z gonna fine oud aboud whad we done iz if someone dells ‘em. God id?”

“Well, zurz, Joe. Like ya zed before—”

“Yeah, Zimon. ‘Like I zed before.’ But now I’ze zayin id agin, zo lizzen. I know ya ain’ god mudge room up there for rememberin, zo do uz both a favour an’ concendrade on forgeddin whad we done an’ whad we’z aboud do do, rather than ever’thin I dell ya.”

“What?”

“I’m askin ya do forget aboud the vids. But, ezpeshully, I’m askin ya do forget aboud the guy we zold em do. Can ya do thad, Zimon?”

“Zure, Joe. Zure, I can forget aboud Lynyr—”

“What?”

“Lynyr, ya gnaw, with thad weird laugh—”

Joe advances, stretching his height intimidatingly above the shorter man. “What?”

Zimon whimpers. “I had id when yer allus rushin up close like thad—”

Joe’s hands slowly encircle Zimon’s neck above his cringing shoulders. His thumbs push slightly into the fatty flesh that droops from Zimon’s adam’s apple. “What?”

Zimon chokes out his answer, “I don’t remember.”

“Thad’z righd, Zimon. Ya don’z remember nuthin. When th’ copz azk, ya don’t remember. When they keep azkin, ya ztill don’t remember.” He pulls the hood of Zimon’s sanitary-suit up over Zimon’s head. “An’ if they give ya no choice bud do remember zomethin, whad’z id gonna be?”

The hood tightens over the round, bulbous shape of Zimon’s scalp as Joe does up its seals.
“Thad id waz a joke. Yeah. All juzz a joke!”

Joe’s hands rest on Zimon’s shoulders. “Hey, thad’z good, Zimon. Maybe they
can’d really send uz do th’ body-binz fer a joke, zee? Thad’z a good thing do remember.
Bud whad elze?”

“Id waz you whad pulled th’ ztringz. Id wazn’d—” Zimon stops himself before he
says the name. “Id waz you whad pulled the ztringz,” he repeats, “Juzz you an’ me th’
whole dime.”

“Thad’z rightd, Zimon.” The eye-jammer disappears into Joe clothing. “Now led’z
go.”

Zimon follows Joe down the short hall toward Sigma Rejuvenation’s sterile
sanctum sanctorum. The sonic showers hum, erasing all external impurities, and then
they’re striding through the cool winter of the greater hallway beyond. It’s quiet tonight.
Yesterday, Joe knows, the clean-team were probably mobbing the joint, dealing with the
bacterial aftermath of cops, death-dealing Del, and all the rest. Joe and Zimon walk past
the door to a levitator where Joe keys in his security code.

They drop together into the depths of the bodysnag.

* * *

Forty-five minutes before, 8:35 AM—

Their inoculations done, Ellen and Metzenbergen have entered the Hamm’s
vestibule, the cubicle at the far end of the third pre-ops room where midwives undergo
their last phase of prep before a transpiration.

David Metzenbergen had known Dr. Frank Hamm, the creator of the process. E’d
served em dinner, poured wine for him, and been the butt of several of his questionable
jokes. Of course, they’d never been friends—never really even talked, except after
Metzenbergen had been made a midwife, and then only in the technical language of
transpiration. The only time David had really wanted to speak to the doctor on a human
level was the time e’d wanted to beg him for es life. The tragic irony of that moment
being that David had temporarily lost es voice, and couldn’t. Metzenbergen wasn’t the
first to survive the weeks of vivisection while kilometers of mono-fibers were inserted throughout es tissues. E was, however, the first to survive the energy bombardment required to fuse the metal into the core of all es cells.

Hamm was entombed at Vertigo Bay along with Ditto Straub. Sitting down in the vestibule named for the man, David always experiences a small regurgitation of glee. Even the most powerful psychotropic substances, it seems, are unable to fully stifle this rise of joy at the recollection of the lunatic’s demise.

Ellen is seated across from em, their knees almost touching. In the slackness of es surgery-second’s face, David recognizes the somnolence of trance. The hum of the Hamm’s vestibule has worked itself up to its particular pitch, and the sensual overloading has begun its infinitesimally-timed sequence. Metzenbergen closes es eyes and prepares, once again, to experience the bizarre sensation of complete separation between ‘mind’ and body.

Perfume and decay sprint up es nostrils, permeating es flesh, becoming indistinguishable from the pins and sandpaper scrapes, the windy caresses and slaps of energy that bolt through the air surrounding him. Sound shrieks and roars above a whisper of random syllables. It bleats and quacks with a barnyard syntax that slowly divests all sound of its potential for meaning. Multi-colored strobes and ghost-like swirls of holograms paint layers across his retinas despite es closed eyelids.

Inside em, the mono-filament mesh twitches to life as electrons align and chemical doorways swing open. Es body is paired within itself. Es mind, unable to stick wholly with either twin, retreats into the hallucinogenic ether of uncreated space.

Two centuries of practice kicks in. E summons the koanish and occupies his absence of ego with their repetition. E’s aware that one of these selves is not self, but hangs back to observe the emptied whole against its opposite, a shape shaded by memory and the illusion of seperateness.

In the operating theatre David will reject the doppleganger. E’ll push the image, computed among his cells and configured in the atomic structures of monofilament, out of the triangle. The form of humanity, calculated along miles of monofilament, will travel through a conducting field of ionized air and force itself into the form of Mustafa
Donsacker. Mustafa will have been wheeled in on a gurney and wired-up alongside the template bred to receive em.

The collected valences of unformed David Metzenbergen will push those that are fine tuned and calibrated as Mustafa Donsacker out of es dying template. It will be a struggle despite the intoxication Mustafa will have undergone in Sigma Rejuvenation’s Patient Preparation Centre.

The displacement will happen in less than a moment. A calculation of Mustafa Donsacker will be absorbed through a veinous web of insulated fibre-optics into the mega-arrays of Alberni Industrial Park’s central data. Metzenbergen will fall back into es experience, plummeting into es self. This, Metzenbergen’s part in the process of transpiration, will leave em incapacitated for the day. This evening e will tell Altavera of fish-feelings—fins flapping in a summer breeze, gills pumping out of water, scaled skin and lidless eyes.

The transpiration will be completed by Ellen Saunders, the surgery second. Within a second conducting field of air, the humanity configured by the monofilament in Saunders’ body will begin seeking identity. Looking down on these twins of herself, Ellen will direct the vampiric emptiness of her ghost toward R17. The similarly Hamm-excited monofilament running throughout es body will draw out the stunted essence of the virgin template. Simultaneously, the fields and equations of Mustafa Donsacker will be spat from central data. They’ll travel through an arterial mirror of the fiber-optics attached to es old template, and take up residence in the newly vacated body of R17.

For a week afterward, Ellen will have to be isolated in sensory deprivation. The non-entity of R17 will be siphoned from es wiring, out through the sockets in es ankles and beneath es arms. Mustafa Donsacker will spend a few days regaining control of es bodily functions, and then be free to enjoy the fifteen-to-twenty healthy years of her new template’s likely life-span.

In the Hamm’s vestibule, afloat beyond the fact of his flesh, just prior to the sequence’s conclusion, Metzenbergen can observe his life as if it were an elaborate aggregate of crystal. E’s drawn to a dark spot in its newest formations. E recognizes its unsettling shape from much farther down the chain, the way it clings and spreads,
suffocating whatever gleams around it. If words were things that could be applied to such objects, Vertigo Bay is the name e’d give to this one.

* * *

Three days after, 12:35 AM—

Down in the bodyshop, Zimon Trunk is wringing the grip of the eye-jammer with both hands. It’s the new one Joe gave him weeks ago, when all this began. The white palms of his sterile gloves have darkened, the grime from its handle thoroughly removed as he twists the shaft round and round.

“Eff-pigz, Joe! How many more dimes we godda loog aroun’ thiz plaze?”

Joseph Regent and Zimon Trunk are standing beside the vaguely blurred and floating form of R17. They’ve been up and down the rows and aisles of the whole place twice already.

“Twize is enough,” says Zimon. “The bodyshop’z the same az id allus iz.”

“Zee, thad’z where yer wrong. Ev’rything’z compledely differend now.”

Joe looks at the prostrate form of R17. The e-mag pulse that cradles it is a tube of flowing energy that reaches floor to ceiling. The wetsack hangs within it, about four feet off the ground, blanketed in a fog of crackling photons.

“Bud, whad th’ zpam,” says Joe, “I guess yer righd. Mighd az well ged thiz over with.” He pulls a long, thin metal instrument from out of a pouch attached to his belt. It’s a tissue sampling instrument that he’s borrowed from Sigma’s surgical supplies.

“Keep a lookoud, Zimon.”

Joe steps partway into the electromagnetic pulse. The photons glide over the outside of his sanitary-suit. Joe grimaces. Though his suit’s synthetic fluorocarhide coating deflects most of the pulse, his bowels still develop a sudden buoyancy. R17 bobs like a boat whose balance has been tipped by the boarding of a passenger. Joe examines the tip of his sampler. As he pulls at a lever in its side, and a tiny beak at the instrument’s point opens and closes its serrated jaws. He detaches the ocular viewer from the butt of
the sampler, unrolling the wire that connects the two parts. He clamps it over his right eye, then pulls the lever a few more times.

"Wud ya hurry id up already?" says Zimon.

Joe turns. "Didn'd I azk ya do keep a lookoud, Zimon? Why ya watchin me? There'z on'ly one thing in thiz endire room ya don'd need do watch, and here y'are—watchin id."

Zimon hesitates until Joe gestures emphatically. Once Zimon has turned away to face the rows of floating templates, Joe bends back over the supine figure of R17.

He places his palm across the wetsack's forehead, fingers clamped around the top of the template's cheekbones. Then, with the hand that holds the sampler, he pushes up from behind the template's neck, tilting back its head. He then props his elbow on R17's sternum and inserts the end of the sampler into its nostril.

Through the ocular viewer, Joe sees the cavernous opening and then the cutting of the light as the camera enters the template's head. He guides the sampler further forward. The passage narrows as the undulating walls and underbrush close in. And then, where the tunnel turns sharply away, he comes to a flat obstruction. Joe twists the sampler slowly to the left and his view begins to do a somersault. He stops when he sees it: the small hole, the break in the wetsack's cribiform bone. He adjusts the angle of his grip. He pushes slightly.

"Eff-pigz."

E tries again. The tip of the sampler glances off the jagged edge of the punctured bone, finds the gap, and is filled with the panorama of R17's frontal lobes. He turns his wrist to scan again.

"There!"

Joe pulls the lever with his finger. He does it again.

"Ahh."

Slowly Joe retracts the sampler from R17's nasal passage.

"I god id, Zimon."

E lets the ocular viewer fall from his eye. He holds the long metal rod up in his hand. At its tip, held within the opened triangle of its beak, a tiny bead of microcircuitry glints through a coat of viscous red.
Joe’s satisfaction is short-lived.

“Joseph Regent and Zimon Trunk!”

The voice is familiar.

“You are under arrest for obstructing transpiration, destruction of private property, eight counts of murder, and one attempted.”

Joe wheels around in time to see Zimon knocked to the ground. The priviledge-pig points his lazz in his direction.

*     *     *

Twenty minutes before, 9:00 AM—

In the transpiration theatre, the sterile silence is broken only slightly by the murmurs and movements of Ellen Saunders and a tech-assistant. The machines that surround the two gurneys in the room’s centre perform their battery of tasks in perfect wordlessness. One of the gurneys lies empty. Beneath a sheet on the other, the template, R17 is laid out. David Metzenbergen looks on as if from half-a-mile away. E senses the cry that’s yearning to be heard, but it’s lost the white featurelessness of the distance.

The tech-assistant is running a few verbal and spatial tests on Ellen to see if e’s been properly inebriated. The assistant shines a small light into Saunders’ eyes. “If this light were a sound,” he asks, “what pitch would it have?”

In a short while, the tech will test Metzenbergen in the same way. Once the assistant is satisfied, he’ll send word the transpiration can proceed, and Mustafa Donsacker will enter the patient preparation section of Sigma Rejuvenation. If all happens according to procedure, Metzenbergen will be assisted to his place alongside the gurney on which Mustafa will eventually be spread. Then the field of conduction will be engaged and, so as to acclimatize, e’ll be bathed for a while in its blue hackle-raising atmosphere. The tech will check the machinery’s connection to the template, and then initiate the other conduction field around Ellen, whereupon they all must await the arrival of the patient.
The tech has apparently finished with Saunders. His small, smooth face turns toward Metzenbergen with what seems like the speed of a waxing moon. Metzenbergen prepares to answer the first of the tech’s questions, but when it comes, it’s not what e expects. The voice is cool, mellifluous and incongruously fem.

“…first pre-ops…Security over-ride…” In David’s fully drug-altered state, the unexpected is mostly undecipherable. E’s baffled by the fact that, despite hearing words, the tech’s lips have failed to move at all.

A second voice, deeper, agitated, scrapes through the ambient whiteness, “…transpiration going on here…the meaning of this…” The smooth moon-face before em has contorted itself. This second voice, Metzenbergen realizes, is the tech’s.

The first one then—

“…second pre-ops room…security personnel…Delano Jones…”
—must be that of the computer. The tech is looking furiously around the room, es shout grinding on the air, “What’s going…Central, hello? Answer…”

Like a slowly widening ripple, the feminine tones roll through the room again, “Emergency. Delay transpiration…Jones seeks entry at third…Security over-ride. Security…”

Metzenbergen tries to focus. E’s doing a transpiration. Can’t afford mistakes—.

The tech is rushing to and fro, closely followed by the white of his afterimage. E shakes his arms and opens his mouth at the ceiling. “Central, report! Report…who authorized…can’t be disturbed…repeat…”

When next the ripples arrive, Metzenbergen is better able to interpret them.


The tech opens es mouth to let loose another truckload of gravel, “Central! Why don’t you respond?” No answer comes.

Metzenbergen raises es hand, trying not to be distracted by the fact of es flesh. The tech’s eyes swing instantly around to es direction. David imagines flesh shrugging—the climate for transpiration has already been ruined anyway. E’s trying to say so, when the computer’s voice trickles again into es ears.

The solid polished surface of the midwives’ entrance into the operating theatre begins de-materializing, its solidity blowing away like so much desert sand.

As the door gains its shallow clarity, the computer announces the name of their visitor. “Now entering, second security officer, Mr. Delano Jones.”

The figure emerges from the vague substance of the door, shabbily dressed in a rad-suit and cloaked in a long, green slicker.

The tech advances upon em. “Are you crazy? This is a sterile—”

At first, the deeply medicated Metzenbergen senses a kind of satisfaction as e watches the tech escape the prison of his flesh. It’s only when the tech-assistant staggers back into a tangle of cables, then hits the ground with the meat of his chest streaming out the middle of him, that David recognizes the inappropriateness of the situation.

Metzenbergen vaguely considers the possibility of action. Then, he’s looking up from the tech’s corpse, into the muzzle of the lazz-gun the intruder has pointed in his face.

“Hello, Metz,” says Delano.

Terror and a strange sense of recognition wage a brief battle for possession of Metzenbergen’s awareness. E watches as the muzzle lowers its aim suddenly, then screams as e feels a part of es gut disintegrate.

• • •

Three days after, 12:40 AM—

In the bodyshop, amidst the buoyed menagerie of near-humans, Chief Detective Daniel MacAfferty watches as some uniforms take the cuffed and frightened Joseph Regent and Zimon Trunk away. He opens his fist and looks down at the tiny bead of microcircuitry rolling in his palm.

Sergeant Wallace emerges from a crowd of recorders and forensic staff to hand MacAfferty an evidence bag. MacAfferty looks into Wallace’s expecting face. “I told you
whoever was responsible would come get it if they got the chance.” He rolls the bead off the edge of his palm and into the bag.

Wallace waits, hoping to hear more. MacAfferty begins to turn away, but the sergeant prevents him. “Are ya goin’ to tell me what it is now, chief?”

MacAfferty grins. “Yes, well. It’s part of a child’s toy, really. It works inside dolls—my son’s got one. It manipulates magnetic fields in order to push around synthetic muscles in the doll’s features. Make it smile, make it frown, you know. This one’s got a mike and a remote, though. It’s been made very sensitive to minute adjustments—very cleverly adapted, really.”

Wallace looks incredulous. “By those two?”

MacAfferty looks in the direction the two felons were taken. “It does seem unlikely, doesn’t it.”

“And if ya hadn’t ordered the autopsy on the template, we’d never’ve found it.”

“Let it be a lesson to you Wallace. Uncommon events require uncommon approaches.”

This time, when MacAfferty begins to walk away, Wallace lets him take a few steps before calling out. “Oh, by the way, Chief—”

MacAfferty stops and turns impatiently back toward Wallace. “What is it, Sergeant Wallace?”

“Oh, it’s jus’ that I found some unauthorized recordin’ equipment in the rafters over there.” He points. “I though ya might like to know.”

MacAfferty’s eyebrows lift. He walks back toward Wallace and slaps a great meaty paw down on his shoulder.

“I guess there’s hope for you yet, Wallace.”

“Yes, sir.” The two of them thread their way through the bodies of the floating templates.

End of Part II
Part III

2006

David Metzenbergen met Ditto Straub in September, 2006. E knows it would have been September, because it was the first day of classes for what was then called 'grade school.' E's only fairly certain, though, that it was 2006. This is because when e says e's sure it was grade three, e really thinks it could have been grade four.

Dave, as 'he' was called then, was eight (maybe nine) years old. His face, thin and sharp, leading with the curved edge of his nose, was framed by a puff of curly, brown hair, worn well-down below the ears. (Pictures are lost. Still, Metzenbergen remembers.)

Uniforms had just been re-introduced to public schools all over Canada. David remembers that Dave liked his—the jacket with its crested pocket, and an actual button-down collar on the shirt. It was so much nicer than the outfits he was used to wearing. Plus, he thought if all the other kids had to wear them, they'd stop picking on him because of his clothes. Of course, it hadn't made a bit of difference.

Dave's Dad, who was laid-off at the auto plant, had decided he wanted to make a go of it raising alpacas for their wool. They'd moved out of town the summer Dave finished first grade. For the rest of Dave's years in elementary, a rickety old yellow bus picked him up in the mornings to drive him into town for classes. Mom had driven him when they'd still lived right in Windsor, but now she said she didn't have the time. He was old enough to get on the bus by himself.

He'd wait for the bus by the mail-box at the end of the driveway. In September, the grass would be tall in the ditches, and the air would be filled with the rush of it whenever the wind blew. After a while, the bus would rattle up and crunch into the gravel at the side of the road. The screech, as it stopped, always reminded Dave of the time his pet parakeet got crushed trying to fly after him through the swinging door to the kitchen.

The bus was always empty when Dave got on, half-way to Essex, but, as it wound its way into the east end of the city, its hard, little, green benches would fill up with kids. Every year he'd hope to see a whole new set of bright, happy faces, but he was always greeted by the same mean stares and cruel remarks. Even though he'd already spent a
year (or two) with most of these kids, he was still regarded with suspicion as ‘the new kid’ and outsider. None of it was fair, of course—how could Dave help it if he always smelled just a bit of the stalls he had to muck out every morning?

Ditto Straub had been one of his grade school teachers. Or Derek Straw, that is; he hadn’t changed his name yet, so he was always just Mr. Straw to Dave.

The first bell had rung, and the knot of wild shouting in the schoolyard tightened to a murmur as the herd nudged its way into class. Mr. Straw hardly noticed the students as they came in. He was too preoccupied studying the pages of a worn yellow book that he held up before his face. His elbows were propped on the desk in front of him, and crisscrossed between them, lay a bunch of what looked like pick-up sticks. Even after everyone had found their seats, Mr. Straw still didn’t look up, or put the book down, or acknowledge the students’ presence in any way. It was only when the class started to get restless, and whispers started hissing here and there around the room, that the yellow cover dropped away and Mr. Straw rose to print his name up on the blackboard.

Dave had liked Mr. Straw right away. His hair was curly and brown, like Dave’s—though a bit longer—and he wore glasses, too. Dave had started wearing glasses of his own just a year or two before. Big, thick frames that were always falling off his face and getting in the way. They made him feel like an idiot—down on his hands and knees chasing after them, scrambling under lockers and around the other kids’ feet. But Mr. Straw would take his on and off, he’d point with them, or shake them to emphasize a particular lesson. Sometimes he’d tap a finger on one black, plastic temple, staring at the blackboard, or reading that yellow book he liked so much. Dave practiced at home. He pointed his glasses at the dog, and told her firmly to sit, stay, or shake a paw.

To Dave, Mr. Straw had seemed as unfathomably old as any grown-up. He was probably not much more than twenty years old, though. He taught reading and arithmetic to Dave’s class in the mornings. He’d tell stories from history. In the first week there was one where he mentioned something about Confederation; he said how it made our country of Canada out of a bunch of British colonies.

That one Dave remembers because Mr. Straw actually asked the class if anyone could spell ‘Confederation’? As if anyone could have spelled a word like
'Confederation!' But Dave remembers because when no one raised their hand, Mr. Straw singled him out.

"Mr. Metzenbergen," said Mr. Straw, standing suddenly beside Dave's desk.
"Will you please spell 'Confederation' for us?"

Dave knew there was no answer to such a question. "I—I can't."

"What an interesting word to bring up. I must tell you, David, that you are wrong. What if Sir John A. MacDonald had felt the same way?"

He felt the pressurized silence of the class, the dark wood of Mr. Straw's gaze pinning him down with its weird mix of threat and invitation. His small body tried to get smaller.

"Johnny MacDonald's, sir?"

Laughter. A scatter of snickering.

"Sir—John—A.—MacDonald."

"Surgeon Mick Donald."

Mr. Straw's head shook—no. More Laughter. One wave, then another of spluttering giggles. Dave concentrated on disappearing from the middle of a crowded room.

"'Can't' is a word I do not like to hear, Mr. Metzenbergen. 'Confederation' is an event that changed everything for us, even though it took place far away, both in distance and in time." Mr. Straw looked all around the room. "And if you all work hard," he looked back at Dave, "I promise I'll tell you all about that event and that place, as well as a hundred other amazing times and countries."

Mr. Straw walked to the front of the class. He picked up a piece of chalk and wrote on the blackboard. "It starts with a 'C,' and then there's an 'O,' and an 'N,' and an 'F.' I want you to look up the word in the dictionary in the library between now and tomorrow, Mr. Metzenbergen. Tomorrow, I expect you to spell the word 'Confederation' for the class."

Dave scrambled for his pencil to copy the letters from the board. He was mortified, but the class didn't seem to notice. They were too stunned by Mr. Straw's talking, his deep tones, the strange words, the eccentric expectation. There was no
laughter at all. The class’s fun went unfinished. Though Dave waited all through recess for it, the third and generally most vicious wave of ridicule never came.

That wasn’t the only time Dave had to visit the dictionary that year, but after a while those regular trips to the library became a kind of a game. Though it was really more like it became Dave’s official office—Special Student in Charge of Looking Stuff Up in the Dictionary, or something. Because saying it was a game, after all, would mean it was always fun. And it wasn’t. Mr. Straw could be very mean about things. He was very rarely satisfied.

Still, Dave liked to work hard for Mr. Straw. He felt good about trying, even when Mr. Straw seemed ungrateful for his efforts. It made him realize that he could do things, find things out, know things, without anybody’s help. Let the class have their friendships and sleep-overs. Let the bully push him at lunch-time, and the pipsqueak squeak her insult, Dave Metzenbergen could, and would, prove he was better than all of them.

Mr. Straw left at the end of that year. He said he was going to Europe. He said that the School Board didn’t like him, and that was okay, since he didn’t like the School Board. He said it was time he went to Europe anyway.

Dave was sad to see him go. After their last class was over, Dave lingered among the desks, ruffling through his notebooks, looking for a reason to stay behind with Mr. Straw. The rest of the class had mostly filtered out—two girls, Gabby and Hazel (David can’t actually remember the second girl’s name, but he calls her Hazel anyway), had also stayed behind. They were standing at Mr. Straw’s desk, quizzing him about Europe.

Dave closed the cover of his math text and looked over the rows of empty desks. It was late spring, and he could see the new leaves of the maples fluttering outside the second-story windows. He scanned to the left, toward the back of the classroom where construction-paper rainbows were affixed all over the mottled, dry-wall white. He had a sudden, terrifying urge to cry.

“Mr. Metzenbergen!” David’s head swivelled back to the right. Mr. Straw was on his feet, leaning against his desk. He was looking between the puzzled expressions of the two girls.

“I was hoping you’d stay behind,” Mr. Straw said.
“Yes, sir. I—” Dave didn’t really have anything to say. He sniffed.

“I can’t hear you from all the way over there, come here please, I’ve been shouting all morning already.”

Dave wrapped an arm around his books and shuffled between the desks to the front of the class. The two girls (Gabby, who, in grade seven, would kiss him sometimes when no one else was around, and—Hazel? It must have been Hazel) parted to make way for him at the desk in front of Mr. Straw.

“You’ve done very well this year, David.”

David stared at the scars in the desktop. “Thank you, sir.”

“Stop looking into your cups, sir!”

David looked up at Mr. Straw.

“That’s right, look at a person when you talk to them.”

Especially if you want them to make a face at you, Dave couldn’t help but think, or even hit you. “Yes, sir.”

“You’ve done well, but still there’s room for improvement.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t think I haven’t seen, Mr. Metzenbergen, the punishment that you endure from crueler classmates.” Mr. Straw paused long enough to scan, Hazel, the girl to his right. “I admire your perseverance and determination in not letting it affect your spirit. I advise you, however, to be a little less high-and-mighty about it. If you were, I think you might gain favour, make friends even, with some people.” His glance moved over to Gabby.

Dave stared for a moment, wondering whether to say ‘Yes, sir,’ or ‘No, sir.’ He looked to the left and right for answers, and found Gabby and Hazel staring, wide-eyed, at him. His eyes returned to his teacher’s old/young, smiling face. Mr. Straw stuck out his hand.

Uncertainly at first, and then with a firmness to reflect Mr. Straw’s own, Dave shook the offered hand. Dave worked his jaw.

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Straw. “I know. I’ll miss you, too. All three of you. But, cheer up—it’s the last day of school! Don’t worry, Mr. Metzenbergen, it’s a small world. It’s very likely we’ll meet again one day.” The three students followed him as he walked
toward the classroom door. "Now go eat your lunch. You don't have that much time before your afternoon class. Goodbye. Have a good summer." Together they stepped into the bustle of the school's central corridor.

They went their separate ways after that, dispersing right then in the hall, and much farther afield in the years that followed. Of course it was true, though, Metzenbergen couldn't speak for Gabby or Hazel, but he certainly would meet Mr. Straw, or Ditto Straub again. Twenty-three years later, aghast at the treachery of God, he would watch as Ditto, who, miracle of miracles, had actually recognized him, made a choice: set David free for old time's sake, or fulfill Babe Solomon's strange request to own a piece of Ditto's past.

* * *

Four days after, 9:20 PM

Chief Detective Daniel MacAfferty sighs and pushes away from his desk. The rollers on his chair rattle over the pre-trimillennial tongue-and-groove of the floor. He looks through the bleared, smoky window that separates his office from the squad room. A handful of officers are lingering between desks or answering phones. The Alberni Precinct Bureau of Investigation hasn't been this quiet for days.

Four days ago, the place had changed from the usual tableau of inert vigilance into a scene of swarming badges and Council envoys. Seven people, three of them Citizens, lassed to pieces at the Sigma Rejuvenation Clinic. It hadn't taken too long before things had started to calm down. The Council watchdogs for instance had drifted off by early afternoon. The murderer, after all, had lobotomized himself at the scene. The collective sigh of relief that particular piece of news had elicited was practically audible.

MacAfferty weaves his thick, brown fingers together and pushes his palms out from his chest. The chair back creaks as his broad shoulders arch over its top. Though he didn't like thinking of it that way, that Bemo driver's misfortune had turned out to be a bit of luck for MacAfferty. He'd been able to keep the precinct working at full capacity into the night, telling the Captain that until the Manaimo judges turned up the missing body of Alfonso Gargaglione, they couldn't be sure there were no accomplices. The
Captain had rightly pointed out that the cabbie, what with missing his arm, probably wasn’t in much shape to do anyone any harm. MacAfferty had muttered something about potential hostage situations—fairly ludicrous, he knew, but Captain Singh had demurred.

MacAfferty’s real motivation was to give Keller, down in the morgue, some time to look over the ruined template. It was a risk—it had taken some convincing to get Keller to mess around with this kind of private property—but the result had been the discovery of the microtechnology inserted into the wetsack’s face. Keller had dropped the evidence bag on his desk at about the same time the eighth body turned up. Stripped, armless and pretty well worked over by rats and dogs, about three kilometers outside the Wall.

On the battered metal desk at the centre of the room, MacAfferty’s computer glows at him with an innocent insolence. The last page of his report, justified in twelve point type, hangs on the screen, waiting to be logged away. He scratches the dark, coarse growth along his jaw-bone. He didn’t shave this morning, and the accelerated aging of his rejuvenated body has pushed out more than a hint of beard.

He’d questioned Joseph Regent and Zimon Trunk for most of the early morning hours. Then he’d spent a good part of the afternoon watching the closed-circuit recordings they’d found in a trash bin not far from Regent’s compartment. All of it recorded on the black-market equipment they’d found hung in Sigma’s cryo-freezers.

There had been plenty of incriminating action. Molestations, an appalling disregard for living property, activities most would have said could never happen in Alberni Industrial Park. Most of it perpetrated by Regent or Trunk, though. There had only been one featuring Delano Jones. It was filled with some kind of rant about the man’s deluded infatuation. All of it focussed around his obsession with a Citizen he’d apparently had some kind of relationship with—Lisa Falludi, who was presently stationed at Vertigo Bay. That had put the last of the Captain’s doubts to rest. After one brief glimpse Erin Singh had said, “Well, thank the Lifeform, that’s that—a nutcase. All that’s left is the dismemberment of the criminals. And, of course, the report. I guess you can handle that, right, MacAfferty?” And then he got MacAfferty to send everybody home. Dan had done it, but he hadn’t liked it.
The report had been finished two hours ago. It wasn’t due till the morning either, but, instead of going home himself, MacAfferty sits, looking at the read-out; he doesn’t like that either. He was the hero of the document, pulling another two felons out of the hat for the climactic twist ending, but still, he doesn’t like it.

Daniel MacAfferty closes his eyes and thinks of home. It’s already getting late. He’ll have to call Suzy again, tell her he won’t be getting there any time soon. She won’t want to hear it, but Suzy’ll understand. She always does.

Daniel lets his mind drift into more pleasant terrain. He imagines coming home late, and kissing his son, Bobby, quietly on his sleeping, six-year-old forehead. Next, he perceives himself in his own bedroom, gazing down at the shadows and the subtle shapes of Suzy under the covers of their bed. He’ll undress, and Suzy will murmur quietly as Daniel slips under the blankets to share their bed’s conjugal warmth. Daniel will stretch out one arm and Suzy will snuggle up to him, pressing her nakedness against his own. As often happens in these fantasies of MacAfferty’s, Suzy’s flesh is suddenly no longer that of a woman. He remembers one of Suze’s previous bodies—he remembers the wiry strength of the male Suze was thirty years ago, holding Daniel down, thrusting—

MacAfferty opens his eyes. The light from the computer screen remains insolently glowing. Sending this version of the report upstairs would certainly mean the end to any possibility of further investigation. They’d put the ‘case closed’ signifier on it, and the computer would file it away among the rest of the endless mass of dead data—forgotten in the permanent history. MacAfferty’s instinct tells him that there’s something more to investigate, but eff-pix him if he can figure out what—or why. His thoughts return, again, to Joseph Regent and Zimon Trunk. How, in still-pixing spam, had these two total misfits ended up together, in responsible positions behind the Walls?

Joseph Regent is a pretty bad bit of business. How he’d slipped under the radar, into the protected environment of the IP, MacAfferty will never know. That’s someone else’s job to figure out. One thing MacAfferty does know is that when they do, someone else will be losing their Citizenship. Zimon Trunk, it turns out, is the offspring of a rather prominent ex-Citizen. Someone pulled some strings; someone would lose their Citizenship over that, too. Trunk’s worst fault is only that he’s a total idiot. If he hadn’t fallen under the influence of Regent, his deviance might never have shown. Of course,
MacAfferty doesn’t really believe that for a minute—Trunk, as much as Regent, was a bad tire on the road of life, he’d have blown out, sooner or later.

The chair under MacAfferty rattles into an upright position as he stands and wanders closer to the glass between him and the squadroom. He thinks about the interrogation.

"Why’d you do it, Trunk?"

"Id waz a joke, nuthin bud a joke, I zwear."

"That’s some joke. And you were planning to fill Jones in on your little prank and then you’d all sit down and have a good laugh over it?"

"Well, nod eggzackly."

"Well, what then, exactly?"

"We—we wanded ‘im to gwit th’ job."

"So you were planning blackmail?"

"No! We juzd wanded ‘im to gwit."

At first MacAfferty had believed the fat little man. The whole scenario was too twisted otherwise. But then there was the subbubanite in the other room.

"I’ve just seen a couple selections from your private vid collection, Regent."

"Haw! Hope ya liked ‘em. My dechnique—vid-making dechnique, thad iz—"

"Shut up! What I saw made me sick, you necrophiliac pixer!"

Being near Joseph Regent made his skin crawl, it was an effort for MacAfferty to not to crush him like he would any other dangerous vermin. Regent was smart, too—you could stand and watch the wheels turning.

"So, tell me, Joe, you go to all this trouble just to make this other person—this Delano Jones—look stupid?"

"Thaz righd."

"And Citizens end up dead, but that’s an accident—not your fault."

"Thaz righd."

"So, you go to all this trouble. And you have vids of yourself in the cryo-chambers, of Zimon in the cryo-chambers, but only one of Delano. Why is that, Joe?"

"Whad?"
"Why don’t you have any vids that show Delano in action? Got something to hide, Joe?"

"Whad? I—" You could just watch the wheels turn. "I dunno."

"What do you mean you don’t know, Joe? Of course you know—"

"I jus dit keep any, thaz all. Anyway, thad aitch-hole Del-bone god thiz wiggid, uld-ra, up-tooth-a-moment eye-jammer asides."

It was true. They’d found the eye-jammer in question beside Delano Jones’s corpse—the very latest in black-market technology. Not even the best of Alberni’s security systems would filter out the scramble of data echoing off its circuit-sleek hide. Not in the short term, anyway. Eye-jammers, no matter how good, are useless in the long run. You’d show up on the system eventually, just by not showing up on it with any kind of regularity. As it was though, except for those few small gaps lately—freezing into motionlessness while touring through Sigma’s coolers—Delano Jones’s whereabouts and doings within Alberni IP were mundane and accounted for on the permanent record.

Nonetheless, MacAfferty thought, there was something wrong about Regent’s answer. One ridiculous irony of the whole situation was that Regent’s archaic equipment, using magnetic tape, was immune to the effects of an eye-jammer. But he only had the one recording of Jones. Why?

There was something else that was bothering him, too.

MacAfferty put his palm up against the door frame at one end of the spread of his office’s windows. As he leans forward to take in more of the police-station panorama, the glass films slightly from the gust of his nostrils.

What a bizarre study in opposites they were: Regent, tall, scrawny, skin hanging off him like he’s been drying up for years—nasty eyes, nasty laugh; Trunk, short like his name, and spherical—that was the only way to describe him—from his marble-sized eyes to the globbs of his feet, round head, round gut—spherical. Maybe some genetic meddling in the family tree gone strange. They both talked the same ridiculous T.Viz suburban street-fuzz, though.

"Zimon, that little beat you guys stuffed up the wet sack’s nose—where’d you guys get a hold of that, anyway? Did one of you guys make it?"
“Thad’z crazy. Ya thing if I cud make thad, I’d still be worgin seguridy ad Zigma Rejuve?”

“Where’d it come from then?”
A shrug of the shoulders. “Joe god id.”
“You act like you’re not sure, Zimon. Maybe someone else got it.”
A long slow blink. “Joe god id.”
“We’re going to be together a while here, Zimon, why don’t we share the time pleasantly. Tell me the story.”

“What?”
“Tell me all about it.”
“Ahn?”
“Details, Zimon. Details—how did Joe ‘ged id!’ From whom did Joe ‘ged id!’”
“I’m nod zure. Vrum zum guy—inna bar, I thing.”
“You’re ‘nod zure?’ You ‘thing?’”

No mistaking the bit of a tremor that passes through the otherwise passive heap of Zimon Trunk’s flesh. “No. No, he god a vone zypher there. He god a vone zypher vrum the guy there—”

“‘Vone zyver?’ What’s a ‘zone vy—’” he turns to look at Sergeant Wallace, his bunched angles hardened in the corner of the barren room. “Sergeant, what’s a ‘vone zyver?’”

“Vone zypher, sir. It’s south-island slang. He just means a vidmail address—”
“A vidmail address! Why the spam didn’t he just say so. Eff-pix!”
“It is annoying, yes sir. And entirely unnecessary. Should I hit him for it, sir?” He steps forward, his chest and biceps bristling.

Eyebrows rise and lose themselves in the expanse of Trunk’s pasty white forehead.
“I’d be worried you’d lose your fist, Sergeant. Maybe if he does it again, though.”
Trunks eyes glisten in the cold light.
“So, Zimon, which is it? Did Joe get the eye-jammer in the bar?”
“No. I thing—no. Joe god a vone—no. Joe god vidmill adrezz ad th’ bar.”
“I’m not asking about Joe’s dating habits, Zimon. I already know far more than I care to.”
“No, he god a vidmill adrezz ad th’ bar, an’ he makez a vid-gall, an then goez an’
geds th’ eye-jammer. I don’drilly gnow. I never azked.”

It could be true. Trunk was about as bright as poultry, he might not have asked.

Joe might not have told em.

There was no guy and no bar in Joe’s story, but they’d gotten a name and address
for the supplier out of him anyway. The name, Lynyrd ‘the Wink’, was too obviously an
alias to mean anything, and the address, recently abandoned, was a broken-down
convenience store in the middle of nowhere.

MacAfferty knows he’s got nothing. He knows there probably is nothing. The
events had been too strange by half—why look for more complications where there were
already too many? He should send his report already. Suzy was home, waiting. Bobby
would be asleep, but he could be there when his boy woke up.

MacAfferty’s computer chimes softly three times. It’s a message from his
secretary, Rachel Drewett.

MacAfferty’s finger draws an idle circle in the mist he’s breathed onto the glass
before him. “Computer, answer. What is it, Constable Drewett?”

A cropped-haired man in the station-room turns to look at MacAfferty. Through
the glass, MacAfferty watches the man’s lips move as he speaks into his headset.

“Good news, sir. Citizen Keller called—”

“Put em through.”

“Sorry, sir. E just wanted to leave a message.”

“What?” MacAfferty rams the glass with the tip of his pointing finger. “Well,
connect me to Forensics then, I—”

“E said he was too busy to talk with you, sir—”

“Well—”

“—to talk with you—again, sir.”

“Oh.” Es finger slackens. “I see.” He’s called Keller probably twenty times in the
last few hours.

Rachel clears his throat. “E said to tell you that report you were waiting for would
be ready in an hour.”
“Is that right?” It really is good news. “Maybe I’ll get home before morning after all.”

“Yes, sir. Oh—wait a moment, sir. There’s a call coming in—”

There’s a small flurry of movement around Rachel’s desk as he shuffles through a variety of read-out sheets. His lips are moving quickly and his eyes light up as his hand pounces on one particular sheet. He holds the temporary digital read-out up, in front of his face. He smiles and says something laughingly.

“What is it, Drewett?” says MacAfferty. Rachel Drewett’s hand rises to ward MacAfferty off. Rachel smiles again and taps a few buttons on the keyboard in front of him.

“More good news, sir!”

“Spit it out, Drewett. I’ll judge for myself, thanks.”

“They’ve finally been able to schedule your Moon-comm. They’ve freed up about forty-five minutes for you to talk to the perp’s girlfriend—”

“Who?”

“Sorry, sir. To Citizen Lisa Falludi.”

“Why, then, Constable Drewett, am I still talking to you?”

“It’ll be another two hours before you can actually talk to em.”

“Fine.” MacAfferty puts two dots and the bowl of a smile into the circle he’s scrawled on the window between him and the squad room. “Put em through as soon as they call. Computer, end connection.”


Ten days before, 2:40 AM

David Metzenbergen is very tired. All he really wants is to go back to sleep. The sigh of the forest outside the Heidi-Gwai Remote Resort seems like an endless lullaby—a whispering choir enticing him consistently toward the veil of unconsciousness.

Beverly’s voice is the cymbal that crashes across the chant’s sublimity. “David? I’ve been thinking.”
David Metzenbergen's left hand lies across the curve of Beverly's midriff. In es semi-dreaming state, e imagines the tip of es ring-finger dipping into the hollow of the navel that isn't there. The depression is a frequent source of fantasy for em — e emself has been without one for about a hundred and eighty years.

The hand slides onto the sheets as Beverly rolls. David feels the freshborn's fingers poking es shoulder.

"I've been thinking about what you said," the voice falls with the insistence of a dripping faucet. "And I guess I just don't understand."

David sighs. "I wouldn't really expect you to." Es eyelids blink open, and e finds emself staring at the woven, yellow metal of the chandelier that hangs in the ceiling. Es vision focuses inevitably on one of the archaic filaments whose weak intensity, glowing from within a glass bulb, dimly illuminates the quiet room. Yet another impediment to sleep that Beverly flicked into being about an hour ago.

David turns toward es tormentor. "It was a different world." E lifts es hand from the sheets and waves it at the general atmosphere of Heidi-Gwai.

"When I was born, this kind of thing was everywhere."

Beverly Toe pushes out the carmine swell of es lower lip. "I know that, David."

"Do you?" Es gaze shifts back to the ceiling, and e brings es raised hand over to intercede between es squinting eyes and the tiny incandescence above em. "You can't. Not really." Es knuckles are unblemished. The skin stretched over es metacarpals is clear and smooth. E remembers a different hand, a multitude of liver-spots, a web of scars. "You think of Heidi-Gwai — of cedars and squirrels and ferns — and imagine them all over, like a kind of kid-vid world. When I was a boy, I imagined the Pleistocene in the same way — brontosaurs hobnobbing with triceratops, hiding out from tyrannosaurus rex together in the sweaty swamps, and all tucked under a misty blanket and ready for bed."

"Being young and being ignorant aren't the same thing, David."

"It has nothing to do with ignorance. You just can't understand. The most immediate consequence of our wealth in original nature was that most people were hardly aware of it. Some were, but most of those generally wished they didn't have to be. They were what we called 'underprivileged' — pitied as subjects to the whims of the Lifeform."

"But—"
“Money. For most people that was the only object that possessed any true reality.”

“David—”

“Technology had broken the future wide open. Values of the past, of the present even, took a back seat to the vast potential values of the future—that’s what money was—a potential value, value divorced from things. Nature—existing value—family, ethics, health, education, these were all just too dull—”

“David!” She rolls over to straddle his belly and leans down into es face until the tips of her blonde hair are grazing es cheeks. Between a thumb and es curled forefinger, Beverly squeezes David’s thick, curved nose closed. “I didn’t ask for a lecture, you know.”

“Um.” David responds. Beverly giggles as girlishly as possible at the nasal honk. “I asked you to tell me a story, and all you’re giving me is the moral.”

David looks up into two clear green eyes separated by a button-nose. Freckles swirl out from its bridge to fan across cheekbones, dissipating toward the edges of the freshborn’s face.

“I know.” Honk. E takes Beverly’s wrist and gently detaches the hand from es face. “But if you want to understand anything about Ditto Straub, you have to understand about money.” E leans right, toppling Beverly from es midriff, pinning the wrist in es hand onto the pillow above the freshborn’s head. Large, white teeth, and a wet, red tongue appear between Beverly’s parted lips. David stares at the shadowy recess that appears between the narrow gap. “Ditto wanted money. But he didn’t want money so he could buy houses, or clothes, or companies, or presidents—though, of course, he did all those things, too—he wanted money because he wanted to buy the future. He used to say: ‘The past, the present—it’s all imagination, paltry and human. The future’s the playground of God.’ He was determined to make it his.”

Beverly reaches up to pull some loose strands of hair from the corner of her mouth. “I thought people back then were all atheists.”

“Well, no. Not exactly. It’s more like there was no conformity about the concept—inevitable whenever the human relationship to God starts to change. Most people believed in God, but they also believed in limiting the concept to specific
definitions—what they really believed in was many different gods. It made for a lot of arguments—and, yes, atheism often resulted.”

“So, Straub was an atheist anyway.”

“No. Of course, I’m only theorizing, but—well, Ditto was never so simple-minded. He was a creature of exceptional will. And as such, I always say his thinking was sort of the epitome of his day. He believed in God. But he viewed the Supreme Being as more of his supreme competitor than the cooperative synthesizing principle hinted at in the Rules.”

“That’s sick. Isn’t it?”

Metzenbergen’s head flops back onto es pillow. Es eyes close. “I told you.” E remembering es own youthful ‘competition’ with God. “You really can’t understand.” Corralled by various overseers, slapped and kicked and pissed and shot on, praying for a little luck and hating himself for doing it. “They were different times.”

A moment passes in blessed silence. David turns es head to look once again at Beverly. “The real difference in Ditto’s way of thinking was that he truly believed that the competition was one in which he could, and would, eventually win. I saw this most clearly after Frank Hamm’s development of the transpiration process.”

“Beltane said that transpiration resuscitated humanity’s need for God.”

“Yes, he did. But imagine it. In the beginning, Ditto was the process’s sole owner. Dispensing or withholding eternal life was a power that was his and his alone. How Godlike a power is that?”

“But, Beltane—”

“Yes, yes. Beltane was right, I suppose. But the realities didn’t settle in just like that. Stepping outside their skins gave people a little more perspective, yes, and patience, yes. Preserving an essential connection to the world became more important, yes. But back then, Bell’s proof of action at a distance, chaos theory, species interdependence and the function of bio-diversity, it was all pretty new. The link between the flap of a butterfly’s wing and hurricanes halfway round the world may have been understood by Zen masters for millennia, but—well, there weren’t many Zen masters around.”

David is looking up again, hands in the air with their fingers laced loosely together. Rotating es wrists a centimeter at a time, e peers at the brightness above through
one small opening after another. “You know, people used to think that belief in God had
been created to relieve anxieties about death. It never seemed to occur to them that life
after death, with it’s implication of eternal responsibility was infinitely, literally
ininitely, more terrifying.” E lets his hands fall apart. “Not to mention the implications
of eternal life with no real responsibilities at all.”

Beverly swivels up onto her hip. E looks at David’s profile, sunken into the cotton
and real down of es pillow. With an elbow bent beneath em, Beverly’s head tilts down
onto es own shoulder. “But Straub,” e emphasizes the name, reminding David of their
conversation’s topic, “saw transpiration as an opportunity to play God.”

“No. Not to ‘play God.’ More like the first step in beating God at the game.”

“Now, that’s sick.”

“Yes.” Metzenberg en listens to the breeze brushing through the canopy of cedars
outside his room. The lullaby, however, has ended. In the hint of a whistle buried deep in
the soft cushion of sound, David hears the shrieks and screams of the suppressed past.
Though e clings to the edges of sleep’s veil, the fabric is in tatters.

“Is that what Miller called the ‘psychosis of individualism’?” Bev asks, but
David’s no longer really listening.

“Yes. It is sick. But, when nearly everyone thinks along the same lines, who’s
going to know?” David swings es legs out over the edge of the bed and sits up. “Besides,
Ditto really was a kind of visionary. He understood the reality of the future. He was a
very inspiring person.”

E stands, recalling Ditto rising from an armchair to emphasize a certain point.
“Gentlemen. We live in an age of miracles.” He’d gathered a handful of the moneyed
class and fed them in his forty-thousand square-metre Te Anau home, then got them to
come back into his study where Metzenbergen mixed their drinks and served cigars. This
was long past the days of David’s servitude in the USkrian saw-mills. “The proof is
everywhere—why, Gladstone, your heart is a mechanical one is it not? Horvath, isn’t
your company about to come out with nourishing, edible plastics?” An asteroid of
considerable size and aqueous composition was going to hurl its way within a thousand
kilometers of the Moon. He was looking for investors to help him land it, and put in a

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base alongside. "The achievable is suddenly, manifestly limited only by human imagination. I say it's time we tested the limits of ours."

David turns to look at Beverly—the small, rounded limbs of the girl, es vat-sculpted body naked except for a ribbon of cotton sheet twisted over es thighs.

"Anything, everything was within our grasp—a wide open future. But most people responded with fear—reactionary and illogical moralities. Or, more commonly, with their with basest, most animal instincts: greed and violence." David turns toward the closed balcony doors. "Money—potential value—was a way to have some control over the future." E looks at the dark square of the painting above the room's dresser. "But most people hoarded it not because they dreamed of making something grand of the future, but because they felt they needed to protect themselves from its giant uncertainties. Not Ditto, though." Finally, his restless eyes return to the freshborn in the rumpled, king-sized bed. "For a brief while, in the mid-twenty-first century, nothing happened in the civilized world without Straub International pulling the strings." Metzenbergen looks away. The room seems suddenly too small to contain them both. The Hide-A-Way Resort, Heidigwai Natural Park itself, all of it seems suddenly too small.

"But it all fell apart."

"Yes." E begins padding aimlessly across the plush beige shag on the floor. When e stops e finds es hands straddling the jamb of the door to the bathroom.

"It was bound to when life itself was reduced to nothing but a commodity."

"Yes." Above the sink, a mirrored cabinet is fixed to the wall, and when David looks up, it is to see a face: 'es,' but not his. E recognizes the beak, the dark swatch of hair, the brown eyes and imposing, black brows: es, but not 'his.' This cosmetic of flesh e long ago disassociated with anything e might call emself—just a tool that enables recognition, an extension of the idea that is David Metzenbergen; in reality, just another interval in the sequence that manifests itself as the 'Lifeform.'

"Yes," e says, turning back toward the ineffably female form of the freshborn Beverly Toe. "And no." E continues es restless stroll across the carpet. "It's true there were a lot of dice rolling on the table. It's true, as a civilization, we were set to crap-out on any number of games." E sweeps the balcony doors back open to breathe in the scent of the forest. "Euro and Asian tensions rising over the dwindling arctic water supply;
chaos in the old Mid-East when oil became valueless; the battle against African meta-viruses, not to mention over-crowding, the coastal flooding, the relentless Chinese expansion, and irradiated, ozoneless Australia.”

With one hand, e reaches out to fiddle with the latch on the door. “Historians have been over it and over it with me. They all say that Ditto’s brinkmanship with the Wall technology was the last straw. That it was his mistake, that whatever political game he tried to play by offering it to the Ottoman Central Markets was a terrible miscalculation.”

David slides the glass door to the balcony closed again.

“To tell you the truth though, Beverly, I don’t think any of it had to happen.”


“No. Well, that too. There were lots of people who knew, who had warnings, who got ignored—not just Miller. What I mean, though, is that Ditto didn’t make mistakes. It certainly was Ditto’s machinations that made the first of the big bombs fall. But it’s so obviously true, that Ditto must have known it would. I’ve never heard anyone offer a plausible guess as to Ditto’s motives otherwise. What I mean is this: if it wasn’t a mistake, then it didn’t have to happen.”

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2012

Dave watched another dark network of cracks approaching. One step, two steps, and the fissures passed beneath him.

He thought of them as the sidewalk’s hollow veins, and of the sidewalk as the emptied body of a long, dessicated snake, flattened at the roadside. He thought of them as wilted river-weeds spread over a dried-out riverbed.

As if a satellite in space, he watched the lines of yet another dead delta spin past underneath. He kept his eyes directed to the concrete to avoid the eyes of the beggars, always ready to fasten on an unaverted gaze. This neighborhood was rife with them, and desperation, rooted in their flesh, flung its barbed vines at every passerby. Dave hated
walking here but it was the quickest way toward his destination. To walk around the neighborhood would take forever, and the bus was too expensive.

Dave was fourteen, just old enough now to really understand some of the large, strange words that had begun to so totally change his life in the last few years. 'Recession' meant he had to work for Mr. Flaherty, and that school was a waste of time. 'Market Crash' meant old people on the sidewalk with no homes to go to. 'Energy Crisis' meant that dad, him, and just about everyone he knew had to shiver in the nights, and walk and walk and walk everywhere they went. Though really, Dave's dad didn't do that much walking anymore. Sometimes, it seemed to Dave that he hardly ever got up on his feet at all. Just long enough to get something instant into the oven then back to the couch to absorb the latest in Real-TV. Mostly he didn't even manage that.

Dave'd get home and Pop would mumble "hello," and that was pretty much it. He'd get something cold and gluey out of the fridge, a fork from a drawer, his dad would pull his legs up to make some room at one end of the couch, and Dave'd sink back next to him into its collapsing springs. Chewing self-consciously, Dave would shift his vision back and forth between the talking heads and his dad's frozen profile and wonder what he was going to do.

Every so often dad'd say, "Davey, go out and get your dad another pack of Mary Janes," and scribble a note, or "Here's a little list, Davey, and there's six twenty-dollar coins up on my dresser. Go out and see what you can do, will ya?"

Everything was happening so fast. It was less than three months ago that he'd come back from Flaherty's Convenience and that first empty bottle had showed up on top of the trash. Now they were popping up regularly on kitchen counters, by the tub, or next to the dead flowers in the dining room. He didn't know how long ago all the plants had died. They'd been alive at Christmas.

Dave remembered because he'd had to catch a vase of them after nearly knocking it off the table chasing Sammy Gunn around. That was the last time he'd seen Sammy—nearly four months ago. Dave hadn't gone back to school the September before—Mr. Flaherty had offered him full-time work in July. He took it, of course. He had to. But between the job and trying to figure out how things worked around the house, Dave hadn't been left with a lot of free time. Lenny, that fink-fuck was the first—he hadn't
even waited for school to start before he stopped calling. Sammy tried to stay in touch, but Dave was always busy, and every time they saw each other there was just less and less to talk about.

Dave closed his eyes and came to a sudden halt. He sucked in a lungful of warm humid air and arched his neck backward. When he opened his eyes he was staring at the vague bright spot in the center of the uneven slate sheet of the sky. His fists clenched as the wave of shame, so familiar yet forever new, pulsed up from his toes and scraped against his heart.

And Dad had been stoned. So stoned. At Christmastime. So very stoned and sad and spilling all over the living-room and the boys. And he just wouldn’t—just wouldn’t let him get away! Get Sammy out and away from that sick, swollen scene of terminal embarrassment.

Dave swooned to his right and staggered a step or two to the edge of the sidewalk. With his fists squeezed into the orbits of his eyes, he leaned his forehead onto the cool plate-glass of the storefront there. His glasses clinked against the window, and dug into skin between his eyebrows.

But it wasn’t really Dad’s fault. With his left hand, Dave pulled his glasses down and away while he spread the other across the bridge of his nose. Dave couldn’t blame him. Tears burned between his cheek and his palm. It was all because of Dave’s mother. His fucking mother!

“Hey, kid?”
Oh no.
“Kid?” The voice was quavering, a cracked woodwind.
Something gave his arm a small squeeze.
Dave sniffled up the dampness of his face. Looking away from the side he’d felt squeezed, he wiped ineffectually at the few tears that had escaped.

“You alright?”
Dave wanted to ignore it, its dry warbling, but the squeeze came again. And this time the pressure was insistent.

“Hey, son—”
Dave turned around quickly, tearing his arm free from the anonymous grasp.
“What? What do you want?”

“Whoa, son. No need to snap.” She was short. Old, of course. “You were just looking a little—well—” Her coat was a dark blue, long and thick. It wrapped around her tightly, like the thin skin of an oblong balloon. She must have been wearing all the clothes she owned to make it puff up that way; her neck was a scrawny stick growing out of the divot of her collar. “I just wondered if you were alright.”

“It’s none of your concern.”

“Young man, I’ll concern myself with what I like. There’s no need—”

“t—” Dave willed his jaw to unclench. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

“These are tough times—”

Dave wiped at his face again and hooked his glasses back over his eyes.

“—people should stick together.”

Her grey hair was held in a neat bun on top of her head. She was wearing sleek, soft gloves of black leather. With his glasses on he could see the slight stains on her coat. Still, her face was clean, and a line of pink had been newly-placed above her eyes. Dave had spent hours watching his mother apply her own make-up. He recognized how neatly the woman’s cheeks were rouged.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and he realized that he really was. He began to rummage in his pants for some spare change.

“Hang on.” She waved a hand at him. “I don’t want your money.”

Dave froze. He felt confused. “What?”

“I said, ‘I don’t want your money.’ I’m no Oprah, but I’m not begging on the street just yet, thanks very much.”

“Oh,” Dave said and took his hand from his pocket. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled, “it’s just—”

“That’s ok, I understand. It’s the neighborhood.”

Dave didn’t know what to say, so he looked away and around him.

He was standing on Wyandotte Street, in Windsor’s west end. The storefronts were mostly papered over, closed indefinitely. Still, the early morning crowds were beginning to appear. Two lines of people fluttered outside the ‘Chinese’ grocers that were still open for business. Their lit signs, both of them red with white lettering, seemed to be
the only real colour within sight. Even the garbage being pushed along by the listless breeze seemed washed out from months of travel. In an alcove across the street a man-shaped bundle of rags swayed back and forth in the shadows. That one was a beggar, no doubt about it. Dave felt the heat of the hungry gaze, reaching over, into him. He looked quickly back at the diminutive woman with the woodwind voice.

She spoke, knowing perhaps that he had nothing to say, “Mr. Chan, my husband, bless his soul, never thought at all about investing in the stocks. While he was alive, I cursed him every day for it, but there you go.”

“Oh,” said Dave.

“He paid off the house, bought a couple more, and then he filled a safety deposit box with a bit of gold.” Her shrug was indicated by a tremor in the shoulders of her coat. “Seemed ridiculous at the time.”

“Um,” said Dave, “I have to—”

“Which way were you headed?”

Without thinking Dave pointed vaguely behind him.

“Well, me too. Why don’t we go together?”

Before Dave could answer, the navy vine of her arm had twined with his and turned him round. “My name’s Greta Chan. What’s yours?”

“Um—Dave,” said Dave, and then he was walking with her, elbow in elbow, down the sidewalk.

After about twenty steps, he found himself staring down at Mrs. Chan’s grey bun, feeling distinctly mystified. She looked up at him and gave him a good look at her dentures between her smiling lips.

“People should stick together. That’s what my mother always used to say.”

Dave felt compelled to answer. He wanted to answer. “People almost never do what they should, though.”

“Really? That’s a bit dark, don’t you think?”

“But it’s true. It’s something a teacher of mine used to say.”

“My goodness. What a thing to teach a child.” Mrs. Chan brought him to a halt at a street-corner. She looked around for cars. Of course the only ones in sight were parked.
And most of those were going to be staying that way—only taxis moved around much
down here.

“What was this teacher’s name?” They crossed.

“Mr. Straw. Derek Straw.”

“Derek Straw? Now, why does that sound so familiar?”

Dave’s turn-off was just up ahead, and he focused on that instead of his inability
to answer her question.

Mrs. Chan, as it turned out, didn’t really need his help. “I think it’s that horrible
man they call ‘Ditto’ these days.”

“Who?”

“Ditto Straub. I’m sure I remember hearing how he changed his name. He’s the
new President of the CBC. Is that the fellow you mean?”

The memory of Mr. Straub had ceased some time ago to be anything he thought
of as real. “I—I don’t know.” To Dave, the thought of him alive somewhere, in the flesh,
breathing and pointing with his glasses was quite startling.

“He’s the one that finally made the radio start selling advertising.”

“Oh.” Dave had no idea what it meant. He hardly even noticed when Mrs. Chan
turned with him up Memorial Avenue.

“It’s an awful, terrible, horrible idea. As if enough of what’s good in the world
hasn’t been totally destroyed.”

How had she known he had to go up Memorial?

“Most people,” she went on, “can hardly afford a decent meal, but somehow
there’s still plenty of money for flashy ads.”

“Do you live up this way?” asked Dave.

“No, no.” Mrs. Chan shook her head. “My home’s back the way we came. I like
this street, though.” She gestured at the surroundings. Maples lined the street, rising out
of the over-grown grass and weeds of the boulevard. The houses, a grab-bag of
architectural mediocrity, stood back from their ragged lawns in various states of disrepair.
Most were occupied, but not all by their owners; faded and pointless ‘For Sale’ signs
were like guideposts for a tour of the local squatters’ residences.
Dave felt suddenly apprehensive and then ridiculous for feeling it. He found himself looking, once again, at Mrs. Chan’s tight, grey top-knot. “Where are you going?”

Mrs. Chan didn’t say anything for a minute. The top of her head just bobbed up and down as they walked along.

“Mrs. Chan—”

“Oh, Dave. Going, going, going. You know, if people had spent more time in the last fifty years trying to figure out where they were then, instead of where they wanted to go, well—let’s just say the world wouldn’t be going to hell the way it is today.”

Dave thought about it for a minute. He had no idea what she meant. “I was just wondering—”

Greta Chan brought them both to a halt. She turned toward him and looked up at his face. Her loose skin seemed to part from around the dark hazel of her eyes.

“You remind me very much of my grandson, you know. I haven’t seen him since he was about your age. That was years ago. My daughter took him away, out West, and well, that’s just a long way to go when you’re my age.”

She turned and continued leading him up Memorial Avenue.

Dave certainly didn’t have any idea how to respond to that, and Mrs. Chan didn’t seem to want to answer his question, so he left it alone. He decided at the next corner he would go in whatever direction she wasn’t.

After a minute or so of silence, a familiar ticking began in the trees. They both looked up. The small drops of drizzling rain floated down to dampen the skin on their cheeks. The dirty curtain that seemed constantly drawn across the sun had finally delivered on its daily promise.

“I’m going to the same place you are.”

“What?” said Dave, drawing the snaps on his collar together.

“I’m going to the same place you are, Dave.”

He cocked his head involuntarily. “To Wildwood?”

“That’s right,” Mrs. Chan said. “To Wildwood Cemetery. My husband was buried there ten years ago.”

Mrs. Chan reached up to put a hand on Dave’s cheek. She nearly had to stand on her tiptoes to do it, and he nearly flinched from the touch.
“I’ve seen you there before.” Tiny, unbearable beads of water clung to Mrs. Chan’s powdered skin. “I’m sorry for my little game, but when I saw you, you looked like you needed your mind taken off—of something.” She let her hand drop to his shoulder.

Dave looked at the sidewalk.

“Who is it that you visit there, Dave?”

The cracks, of course, were there.

“My mother. She died nearly three years ago. She had an allergic reaction to some genetically altered chicken.”

“Oh, that’s terrible.”

Dave was suddenly crying, crying like a little baby.

“She just kind of blew up and strangled right there at the kitchen table.”

* * *

Five days after, 1:20 AM

Es name-tag says: ‘Cit. Lisa Falludi’, and beneath it, ‘Salvage, Grp. C’ and then in smaller letters, ‘Lunar-Recon.’ E’s hurrying down a short, conduit-lined hallway. Pipes and cables stripe the length of the solid rock roof and walls. The floor is a resilient black polymer, seamless except for a sort of ladder running down its center. It lays over the bed of rock that’s adjacent to the walls. The hall is well lit, but nothing, it seems, can quell the eerie truth of being insinuated a kilometer deep into the hide of the Earth’s only natural satellite.

No artificial weight-inducers are installed in Vertigo Bay’s connecting halls. There’s a little more gravity down here than on the surface, but Lisa still feels light as a feather. After four months e’s used to using her hands to guide her progress. E snags a rung that protrudes from a central conduit, and then propels emself another few meters down the hall.

Lisa’s been back in the rock for nearly four months. E was so glad to be back that right after touch-down, e’d wanted to get down on es hands and knees and kiss the floor.
A day later though, halfway into decontamination when e finally got to take es helmet off and could have done it, the urge had subsided.

E’d done a year-and-a-half on the Moon starting in 2242, six months after the first recovery mission had landed. That stint had ended when e had to go back earthward to recuperate from low-grav osteoporosis.

E’d spend twelve months back on the brown marble—a year lost in the land of the living dead. The stultified, flesh-hoarding culture behind the Walls had been driving em bazznatchi. Why sit around, measuring every nano-volt, bowing to machinery and pledging allegiance to fossil-thoughts and the blandness of the day-after-day, when you could be here? Vertigo Bay was where it was all happening—the future of humanity. Mars, a new planet, a new beginning—the destiny of the Lifeform lay wholly in the hands of the Lunar Reconstruction crews.

The program Lisa has just been working on was designed nearly two hundred years ago. It controls the oxygen reconstitution rods that help make life possible here. Systems malfunctions drove them offline the day before. Of course, they didn’t work at all when e’d first got here three years ago. Nothing did.

To get water and oxygen, the first of the Recon teams had been forced to bore new tunnels down to the asteroid Straub Inc. had parked and buried in the lunar crust in 2052. The corridors of Vertigo Bay itself were still inaccessible then—the final tenants of the place had had done their best to close it permanently upon their departure. They blew the reservoirs so that half an asteroid’s worth of water had flooded the place. And then, just to be sure they’d be the only one’s to get away, they set off a mini-nuke at the landing area before they left.

Clearing out the debris had taken two years of living under a bubble on the surface. Then there’d been the ice. There were a few sections where small crews like Lisa’s were still melting it down and pumping it back into the patched-up reservoirs where it belonged.

Nowadays, everyone lived inside, though there was still stuff going on up on the surface—unloading supplies, and checking on the terraforming warheads. Lisa still got the odd shift up there, still got to go up and stare at the impossible mountains, the alien sky. But e’s mostly pretty relieved e no longer has to live with the day-to-day knowledge
that the merest accident, a tear in a suit, or a power failure, would kill em. Down in the belly of Vertigo Bay, the Lifeform allows for a little more lee-way.

Lisa comes gracefully to rest on the bottom rung of a ladder that disappears into a tunnel in the roof. The lifts are still down, of course. There’s really too much to do—unlike Earth, Lisa thinks, where people have nothing but time on their hands. ‘Patience is a virtue, all virtue is learned through patience’—what’s your rush, Citizen? The Lifeform needs a century or two more to heal—Mars, the Moon, the stars, none of it’s about to disappear, after all—

Lisa sighs and starts upward. It had all driven em bazznatchi!

Vertigo Bay isn’t huge: less than two hundred rooms connected by a network of short tunnels and halls, all of which are linked together by one central shaft. The whole complex weighs in at only about two million square-meters. To get from Physical Plant, the systems control center, to the Hub, the base’s tiny communications room, it takes about a two-minute sail through the corridors of Vertigo Bay. Even so, Amin Ojinski’s face is creased with impatience when Lisa steps through the door. E doesn’t even wait for Lisa to regain es equilibrium after es body-weight triples in the space of a footstep.

“Where have you been? I’ve been twiddling my—”

Lisa cuts em off. “Hey, I came as soon as I could. I couldn’t abandon my oh-two reclamation work just like that. It takes time to save and apply. You like breathing, don’t you?”

“Well,” Amin responds warmly, “you like eating don’t you? Tasha’s been waiting for me to take over down in the greenhouse for half-an-hour.”

Vertigo Bay had originally been manned by staff of two hundred and sixty. In its present condition, the Recon crew of seventy-five pushes its sustenance allotments to the limit, and, overworked as they are, tempers sometimes flare. Especially lately. Three months ago, salvage group ‘A’ stumbled onto something that sent a wave of commotion rattling up and down the chain of command. Shiftwork that had been barely manageable before had been rendered even more impossible by the introduction of a whole new set of protocols.

Curiosity about the discovery was intensified by the fact that it had been made somewhere in Vertigo Bay’s lowest levels. There wasn’t supposed to be anything down
there but more living quarters—space the short-handed Recon team had no use for, causing the job to be repeatedly postponed. Still, though no one would really admit it, there was some interest in melting the ice in those lower rooms. After all, that’s where the tyrant, Ditto Straub had lived. Apparently the trip had been worthwhile, too, but the protocols meant no one was allowed to tell anyone why.

Lisa stares at Amin’s disgruntled face, taking the time to mentally forgive es short-temperedness. “I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner, alright?”

Amin rubs es eyes. “Um, yeah—me, too, I guess. Sorry for shouting.” E says it, though e hardly sounds like e means it. “Look, you know how all this stuff works, right?” E waves at the rows of screens and the knots of controls in front of em.

Lisa’s training includes all aspects of the moon-base’s operations, but still—

“I’m not sure, I—”

“Look,” says Amin, the edge rising again in es voice. “I’ve got to get going. It’s just an eff-pixing call from Earth. They’ll be on air in a few minutes—”

There really aren’t any choices being offered. “Of course,” says Lisa, “I’ll manage just fine, thanks Amin.”

Amin nods curtly and brushes by Lisa on es way to the door.

Lisa knows that irritation with Amin’s abrasive behaviour is an inefficient, even dangerous luxury that their lunar existence ill-affords. E focuses on the horse-shoe of the communications array that fills most of the Hub’s small rectangle. On the main screen above the banks of levers and switches e reads the words, ‘ATTN, Cit. Lisa Falludi /: Prepared to Receive: Earth, Alberni IP.’ Trepidation quivers down es spine. Lisa hopes it’s not Delano.

E sits down in the plush bucket chair that nestles between the arms of the array. E didn’t see how it could be Delano. The last time they talked, they seemed to agree they’d never see or hear from each other ever again. Lisa’s mind drifts back—e remembers the vague ugliness of the shadowy little sububmanite. Nothing to look at, but somehow fascinating in the way he occupied his flesh—there, but not really—

A throat clears behind em. E knows without turning that it’s Amin. E hasn’t left yet. E also knows what it is that’s kept him from his pressing duties.

“There’s a new rumour going around, you know.”
Lisa sighs and her head droops. “I’m sure there is.”

“Maybe you’ve heard it?”

Lately Lisa hasn’t been able to go anywhere in the station without somebody whispering at em about what it might have been that the other salvage crew had uncovered. For some reason people seemed to think that because e worked in salvage e would have all the answers. The fact of the matter is that even if Lisa does know anything, e’s prohibited from talking about it.

Lisa looks over es shoulder at the enviro-tech who’s standing just inside the doorway. “I thought you were in a rush to get down to the greenhouses.”

Amin looks down. Es feet, Lisa notes, have suddenly become a great source of fascination to em. “Yes. Well, you know—I just wondered—” e’s watching them take root, it seems. “Have you heard—”

Lisa swivels es chair around. “Doesn’t anyone around here care that they might be jeopardizing their Citizenship with this childish indulgence in curiosity?”

When Amin’s face comes back up, it has regained its look of animosity.

“Jeopardizing our Citizenship’? Don’t be ridiculous. I didn’t notice any tight lips about the last big discovery.”

Only the stress of the last few months could really explain this dangerous display of jealousy. In their de-icing mission, the salvage groups get to be the first to see the various artifacts that fill Vertigo Bay. Lisa is tempted to vigorously remind Amin about the artifact es team had come upon six months ago. The booby-trap had killed three of them when it exploded.

“That was different and you know it, Amin,” Lisa says, knowing, however, that the tech really does have a point. E remembers telling the story over and over, at every opportunity. “There were no secrecy protocols invoked after we found the corpses of Babe Solomon and Ditto Straub.”

“Alright, alright. I admit it. But still, people have to talk, don’t they? And this is just talking—” es glance falls again to es immobile boots. “I mean, if you really did know anything, I wouldn’t expect you to come right out and tell me.” Es eyes peer slyly up at Lisa.
The gambit is puddle-shallow, and the amazement must show in Lisa’s face, because Amin is quick to cast out the next remark of es fishing expedition. “I heard that they found a piece of alien technology.”

Lisa can’t help emself. “Alien technology. Do you mean some kind of previously unknown tech—”

“No, no. Alien. Not made on Earth—not made by humans.”

Lisa is about to say something else, but e clamps es jaw shut and does another quick mental count. “Citizen Tasha Cho is waiting for you in one of the greenhouses, isn’t that right?”

Amin nods. Es feet shuffle. “If you did know anything, I wouldn’t expect you to come right out and say.”


Amin turns and Lisa watches es head sink below the floor as e descends the ladder to the corridors below. E swivels es chair back around to nestle more closely into the horseshoe of the communications array. New letters have appeared beneath the ‘Prepared to Receive’ on the main screen. The smaller print reads, ‘Alberni Pol., LT. MacAfferty. Priority Comm.’ E glances at the picture that accompanies the new writing. Wide features stretch across the block of the Lieutenant’s black, bald head. Lisa notes the discrepancy between the cop’s template features and the lack of the ‘Citizen’ honorific at the head of his name. E’s quite sure e’s never met the ex-Citizen before.

Lisa scans the controls in front of em. The procedure for two-way earthward communication takes just a few minutes to come back to her. E spins a dial and then taps a long series of code on a centuries-old keyboard.

“Hello, Lieutenant MacAfferty,” e says, “This is Citizen Lisa Falludi. It looks like you get the next forty minutes of my day. I hope you have something pretty important on your mind, because I’m a pretty busy Citizen these days.”

Lisa sends. The computer begins to read aloud the long text message that has begun scrolling past on the screen. The machine-voice is edifying em with the latest batch of protocols surrounding unsecured earthward communications. Lisa mutes the
computer’s lecture and relaxes. It’ll take at least ten minutes before e hears anything back.

E swivels es chair languidly back toward the tube down which the enviro-tech had descended. E stares, wondering about the source of the rumour Amin was talking about. Someone in salvage group ‘A’ must have talked. What ironic synchronicity, e thinks, swiveling back to face the comm-array, to be consulting, at this moment, with a police detective. E takes in, once again, the stolid, square head on the screen.

Ordinarily, the cops, albeit cops from a very different department than this MacAfferty, would be the very people Lisa should be informing about this breach of protocol. E knows, though, that they’d just ask how e knew the source was a dependable one. Lisa’s hands drop together between es thighs as e pushes back into the bucket of es chair. E’d say someone in group ‘A’—Vince, or maybe Boany—had told em what they’d found, but e’d be lying, and they’d find out. The truth is that e’s known for a very long time, years in fact, what was down there, but that’s the last thing e wants anyone else to know. Es thumbs begin to pursue each other, round and round, in the cup of es hands.

It takes only a second-and-a-half for Lisa’s image to transmit itself from the Moon, first to the receiving station in Alberni IP, and then through the Industrial park to where Daniel MacAfferty’s been waiting for it.

Not long before, Drewett had actually told him that the waiting was over. He’d been wrong. The image has arrived along with a giant message concerning what he’s not supposed to talk about. MacAfferty ignores the script—he doesn’t, regrettably, have any questions that are all that sensitive. Instead he focuses es attention on the face the screen displays under the words ‘Vertigo Bay / Lunar Recon / Sal. grp. C, Cit. Lisa Falludi / .’

Lisa Falludi looks young, of course; e’d undergone es second transpiration only eight years ago. MacAfferty is surprised, but not overly so, that Lisa does indeed look a fair amount like the wetsack Jones had ended up destroying.

Dark hair, thick and curled, cut just below the shoulders. Round, dark eyes. Full lashes and eyebrows that slant steeply across es forehead. Es nose is small and practically flush with the rest of es face, which is round aside from the point of es chin.

The small part of Falludi’s body that is visible on MacAfferty’s viewscreen reveals the major differences between this Citizen and the template. Lisa’s breasts,
poking timidly out from inside her ‘Moon-Recon.’ chemise are kilograms lighter than the template’s dramatic handful. That and the mole on es left cheek are the only truly distinguishing features. The differences, as well as the resemblances, are disturbingly vague.

It takes only seconds for MacAfferty to take the image in, while the script that’s reeling by shows no sign of abating any time soon. He decides to use the extra minutes to skim once again through Forensics’ report on Jones’s brain-scan.

MacAfferty’s old rolling chair protests as he leans back at his desk with the vid-report in hand. He got through it pretty quickly the first time—there’s not a lot there. Not surprising, since the brain these superficial thoughts were removed from had been mostly blown out of its skull. But it’s still been some help in adding a couple of questions to the list he’d prepared for Citizen Falludi. He gives the dial at the bottom of the flexible report-screen a twist, and then reads a part of the text that appears.

"—There! There she is, trying to fold herself up into herself and disappear. Too bad, green-eyes, that way out looks temporarily clogged by your flesh. My lazz (oh, LSTR. I miss you) is hard as a bone in my hand. I point it at the ridge between her eyes as she sinks, hoping to push herself into the floor. She’s babbling, or begging—speaking some language I refuse to understand. She cowers behind one of the other things I’ve just shot. (I imagine she’s just finished eating the inside of its head—"

MacAfferty twists the dial back again.

"—I stumble over what are probably roots under the water as I splash to the curb, leaving the broad, brown leaves, floating everywhere like desolate little rafts, bobbing away in my wake. Stepping up onto the splayed foot of the tree, I look into the black, smoky hole I’ve burned into it, then laugh—this sure is a big improvement on jumping around in puddles—"

Crazy. Really. There was no more denying it. It was like nothing MacAfferty had ever read. This call to the Moon is starting to feel like nothing more than a formality.

Still, it’s strange—he twists the dial. There’s something—

"—From the center of this great chamber it’s easy for me to imagine that the walls are horizons. The ductwork and the motion of the fluids inside it seem like clouds methodically swimming through the brightest of white skies. Tangles of automation click
and scurry across the floor, or whirl overhead like so many creatures of the field and air.
I do pirouettes, appreciating one view after another, admiring the orderly mind—"

There's something strangely literate about it all. For the thoughts of a madman, they were oddly lucid—not poetic exactly, but structurally elaborate.

"—In the growing-rooms, where the seeds of flesh are sown, anxious thoughts about Lisa give way to an idea of patience. Among the aquariums, whose bubbling fluids nurture the pink and meaty stuff that floats at their center—"

Oddness in this case, however, is exactly what he's grown to expect.

The tinny quality of a voice being transmitted over about 373 million kilometers interrupts MacAfferty's ruminations. Another concert of creaks erupts from his chair as he leans forward to catch the tail end of Falludi's terse introductory sentences.

"—have something pretty important on your mind because I'm a pretty busy Citizen these days."

"Thanks very much for responding, Citizen Falludi," MacAfferty says. "I appreciate your desire to do away with the niceties—time is, as you say, of the essence. In order to avoid wasting it on needless details then, let me just say that I'm investigating a murder, and that my investigation involves a non-Citizen, Del, or Delano, Jones. We have reason to believe that you know him. Is this true?"

A coldness takes hold in MacAfferty's gut when the word 'murder' elicits not even a blink. It hardens when, three seconds later, his question about the link between the Citizen on the screen and the murderer brings forth a visible gasp. MacAfferty is about to accuse Falludi of something when he realizes that what he's been watching on the computer screen is the Citizen's expression playing catch-up with his words. Light, after all, takes about three seconds to get to Vertigo Bay and back. Clearly, the effectiveness of his interrogation techniques will be diminished by the lag. He is staring at the screen, waiting for Falludi's answer, when he realizes his techniques are suffering on several fronts. Belatedly, his hand darts out to punch the 'send' button, signalling that he's finished talking for now, and is ready to receive.

Three seconds of silence later, the tin voice comes over again. "Is Delano dead? What happened?"
"I'm afraid I'm not really at liberty to tell you what happened. But yes, Delano's dead. He died of a lazz wound to the head." MacAfferty's rules of Constructive Interrogation, rule number one: never tell anyone anything you don't have to—criminals will trip themselves up offering information they could not know if they were innocent.

"What was the nature of your relationship to Mister Jones?" The three second wait delivers a widening of eyes and a expression of shock, but no overt signs of grief.

"I—well, my relationship with Delano—I'm not even sure you could call it a relationship, really. I spent some time earthward last year. I met him in a bar in Manaimo. We—I spent a few days with him, but that was all."

The signs of reticence would be noteworthy if they weren't so predictable. "You were lovers?"

Falludi looks flustered. E quotes the protocols, "Sexual relations between Citizens and non-Citizens are discouraged." E visibly struggles to introduce a blankness into expression.

"Please answer the question."

E looks around emself, worried about eavesdroppers. "I had sex with him, yes. But we were never lovers. Whoever told you that—" MacAfferty's interest piques, he waits for a name—in vain. "Look, I was drunk. I was just back from the Moon and I was missing the action. I needed a little excitement."

"And after a few months of illicit sex, you tired of him." Rule number two: when the respondent becomes defensive, provoke as much as possible. MacAfferty waits for Falludi to angrily interrupt him. But of course e can't—MacAfferty's got to send first.

"Am I to understand," he adds hastily, "that Delano was no longer providing the 'excitement' you needed?" He stabs the button.

"I already told you that it lasted only two days."

"Actually, you said 'a few.'" Send, eff-pix, send!

"Two nights. We spent some time together on the third day when I tried to let him down a bit gently."

"Why 'gently'?"
“Well, if you want to know the truth, I might have spent a little more time with him, but he started to get obsessed. He started talking about love and inventing some kind of future for us together.”

Watching the look of both intensity and openness coming together in Falludi’s face makes MacAfferty sigh. The feeling that this call was nothing but a formality was growing. He makes one last stab. “But what about your obsession, Citizen Falludi? You obviously know what people think about this kind of dalliance—maybe you had gotten just a bit too close for comfort?”

“Look, that’s crazy. I’ll admit, I found the guy a little fascinating at first. He had a way of wearing his skin, like it was just a shadow of his real self. But not a like Citizen, like his flesh was just a tool, or it didn’t matter, more like it just wasn’t real enough to actually contain him. It was kind of mysterious and sexy—to a drunk person anyway. It kind of scared me later. We walked around on that third day, I bought him a present, I said goodbye to him and that was that.”

The description is interesting, and it coincides with the information from the brainscan. It’s also totally useless in terms of MacAfferty’s investigation. “That gift—was it a globe of the Moon?”

“Yes. Look, was Delano murdered, or did he murder someone?” The comment causes a slight renewal of MacAfferty’s interest. Perhaps the first rule is paying off. Even though Jones was the murderer, nothing MacAfferty’s said would have indicated it. Falludi continues, “Because whatever he did—well, I’ve been on the Moon for nine months, you know. I don’t see what any of it could possibly have to do with me.”

“As I suggested earlier, Citizen Falludi, I’m not presently at liberty to talk about the case. But you sound a little worried. Why should you imagine I’m accusing you of something?” Rule number three: never admit to anything, and always insist the respondent is confused.

“I’m not imagining anything, Lieutenant, and I don’t appreciate these games, and there are people who would be very interested in hearing how you’ve antagonized a Citizen with the heavy responsibilities of Lunar-Recon. I repeat: If Delano’s killed someone, I’ve been on the Moon for nine months. It’s got nothing to do with me.”

“Why, Citizen Falludi, do you keep assuming Mister Jones has killed someone?”
Rule number two is working well now. Falludi’s face has flushed, the muscles of
es jaw bunch as e grits es teeth. “Lieutenant, I could tell you that it’s the obvious
conclusion, since you happen to have been announced as Alberni IP. I mean, if Jones had
been killed in some sububban street brawl, that would be a job for a Manaimo judge, and
not for an Alberni IP Lieutenant, right? I could also point out that, if it had only been
Jones who’d been killed, no one would schedule a priority communication to Vertigo Bay
over it. Especially on the basis of a year-old fling. I could tell you all that, but I wouldn’t
want to make you feel stupid for asking such a stupid question. Instead, I’ll refer you to
the true answer, which I alluded to earlier: Delano scared me. When you began the call
by mentioning ‘murder’ and ‘Delano’ in the same sentence—well, I jumped to the
obvious conclusion.”

The thought runs through his head that he’ll have to make a few new rules—
something that deals with interrogations, Q&A delays, and strange formats. He’s gone
and pixed-up on the basic underpinning of all of MacAfferty’s Rules: never, never ask an
unintentionally stupid question. He tries to bring control of the conversation back round
to his end. “Are you saying that you felt this individual was likely to murder?”

“No, Lieutenant. Only that that seemed like a logical conclusion after you implied
that ‘this individual’ was involved in murder.” Falludi says it as though speaking to a
child.

Well, thinks MacAfferty, time to wrap it up. He’s been stirring among the dogs,
looking so hard to find a wolf that he’s quite properly been bitten for it. He’ll hang on till
the bitter end, but he’ll make sure that comes sooner, rather than later. “After that
weekend, then, that was the last you ever heard of Delano Jones?”

“No, Lieutenant. I’ve talked with him twice by lunar-comm since I’ve been on the
Moon. He was leaving messages like every half-hour, and I was sick of wading through
them to find the important stuff. The first time I called was to try to get him to stop. It
didn’t work.”

MacAfferty waits. Then he notices that the ‘sent’ indicator is on, and that he’s
waiting for nothing. “And the second time, Citizen Falludi? If you wanted Delano to stop
calling, why did you call a second time?”

MacAfferty is surprised to see Falludi looking a little chagrined.
"I only talked to him because I had an extra fifteen minutes of personal moon-phone time after talking to my uncle Ensten," she pauses to look significantly at MacAfferty. "Dalbert—that’s my uncle—is getting old. He lives in Nanaimo and doesn’t have anyone else to take care of him. I talked to him for as long as I could, but he had to go when I still had fifteen minutes left."

"There wasn’t anyone else you’d rather have talked to?"

"Well—the guy only sent me half-a-million lines of crappy poetry. I’m not a total heartless spam-jammer, you know. Besides, I guess talking to Uncle Ensten left me feeling compassionate.” And indeed, the very thought of es uncle makes Falludi look at MacAfferty in a way that defies him not to feel the same way. “It was after visiting Dalbert that I ended up in that bar where I met Delano.”

MacAfferty scans through the pages of Jones’s brain-scan. “And when did this take place?”

“It was just over two months ago, March fourteenth. I remember because it was my Uncle Ensten’s birthday.”

MacAfferty finds the entry for April 12th: “Four weeks ago she called to tell me that she’s found someone else.” Once again, he’s disturbed by strange coming together of events. Falludi calls, Delano cracks, and Zimon and Joe start making plans, all around mid-March. Could one call from Falludi really have pushed Delano over the edge?

“What did you and Delano talk about?”

“I—I told him there was someone else.” If he was already teetering, MacAfferty thinks, that might have been enough of a shove. Falludi continues, “When he asked who it was I gave him Uncle Dalbert’s name, Lifeform forgive me. I told him that I thought it would be best that he didn’t call anymore—that it was the only way we could both find happiness.”

MacAfferty raises his eyebrows. So that’s what passes for ‘feeling compassionate’ these days. He leans back into a chorus of creaks from his chair and scans down his list of questions—all done.

“Thank you, Citizen Falludi. Rest assured that we’ll be in touch when we’ve gotten to the bottom of this affair.” The final rule of Constructive Interrogation: Never leave anyone thinking that they’ve gotten off the hook.

* * *
2017

Dave looked at the picture in the paper a little more closely. It was him alright. He hadn’t changed a bit in—what was it? Nearly fifteen years? Funny, Dave thought, ordinarily he’d never have been scrutinizing the weekly paper as closely as he was that morning. It was his father who really required its weekend presence.

Each week, from his perch in the kitchen nook, ensconced in artificial light and agoraphobia, his father pored over the pages thick with the ads, scandals, and murders that sold themselves as the news. It had all ceased to mean anything to Dave quite a while ago. Reading about the news wasn’t good enough anymore—he was going to be a part of it.

The paper had just been there, on the table that morning, and Dave had found himself turning the pages in order to avoid looking squarely into his father’s eyes. Eyes which had been wandering avidly over the paper’s ‘Advice’ section until being suddenly jolted from their usual somnambulant path.

“You’re going to what?” his father asked.

Dave re-read the caption beneath the photo, ‘Superstar Babe Solomon has intimate soiree with ad-exec. Ditto Straub, and no sign of hubby, Dunstan Wolds.’

“You heard me, Dad,” said Dave in a clear, quiet voice. The silence that greeted his answer was grim, but satisfying. Dave was pleased that for once his father’s stream-like opinion, adaptable to every contour, unaccepting of impediments to its flow, seemed stoppered by his answer. His eyes skimmered over the collection of gossiping tid-bits to find the blurb pertinent to the picture.

Babe Has Seconds with Ditto! NY—Babe Solomon, face of It-Girl Productions and adfeature film star, celebrated her birthday by enjoying a romantic dinner for two at Sardi’s last Thursday. She wore a single-breasted sash and drank vodka tonics, laughing and talking loudly until after midnight. Nowhere in sight, however, was her husband, fashion-model Dunstan Wolds. Picking up the tab was Ditto Straub, ad-exec with—

“Davy,” his father said, “you can’t be serious. Think about what you’re saying—”

Dave looked up from the paper. “I’ve thought about it a lot already, Dad.” His father had edged forward from his usual Sunday huddle in the corner of the breakfast
nook, where the wall and the bench came together. The besieged hardness in his forehead and grey-green eyes, while not softening, cleared a little. It was, Dave thought, like a thick lair of dust being wiped from a stained plank of white pine. Dave let his eyes wander up the crease where the pale yellow of the two walls met, thinking now of dusting his father as if he were the credenza in the living room. “I’m sick of driving trucks. I need a change.”

“But, Davy, why enlist? Isn’t there something else—”

“Work’s scarce, Dad.”

“How about that tree-planting? You liked that, you said.”

“Yeah, but we were starving, don’t you remember?”

“Oh, it wasn’t so bad. Don’t exaggerate.”

Dave’s gaze returned to the newspaper—weekly now because of the lumber shortage. There certainly was plenty of work to be had planting trees. Picking up the tab was Ditto Straub, ad-exec with Fine & Finer. He looked back at the photo.

“We always had plenty to eat,” his father said.

Babe’s distracting curves were elongated, reaching out to touch the rim of her glass to that of Mr. Straub, his grade three teacher. Or was it grade four?

“You seem to have made up your mind.”

Dave sighed. He looked sideways over the table-top and across the kitchen at the faded mint cupboards that covered the far wall. A streak of grease or coffee ran down the middle of one beneath the sink. Dave made a mental note to give it a wipe when he was doing the dishes later. “I have, Dad.”

“Well, thanks for keeping me informed.”

Dave heard the vibrato creeping in around the edges of his voice. The easy flow of his alcoholic tears could not be far behind.

“I didn’t say anything before because I didn’t want to upset you with any make-believe plans. Besides, it’s a decision I had to make for myself.”

His father began fidgeting, slowly tucking his feet up under his haunches until he was almost crouching. He looked as if he were preparing to launch himself across the Formica table-top. “I see,” he said. “Your decision—why not? After all, it’s got nothing to do with me.”
Dave had been waiting for it. His father had spoken exactly these words in the conversation he’d been practicing in his head over and over again all the previous week.

"Dad," he said, and took in a well-rehearsed breath of air and fortitude, “you know it’s not like that. It’ll be better for both of us. We need the credits, and when I come back I’ll be eligible for work in something I really want to do."

“If you come back, you mean. Last week’s paper said fatalities among peacekeepers around Kiev were on the rise.” He fanned his fingers out, pushing down against the table.

“I’ll come back,” said Dave.

“The number of Chinese troops in Mongolia has doubled in the last two years.”

Dave pinched the bridge of his nose until he saw a faint red glow beneath his closed eyelids. “I’ll come back, Dad."

“There are probably forty bandit-kings with nuclear capabilities over there. Each one nuttier than the last. Nidivitch may have been the first global nuclear extortionist, but there’ll be more. It’s inevitable.”

“I know what’s going on over there, Dad.” Dave leaned forward. “That’s one of the reasons I have to go.” He reached across the table to touch his father’s spotted knuckles. “I can’t stand idly—"

His father snatched his hand away before Dave’s fingers could make contact. He held it sorrowfully, as if it had nearly been burned, up against his chest. “And while you’re off making the world safe for all the little mutants of the future, who’s going to take care of your dad?”

Dave’s jaw clenched. In his practices, when this obstacle had loomed in his imagination he’d steered firmly and widely around it, breathing carefully and counting. Faced with its reality, however, he could do nothing but feel tension and the certainty of collision rising.

“And that’s what it really comes down to, isn’t it?” Dave muttered hotly.

“What?”

Dave looked at his father. His head had jutted forward on the top of his neck with the interrogative. Like a bird’s, Dave thought—he was like a pigeon, wings folded and
forgotten through habitual walking and pecking in circles, its hollow bones weighed
down by a scavenger’s flesh.

“It’s just—” he couldn’t stop himself, he had to say it now. “It’s just got to be about you, doesn’t it? Everything’s got to be all about you.”

His father’s body retreated into the yellow wedge of the corner. Immediately Dave felt the familiar breakers crashing over his conscience—waves of pity, of disgust, all followed inevitably by a backwash of self-hatred and helpless rage. He saw his father’s body, grey and fragile, pull into itself—he thought of the tunnels termites riddle through wood, leaving little but air surrounded by shape. His father hadn’t been out of the house in nearly three years. He was cringing now as if Dave had threatened to toss him into some anonymous dark alley. Of course, in a roundabout way he had done exactly that. Dave sighed. He saw the wet glimmer that had begun pooling around the bottom of his father’s eyes.

“Look, Dad—” he began, but his father had risen from his crouch and, in a short crab-walk, got himself off the bench. He crossed the mottled linoleum and got a glass out of the dish-rack beside the sink. Dave, looking now at his father’s back as he splashed vodka into the tumbler, found he could not continue. He stood, uncomfortably, and went to lean against the counter beside his father. His hands gripped it around its protruding edge, one fingertip digging in to a divot in the marbleized Formica.

“You know I’ve always been interested in medicine, Dad. It’s all that keeps me going on the job. Saving a little credit here and there, catching up on my correspondence courses. But even if I got steady routes for the next ten years, I still don’t think I could afford college. If I enlisted, I could serve with the medical corps right now. I’ve passed just enough certificates to work in hospital supply, or drive an ambulance—”

“Get killed by some Ukrainian nationalist while driving an ambulance, you mean.”

“I won’t get killed. It’d be better for both of us, Dad. I could maybe get a start at being a doctor, and there’d be more money for you around here.”

“Until you got killed, that is.”
Dave laughed. He was in love with his next answer. "That's almost the best thing about it, Dad—even if I did get killed—and I won't—you'd get a pension from the government. You'd be taken care of for life!"

Dave's dad downed a mouthful of liquor, and then turned to look at Dave. Dave took in his father's features—his dark-sea eyes beneath their firm dark eyebrows, the narrow bridge of his straight nose—his skin, firm but marked by the use of chemicals, and the grey streaks in his uncombed ponytail. Dave suddenly felt as if he hadn't really seen his father's face in a long time. He noticed things he hadn't before—a liver spot on his cheekbone, the hollows in his neck.

"Oh, Davy," he said. "I don't want money—credit, I mean—I want you, safe, here in Windsor."

Dave looked up, over his father's bony shoulder, at the pattern of the bars in the filmy kitchen window. "You'd be able to hire someone."

"Hire someone? How could I—"

"But that's it, Dad! They'd be paying credits, real credit-card credits! Not that useless paper stuff I get paid hauling water south." Dave's father had left the edge of the counter and was taking his tumbler back to the tiny breakfast nook.

Dave spoke to his retreating back. "We could afford someone, easy."

Dave's father sat on the end of the bench and swung his knees under the table. He edged his way down the length of the bench's emerald cushion, back into his corner.

"You know I couldn't stand it if you were killed." He said it in a way that made Dave unsure who he was talking to, him or his glass of vodka. He resumed his seat on the bench opposite his father's.

"Dad," he said. His father was staring steadfastly at the lemon of the table-top. "I wouldn't be killed. It's not that kind of engagement—"

"Yet," his father interjected loudly. "That'll change any day now." He sniffed.

"It's a peace-keeping mission. Nobody wants anything to happen over there, and that's the point. We're preserving a balance of power while the Russo-Ukranian city-states disarm their warheads."

Then, his father did look at him. He spoke through the knot of his sneered lips, "Those aren't even your words are they? Where'd you hear that, anyway, smart-guy?"
“Dad—”

“I thought it was a ‘decision you had to make for yourself’! That’s what you said a minute ago, isn’t it?”

“Dad, I—”

“But now it turns out it was Zadie Smith on the Max Factor channel who’s really making this decision.”

“Dad,” Dave said again, but he knew his father was gone.

“Talk to your father about it—why? If Coca-Cola’s World News at Six endorses the idea of more guns in Eurasia, well, what’s left to consider?”

Dave knew he’d just have to wait a few minutes while his father talked himself down. Ah well, he thought, it still wasn’t going as badly as it might have. Maybe his dad was more ready for a change than he thought. Maybe somewhere he knew it really was for the best.

His father, meanwhile, was rolling. “Too many people around nowadays anyway. Leastways too many unemployed people. Might as well get ‘em to do something constructive. If they can’t afford food, maybe we can get ‘em to eat a bullet!”

Dave laced his fingers together above the table-top in front of him. He inclined his chin to rest it against them, and there, in the paper, was the picture of Mr. Straw and Babe, It-Girl’s it-girl. Hadn’t somebody told him once that Mr. Straw—Derek Straw—had changed his name to ‘Straub’?

“Even if they can’t buy our stuff, they can still manage to watch our propaganda and escapist media-scenery, can’t they? The airwaves are free, right?”

Dave picked out the block of the story again.

Picking up the tab was Ditto Straub, ad-exec with Fine & Finer. Ditto’s had a high profile in New York since his I Love Lucy’s Stuff webseries became one of the year’s top ten most-visited virtual destinations. His success was sure showing last night! Wearing an original Torenz one-piece, Ditto dropped a whopping cr8500 on delicacies and drinks for the Babe. Rumours have had the marriage between Babe and Dunstan Wolds on the rocks for months—are the rumours true? It sure looks that way!

“Dave!”

Dave looked up into the oceanic jumble of his father’s eyes.
“Have you been listening to me?” he said, his voice sharp and brittle. “You’re reading the paper aren’t you? Here I am trying to explain—and you with your nose in the paper!”

“No. I’m listening.”

“Don’t you see? They’ve got the goods but nobody can afford ‘em anymore—that’s what this whole thing’s about!” His ponytail flew around his head. “If they can get people who can’t buy and use the goods to go out and destroy ‘em, along with themselves, the mega-corps’s can happily rake in their profits replacing them with their new and improved versions!” His head rose in tandem with his voice until, finally, he was shouting at the ceiling. “Oh! And along the way they get to ransack the rest of Siberia for its resources! ‘Peace-keeping mission,’ my ass!” He practically spat it onto the table. He grabbed for his drink and drained it, knuckles squeezed white against the curve of the glass. Then, after a moment of staring into that place in the yellow table-top that invisibly harbored all his most hated enemies, his face softened. He put the tumbler back down.

“Davy,” he said, inclining his head upward in his direction. “Think for a bit. Listen to what I’m telling you. You’re young. You just don’t understand—”

The table gave an unexpectedly large crack, jumping as Dave brought his palm hammering down on the open page of the newspaper. “I don’t understand! Me! Listen to you! My God, Dad, I go out there every day,” he said, waving his hand vaguely at the world beyond the kitchen. “Every day I go out there and mingle with the crowds that seem to drift along like so much flotsam looking for the drain they can just swirl down and be forgotten. On my way to work, out searching for the store that’s got whatever it is we’re out of—I hear, I see! All those people with no place to go, nothing to do but worry and float along. And you, sitting here, reading your weekly rag, absorbing all available virtual programming, you’re going to tell me about the real world?”

His father’s head began to shake from side to side. “Davy, listen—”

“No, you listen. I’m all grown up now. I have to think about the future—the real future, not the one sponsored by General Electric. Even if all you say were true—and it may well be—it really doesn’t change a thing. I mean, what am I supposed to do, Dad? Drive trucks until I die? We’re barely scraping by these days, and I don’t see any big raises..."
coming my way. If anything, I’ll probably get laid-off again this coming winter. What’ll we
do then? If I enlist there’ll be creds! Real creds! You could get a decent place to live, one
where the energy supply works round the clock! You could hire some help—"

Dave let his voice peter out. By becoming overwrought, he’d lost his father’s
attention. The older man has pushed the empty whisky glass away. He seemed absorbed
now by the citron of the table-top. He mumbled at it, “I don’t want help, Davy, I don’t
want you to be so far away.”

Dave gazed up at the stained white of the ceiling tiles. He marshaled his patience
to try again. “Look, Dad, I’m away for a month at a time as it is. Sometimes less, but
sometimes more, too. You need help that I can’t provide. I worry. You need things my
cash payments just can’t buy. Besides, Dad, I hate it. The trucks practically drive
themselves. I’m only there in case something goes wrong, to fix breakdowns, or, God
forbid they should show up, to kill any hijackers—"

“You haven’t had to kill any—"

“Not yet, Dad! But how am I going to face myself after I have to do away with
some pack of folks whose only real crime is that they’re starving?”

“You’d rather go and kill a few innocent foreigners.”

“We’d be trying to keep people from getting killed, not—"

“You’re splitting hairs.”

Dave made a fist, raising it so as to smash it, once again, down onto the table. He
held it there a moment, and then, slowly, while his jaw unclenched, he brought it back
down to settle in his lap. “You’re right. You’re right, Dad, I am splitting hairs. But listen,
it still doesn’t change anything.”

Dropping his gaze, Dave found himself looking, once again, at the picture of
Babe Solomon. He stared at the paper’s poor reproduction of the restaurant scene, at its
fuzzy suggestion of the Lt-Girl’s perfect features.

“All I do on that job is sit in a cab and watch the crumbling miles of concrete
highway blurr by. When that gets too boring, all there is to do is tap into one of the
commercial entertainment networks. When I finally arrive anywhere, it’s only about six
hours of fresh air before I’m back in the cab and headed somewhere else. I can’t stand it.
The idea of doing that for the rest of my life terrifies me. The only exercise I get is by
electro-therapy. I feel trapped—like one of those animals we used to see at the zoo when I was a kid. I feel like—" he looked up, once again, and into the grey-green turmoil in his father’s eyes.

“Dad.” Dave stood. “I want to feel something different.” He began to walk the length of the kitchen. “The world is going to hell, that’s clear.” He reached the far wall and turned. “I can either mill in a pointless limbo with all the other wraiths, or go someplace where I can make a difference.” He walked back toward his father. “We need creds in this household to get anywhere.” He looked at him and then turned to head back toward the far wall. “The service is about the only place I know where the creds are guaranteed.” He put his hand against the cool solidity of the yellow drywall. “The only good thing about the driving was the courses I got to take.” He turned. “But the only place anyone’ll ever give me the chance to use them is overseas.” A growing dampness had begun to glow again in his father’s eyes. “It won’t be for long, Dad. Three years will go by in no time. It’ll be good for you, too.” Dave waved an open palm in the air, “This is no good for either of us, don’t you see?”

The storm-wracked sea behind his father’s corneas could no longer be held back. Salt water ran down his father’s cheeks. “You know I couldn’t stand it if you were killed,” he says.

Dave walked back to the breakfast nook and sidled in beside his father on the bench’s emerald cushion. He put an arm around him and drew him away from the wall. “I won’t be killed, Dad. I promise.”

* * *

Ten days before, 1:40 PM

Beverly Toe steps up onto the thick wedge of a lichen covered root. “So, Ditto took you with him when he went to the moon?”

“I was es property.” David is looking at the freshborn’s back as es arms stretch out, pink sleeves pulling back from es wrists. A dark fleece vest covers Bev’s torso. E’s wearing it over the shirt to stay warm. It’s still cool beneath the lush canopy of Heid-
Gwai's forest, even though the morning has drifted its way into early afternoon. Pressing up to the curve of the enormous tree-trunk, Bev's fingers dig into the parallel fissures of bark. Es cheek hugs against the quilted moss as e leans in above the root of the giant Douglas fir.

"E liked to keep me nearby," David says. "E was my teacher when I was seven years old."

David eases the bag e's been carrying off of es shoulder. "Is this the spot, then?"

Beverly sighs and turns, rolling on one shoulder so that es back is still supported by the column of the Douglas fir. "How can a simple hunk of wood make a person feel so good?"

Metzenbergen drops the bag, then crouches to unpack the picnic they've brought with them on their hike through the woods. E throws two corners of their orange blanket out into the air, drawing back on it as it floats to the ground so that it settles flatly.

"It's a kind of confrontation with eternity." David gets down on es hands and knees to unfold the corners and smooth away the wrinkles in the orange fabric. "The cerebral reaction upon seeing something alive, and so old, is chemically very similar to that of prolonged meditation." E sits up on es knees to look at Bev. "You look at the sea, or that tree, and for a moment, beneath all your thought, your evolutionary, self-preserving fears, the unconscious awareness of the great system of which you are a part gains the upper hand. When the stars were still visible, they provoked the same kind of feeling."

Bev pushes emself off the tree-trunk. "Well, thanks for dispelling that bit of magic." E ambles over and plunks emself onto the blanket next to their bag.

"I never said I was a poet."

"That's right. It's your married, Altavera, that's the poet in your family."

Metzenbergen shuts es eyes and breathes in the damp, green, and needle-scented air. Altavera, let alone es poetry, which David has never really cared for, is the last thing e wants to think about just now. After a moment, a rustling beside em makes em look over to see Beverly pulling their lunch out of the blue canvas bag. Bev lays the fruit and cheese—bright red and green apples, a block of cheddar—out onto the orange blanket, while David takes in the scenery.
Metzenbergen knows the spot from previous visits. The Douglas fir, by which they’re about to eat, is not the biggest in Heidi-Gwai, but it’s close. David likes visiting this particular tree, though, because its location, in this out-of-the-way corner of the Natural Park, means e almost always gets a private viewing.

The Douglas fir itself doesn’t hold as much interest for David as it once did—e’s grown too accustomed to its seemingly never-changing girth. Instead, e looks about the small clearing for the subtle, evanescent things. Hemlock seedlings, dozens of tiny sprigs, have begun to sprout from the horizontal body of the cedar tree that fell sometime two years ago. Under the shadow it casts, a tuft of Russela mushrooms sits implacably, their tanned, concave heads overlapping one another.

Looking above the tangled swell of salal, David peruses one particular Golden birch from among the rest of its small stand. The squarish pock-marks in its flesh are larger and more numerous than ever. E hopes that today they’ll get to hear the clatter of the Pileated woodpecker, probing the wood for its resident termites. Listening now, e hears only the trill and churrs of a few sparrows, and the whisper of the breeze in the canopy high above.

“So why did Straub set up on the Moon, anyway?”

David looks back at the inverted teardrop of Bev’s face. E’s proffering a segment of apple and a slice of cheese in es direction. David returns es smile.

“Why ask questions you already know the answer to?” Metzenbergen takes the food.

“I only know what I’ve read—what I’ve been taught.”

“And what’s that?” E pops the red-skinned white wedge into es mouth.

“Straub was paranoid. He didn’t feel safe on Earth—he thought someone was going to kill em for the secrets of transpiration.”

Folding the cheese into his mouth, David speaks round es mouthful of food.

“Anything else?”

“Well, that he wanted to terraform Mars, and take ownership of it. But everyone else said it was crazy—”

The knife sits idly in Beverly’s hand. David reaches over and takes it from es loose fingers. “You just said e was paranoid. Isn’t that the same thing as crazy?”
“But being crazy and being stupid aren’t the same thing. And didn’t you say Straub was never stupid?”

David slices some apple and cheese for Beverly. “Well, first of all, paranoid or not, Ditto was absolutely right in thinking there were people who were trying to kill him over transpiration. And the Moon seemed like a very safe place.”

“But why say it’s about terraforming Mars then? And why bother with the Moon anyway, if Mars is what you’re after?”

The fruit and cheddar sit idly in Beverly’s hand. David shrugs and cuts a bit more for emself. “Well, isn’t that exactly what we’re doing? It’s been six years since the Council decided to pursue Ditto’s Mars project.”

“But that was because Vertigo Bay’s already up there.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I’m not ‘suggesting’ anything. But I already know why the Council wants to go to Vertigo Bay. What I want to know is why you think Straub did. Didn’t you say last night that Mars had nothing to do with Straub’s reasoning?”

“No, I never said any such thing. If I did, there’s a whole lot of equipment up there that would prove me wrong.” David gestures at the food in Beverly’s hand. “Are you going to eat something, or what?”

David dimly sees the freshborn’s molars as e puts the apple and cheese into es mouth. Bev chews. “But what kind—oh, my. This apple is delicious.” E nods, munching thoughtfully. “I haven’t tasted one in a while.” Es cheeks dimple in as e swallows. “But what kind of equipment?”

Suddenly Metzenbergen hears it—the fast, whacking rhythm—the woodpecker, like a good, old-time jackhammer, driving its head into the core of the birch.

“What kind of equipment? You tell me. You must have read about that, too.”

“Oh,” says Bev, and bites another apple segment in half. “You know, that he built an arsenal up there. That he had delusions of ‘world domination’. That all Straub’s talk about ‘terraforming’ Mars was just a big lie.”

David looks between the conifers. Es eyes travel up and down the pocked, white stripe of the birch’s trunk. “Well, there are good reasons to use the Moon as a launch pad to Mars. Practically no gravity means low energy needs. No atmosphere means huge
solar energy availability. Of course, no air or water was a problem. But then someone spotted that rock of ice skirting by—Ditto saw his chance, and took it.” The sound erupts again, echoing through the green. “That the terraforming method involved nuclear devices was science, not fabrication.” The bird must be there somewhere, but David can’t spot it. “But, yes, whatever Ditto said, it looked a lot like he was building an arsenal up there.” E looks back at the freshborn who’s also gazing toward the stand of birches.

Bev’s hand darts forward. “There it is!”

Another short snap of the woodpecker’s beat rattles through the muffled air. David spots the small red blurr. “Beautiful,” E exchanges a delighted smile with the freshborn fem beside em. “But what you don’t seem to understand,” e says, “is that there was nothing delusional about Ditto’s visions of world domination. He’d just patented the Walls. What use was a nuclear arsenal after that?”

“So you really believe that Straub—” the vibrato of the woodpecker distracts Bev from finishing es thought. “What is that bird doing?”

“It’s drilling into the dying wood for food. Termites—a kind of insect—have built a nest in the tree. To get at them, the bird uses its beak to hammer through the softening wood and into the termites’ tunnels. After that, with each dip he spears one on the tip of es tongue, and eats it.” The rattle explodes once more, and then the bird’s black body gives a white flash from under its wing as it flies away. “It’s called a Pileated woodpecker.” E watches the red of its crest streak through the trees and disappear.

A luxurious hush falls over the forest. The quiet, however, has barely registered with Metzenbergen when Beverly breaks into it. “So you really believe Straub’s only intention was to claim Mars?”

“Once again, you obviously can’t understand—the word ‘only’ could never, in Ditto’s time, have been applied to the idea of owning a world.”

“But the cost—and he couldn’t really have ‘owned’ a planet—”

“Why not?” Metzenbergen stands, feeling suddenly restless. “He owned me. And tens of thousands just like me.” E strolls away from the orange square of the blanket. On a sudden impulse, e raises es voice to the colossal fir tree. “What’s a planet after that?”

The sound of his outcry falls away and is eaten by the mossy carpet of the forest floor. The hush floats down from the canopy once again. E looks at Beverly, sitting still
with es legs tucked up under em. “Besides, if the idea of terraforming Mars from Vertigo Bay was all a lie, why would the Council have decided to go and dig it up?”

“Well, that’s what I was asking, David. Why would the Council, after nearly a century of saying one thing about the whole incident, change its mind on—on Mars, let alone Vertigo Bay.”

Metzenbergen skirts the blanket’s edge. “Why do you say they’ve changed their mind? It’s all right there in the Rules: ‘Go forth and multiply’; ‘spread the seeds of the Lifeform among the stars.’” Metzenbergen turns and meets Beverly’s gaze. “We’ve just been waiting for the Lifeform to recover its strength—”

“I understand that, David. But you know they’ve always said that Vertigo Bay was a horrible mistake.”

David turns away. E browses across the little hemlock seedlings sprouting up out of the fallen cedar. When Beverly’s voice interrupts e’s reverie e’s staring once again at the pocked flesh of the dying Golden birch.

“Well, David? What’s up there? You’ve seen it.”

All at once David finds the conversation entirely too familiar. The fleshborn/fleshborn charm of it has worn off. “I was a slave, Beverly. I wasn’t Ditto’s drinking buddy. I didn’t see everything, what I saw I didn’t understand. I knew what Ditto and everyone else told me—Mars.”

“Well, what does the Council think—”

“What? Are you worried the Council’s bent on ‘world domination,’ as you put it? I hate to point out the obvious—they’ve already got it.”

“Maybe—”

E speaks harshly. “I’ve been a Citizen a long time Beverly. I’ve already told you, I don’t really care what the Council does anymore. I know that patience is their attitude, and I approve of it.” E turns to glare at Beverly. “It was a coalition of you younger Citizens that were clamouring for some kind of action on Mars. It was you who elected and sent that pack of agitators to Council. Isn’t Vertigo Bay enough of a policy shift for you?” E comes back to crouch beside the blanket. E pats es chest with the flat of es hand. “I still think it’s just a waste of resources. Look around you—how many Pileated
woodpeckers do you think there are in the world? How many centuries-old Douglas
firs?"

Beverly looks into her hands. Metzenbergen observes the effect of es rebuff. E
counts to five and then rolls off his haunches onto the blanket. E puts a hand on Bev’s
ankle. “Well, maybe there is something I can tell you that you don’t already know.”
Beverly looks up at em. “One of the other reasons Ditto wanted the Moon as a launch pad
was because it just wasn’t working from Earth.”

Beverly, apparently by way of a tacit apology, pulls emself over toward where
David is seated. Resting es head against David’s shoulder, e says, “No, I knew that. They
lost about twenty missions, three of them manned.”

David looks down, but the short hair of Bev’s blonde bangs shrouds es eyes.
“That’s right. And you probably knew that Ditto thought being able to approach en masse
was the answer. ‘If you got to go, go big time.’ E said that about a lot of things. But what
you might not have known,” Bev’s eyes appear beneath the glossy fringe, “is that, in the
last twenty years, the Council sent two missions of its own to Mars. They’ve been
thinking about the red planet for a while.”

David looks back at the chiseled birch.

“And?” Beverly asks.

“They both failed. So maybe the Council has found a reason to believe in Ditto.”

E turns and kisses Beverly.

Beverly kisses back, hiding es disappointment. Eff-pix! E thinks, I knew that too,
David.

* * *

Five days after, 9:30 AM

Captain Erin Singh looks at MacAfferty as if he’s saying e has a brood of
illegitimate offspring hidden in the South Victoria sububs. “Have you lost your mind?
Who would want to kill Citizen Metzenbergen?”
The desk that lies between MacAfferty and his boss is meticulously clean. The polished laminate with its embedded keyboard is bereft of personal keepsakes. Absent also is any sign of work in progress. The emptied mug of wakeup that was there earlier has been taken away, and the vid-report MacAfferty brought in twenty minutes ago has fallen onto the floor after being slid back at him across the desk. MacAfferty leans out of his chair to pick it up.

"He’s very old, sir. He might have scores of enemies—"

"Are you suggesting another Citizen might be involved?"

"The murderer was sububban, but the hidey-eyes catch him calling each of the Citizens he killed by name."

"He was security at Sigma. How hard would it be to get the names of patients or the doctors that worked there?"

"It shows pre-meditation."

"It shows dementia. He was fixated on the people he felt were taking his lover from him."

"Don’t you think—"

"Lieutenant, neither the hidey-eyes nor I have any patience for the smear of proven Citizens."

"I’m suggesting maybe a group outside the inner Wall."

"Out in the sububs?"

MacAfferty is aware that he’s grasping at straws. "Maybe some political faction."

"What?"

"With due respect, sir—" MacAfferty knows the Captain’s current template has been wired. His on-board processors are quite probably relaying this conversation to someone in, or around, the World Parliament buildings in Te Anau, on Zealand’s South Island. "Perhaps by killing the oldest man they hope to make some kind of point—"

"Do you know of such a group?"

"Well, no. I—"

"That’s because there is no such group."

"But if there were—"
“If there were then you might find a way to make yourself important, is that it, Lieutenant?”

“I’m sorry, Captain?”

The lines of Captain Singh’s brown forehead turn to creases above his now widely-opened eyes. The Captain’s current template has not aged gracefully—its fem shape stoops quite a bit in the shoulders. “Dan, adjusting to the loss of Citizenship can be a difficult thing. Do you think you might be over-compensating?”

MacAfferty stares, wondering what he did to Erin Singh to make him want to insult him like that.

“You did good work, Chief Detective, exposing the involvement of those two other reprobates in this disaster. But your work pretty much ends there.”

Before Suzy got pregnant, when MacAfferty was a Citizen—when ‘he’ was an e—would this person have talked to him like that?

“It’s up to Contraband to deal with the illicit hidey-eye recordings. That lowlife must have sold them—they’ll turn up soon. Porn-pix from Sigma Rejuve. Right under our noses!”

MacAfferty watches the Captain talk, idling through one of his personal police mantras to avoid shouting. Erin Singh, he thinks, Citizen; one and three-quarter meters tall; hair, thick, once jet-black, but faded now to the colour of stainless steel; black eyes; looks fiftyish, but clearly a template—probably three-quarters burnt—no bodyfat, joints still well-oiled and movements quick; beauty, geometrically impeccable, worn as if it were no more than clothes; the template is a North American variation, perhaps Navajo; a scar is branded onto es neck, beside es Adam’s apple, a reminder of es original body—shot on duty in Hardy breaking up a blackmarket energy ring.

Captain Singh winds up, “That’s the real crime here—that the whole thing happened at all. How did those three get under our screens? That’s what I want you dealing with. Security at the Wall needs a shake-up.”

“Captain,” MacAfferty begins, “you know I abdicated my citizenship voluntarily. My record in Lumsden speaks for itself; I have nothing to ‘over-compensate’ for.”

“Well, make some sense then. If there were some ‘political group,’ as you call it, then they’d be spreading the news to all forty provinces—‘a great triumph for the cause.’

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That's how the old-time terrorist worked, Lieutenant. You may have forgotten, but surely
these new ones you're imagining would've done their homework a little better."

"In this case, Captain, I think the assumption would be that they haven't yet
accomplished their goal."

"Yes. That's another interesting point about your murdering-Citizen-
Metzenbergen theory. If you'll recall, Citizen Metzenbergen is the only one who
managed to escape out of this mess alive."

MacAfferty cringes inwardly at the weakness of what he's obliged to say next. He
can't help but look into his lap as he says it. "Which supports the assumption that,
whichever they are, they haven't yet accomplished they're goal."

"I see. You feel that the bunch in the morgue downstairs are going to rise from the
dead and wreak havoc, somehow—"

MacAfferty looks back up. "Alright, Captain, you needn't buy that particular
theory, but there's a lot of coincidences popping up in this story—I think—"

"I think, even if I did buy your theory, Security branch would be the place to
protect Alberni from any 'suburban factions.'"

"Security? But I'm a Detective, sir. The Chief Detective of Violent Crime—"

"I know your rank, MacAfferty! Do you remember mine?"

A dark jerkin with a sheen of purple, hanging open; shirtless with a black
cummerbund over loose, black slacks; nipples, chocolate-brown; tattoo high on
breastbone, a tangle of lines that open up bird-like; black rad-boots with the same purple
sheen, like the rad-suit hung in the corner; no slicker. Is e married? MacAfferty wonders,
he can't remember. The Captain isn't wearing any matrimonial jewelry, no jewelry at all.
Singh breaks the silence.

"Alright, alright." Captain Singh waves es hand in a way that makes Daniel pass
em the vid-report he's got balanced in his lap. "Let's look at it one more time." He twists
the scanning dial. "What've you got again?"

"Well, there's the fact the murderer called each Citizen by name before—"

"What else?"

"Well, to me the most interesting thing is the circuitousness of the blood-trail left
by the wounded Citizen Metzenbergen."
“See? With practically your first words you’ve gone and made me sorry I asked.”
“It’s important, though. Why would a wounded man—possibly dying, intent on getting help—take this strange detouring route toward his objective?”
“What I wonder,” says the Captain, slapping the report down onto es desk, “is why someone would want to impugn the heroism of a Citizen who thought of helping others before emself.”
“Wouldn’t the surest way of helping the others be calling in emergency staff?” Captain Singh hesitates. Not even e can deny MacAfferty’s logic here. E peers over es steepled fingers. “Dr. Metzenbergen was severely injured—”
“Exactly. Really of no use at all to the other wounded.”
“E may not have been in es right mind.”
“I think, more likely, that the perpetrator, was for some reason toying with the Doctor.”
“For what reason?”
“Well, that’s what—”
“Perhaps he wanted some medical advice on how to shoot himself better.” Erin leans back, es oaken face tilting upward. “Advice that the Doctor, being sworn to the sanctity of life, was reluctant to give. Our nefarious genius tortures the information out of em, then, girded by the soundest of medical reasoning, he triumphantly shoots his brains out the top of his head.”
No, MacAfferty thinks, if Jones was after a particular piece of information, that probably wasn’t it. He stares at the underside of Erin’s jaw. This, he knows, is the moment to point out the possibility it had been Metzenbergen who finally shot Jones. He counts the ornamental buttons on the Captain’s jerkin—sixteen.
“Enough.” Erin drops back over the desk, es hands clapping down on either side of the report. “This line of reasoning, aside from being idiotic, insults the courage of a man whose injuries prevent em from defending emself.”
“They say he’ll regain consciousness tomorrow—”
“I’m glad to hear it.” E returns es attention to the vid-report, spinning a dial.
“Now, what else have you got? There’s this eye-jammer thing—”
“And the motor-reflex control bead. That’s right, sir.”
“The bead they put in dolls to make their faces move. You say—”

“But this one is much more special than that. Citizen Keller’s report said it dates from around 2080. They were originally developed for medical purposes, to help victims of paralysis, but Keller thinks this one was made in New Mexico during the Water Wars—he says it became a fad for some of the larger clans to animate the heads of their enemies’ corpses—”

“And your point again?”

“Well, Keller makes a hobby of these things—”

“Your point, Chief Detective?”

MacAfferty is actually older than the Captain. The number of years he was a Citizen outnumber those of Erin Singh by half again. The patience, the interpersonal security that even MacAfferty’s second transpiration had given him seemed still to have eluded Singh after maybe five. Staring at Erin Singh’s sharp features, MacAfferty tries to focus on something other than the disrespect he feels aimed at his person. The best he can do, however, is to think of the Navajo, and of stolen faces.

“Yes,” says MacAfferty. “Well, the eye-jammer the perpetrator used to shut down the hidey-eye was also a very special item. Eye-jammers aren’t as uncommon as we’d like, but Keller says this one’s unique. Most of them work by interrupting the internal data streams of the recording nano-robots in any given area, say 10,000 cubic meters, and looping them back round on themselves. Whatever scene the nano-tech is focussed on simply freezes. If left on, of course, the computer that analyses the data—”

“Notice the repeating data. I’m aware of how an eff-pixing eye-jammer works—”

“Joe was smart, he got away with using his at Sigma Rejuve for nearly eight years by using it very sparingly.”

“I hope that’s a comfort to him when they take him apart at the organ banks.”

“Delano Jones’s eye-jammer had some very subtle modifications—his worked in a smaller radius, but it’s operation was also more sophisticated, not only looping the data, but simultaneously applying an algorithm that altered it very subtly. The Central Data might never have caught on.”

“More reasons to flesh up on Security.”
"The thing is, the modifications were done using chips that were made around the same time as the bead. In fact, Keller says they both bear the trademarks of the same industrial enclave. This is a military technology—stuff from the twenty-first century Water Wars—highly advanced, but mostly lost to us. And here we find—"

"This is the third time you've told it to me, Detective MacAfferty, and I still don't see what possible bearing it could have on anything. So some blackmarket entrepreneur stumbled across a cache of old machinery. What's it prove?"

"Look, Captain, I admit, it proves very little. It just strikes me as more than coincidence. Stumbling across something like this wouldn't be that easy. The place where these things were used is in the middle of the Mojave Wastelands."

"Isn't it just as likely it was found in some previously undiscovered basement arsenal somewhere?"

"But that the first time we should see it is in the middle of this mass-murder? I don't think so. And even if it were, remember that these two pieces of technology were in the hands of two sububbanites who probably didn't shop together much."

"So?"

MacAfferty had never admired the Captain all that much, but he'd never thought of him as stupid; this resistance must be coming from somewhere up the line.

"So," MacAfferty says, "two things: there's a suggestion that these two, the perp and sleaze-bag Joe got their stuff from the same place; and second, that whoever provided it was not your usual kind of blackmarketeer."

"If I understand you correctly, you're suggesting that this Delano Jones colluded Regent, Trunk—both of whom he despised—and an underground tech supplier, in order to drive himself insane, and become a mass murderer."

"It seems clear to me that Regent and Trunk didn't hatch their scheme alone."

"It seems clear to me that neither Regent nor Trunk had mass murder in mind, either."

"The Lie-Finder indicates that they're not telling the truth when they say they acted on their own. Neither of those two are really smart enough to have put this whole thing together—"
"Eff-pix it all, Dan! What ‘whole thing’? Everything they say—and the lie-detectors show it—indicates that this was nothing but a prank gone horribly wrong."

"Yes, that’s true, but if they were simply the tools of a fourth individual, then that’s exactly what they would think. And if Delano Jones—"

"And if Delano Jones is a part of whatever ‘whole thing’ you’re talking about, then you have some kind of plan where his own suicide was part of its goal. Pretty poor kind of plan if you ask me."

"If he was just a tool also—"

"I’m sorry, Dan, but your reasoning on this one is exactly backwards. You’ve imagined some conspiracy, and are trying to make the pieces fit. You have to look at the evidence first and see what’s there. Did the perp’s brainscan indicate anything about any larger plan?"

"No, but—"

"No, but what? For the sake of the Lifeform, Detective—"

"But most of his brain was conveniently gone!"

"Convenient for who? Certainly not Delano Jones."

"For whoever this fourth party was."

"But you know who sold that bead to Regent, don’t you?"

"Zimon said it was someone named Lynyrd."

"And the Lie-Finders?"

"They said he was telling the truth. But a name like that, it could have been anyone."

"Well, there. You’ve just said it yourself. It could have been anyone. Not any particular group or diabolical mastermind, but anyone—any sububban source of blackmarket technology."

"No. Not this technology. Not any sububban source."

"You’re really not convincing me. I’ll tell you what, though. I have no intention of letting this Lynyrd—what was it again?" E gives the scanning dial on the vid-report a twist. "Ah—this Lynyrd ‘the Wink’ get away with anything; in another month we’ll have both Regent’s and Trunk’s brains out of their bodies—we’ll scramble them through the scans for details about our blackmarketeer then. I was going to leave it up to Contraband
to find him too, but, if at that time, if you still feel this strongly about it, I'll put you on it.”

“But that’s the point! Erin, if there’s something deeper going on, it’s going on right now—in a month it’ll all be over!”

“It’s all over right now, Detective MacAfferty! In case you failed to notice, everyone involved is thoroughly dead—or in Regent’s and Trunk’s case, soon will be.”

“Erin—”

“It’s over, MacAfferty. And so is this conversation. And, if I wake up tomorrow morning and find you anywhere but in Security, it’ll be your job that’s over, do you understand me? Now go home. In fact, forget Security for now, take the week. You have a married and a child out there somewhere, don’t you? Someone else can re-write this report.”

“Captain—”

“That’s all, Lieutenant! Dismissed!”

Back in his own office, doing up the front of his rad-suit, MacAfferty can’t help replaying the conversation to himself, imagining what he should have said. He keeps returning to the Captain’s last comment: that it was over, they were all dead. He wishes now he’d retorted something clever about Singh’s own impossible age. It wouldn’t have helped, he knows, but it sure would have felt good. Still, there’s one other thing MacAfferty also knows: there’s one person involved in this whole thing that certainly isn’t dead: Lynyrd ‘the Wink’. MacAfferty tromps through the squadroom toward the station’s exit. As he closes in on the door, however, he consciously relaxes his stride. Really, nothing has changed; in his head MacAfferty had already made a date with Lynyrd, whoever he is, and he still means to keep it.

* * *
2029

David looked up into the brightest light he’d seen in months. He stopped moving for a moment, and looked down to blink away the darkness and tears. Something blunt and hard jabbed him in the buttock.

“Move it Metzie. The faster we get this done the faster I get back to my warm bed.”

Metzenbergen turned. Through the light stains on his retinas, he made out the hunched figure of Hodge, his rumpled features sharply pronounced in the glare. He was poking one of the two folding chairs he was holding in Metz’s direction. Hodge’s fragmented shadow fell over the chairs spread out in rows alongside of him. The light flicked off and Hodge’s face regained its rounded, sagging edges.

David hefted the two chairs in his own hands slightly higher, and turned to resume his slow trudge forward. On the scaffolding at the square’s other side, red-bands were redirecting the spotlight onto the temporary stage.

“Besides,” Hodge continued, “I notice the little Overseer with the scar and the big tits has an eye for you today. I’d step a bit lively if I were you.”

Metzenbergen didn’t look up. He’d seen Feng earlier, but had hoped maybe the maniac wouldn’t notice him, had maybe forgotten all about him. It’d been nearly a year, after all. Working behind the fallers, harnessing the logs for fly-out had been dangerous enough without Feng around. Always sending the slave-labour out at the last minute—ostensibly to make sure the lines were secure, though really it was more of a homicidal hobby. To disobey Feng’s orders might guarantee survival, but it was worth a month sweating in the chemical baths of the pulp refineries—not much of a choice. Many a slave had been turned to jelly under shifting timber as the giant industrial Sikorskys pulled their loads skyward, but even that was better than the pulp refineries.

David kept his eyes down all morning, preferring the moss growing between the cobblestones of the central square to Feng’s hair-raising stare. Where the uncompleted row of chairs petered out, David dropped one of the seats in his hands to unfold the other. Hodge nudged into him as he squeezed past.
“Don’t look now, Metzie, but the ugly fuck’s coming this way.”

David froze.

It wasn’t just Feng’s hobby of trying to get people killed that made Metz hate the vicious shit. He remembered the day he got away. It hadn’t seemed it at the time, diving for cover behind the nearest stump, but it had been a rare stroke of luck for Metz when the guns had started to go off. The company was forced to halt the timber-harvest in that neck of the woods and fight off the latest menace—local bandit upstarts, corporate turf warriors, whoever. Metz was transferred into a sawmill closer to the city. Others had been caught in the cross-fire, or blown to pieces, but for Metz it had been a stroke of luck. He’d never gone back, never seen Feng again—until today, that is.

“No, wait a minute,” Hodge said, “it looks like—yeah—she’s turning around. Been called away, I think.”

David lined his unfolded chair up with the others, then bent to retrieve the one he’d dropped.

“There’s got to be a story there, am I right Metzie?”

Metz straightened while simultaneously unfolding the hinged metal. A pattering sound murmured into existence above him. It was just the rain starting again, falling on the tent-top under which David was standing. He looked up, pointlessly. There was no change to be seen in the shadowed peaks pushed aloft by the various tent-poles.

“Well, Metz? Do you know that slave-driving bitch from somewhere?”

“Fuck off, Hodge.”

David turned back toward the truck into which they’d loaded the chairs earlier that day. The patter grew suddenly louder. A commotion sprang up beyond the edges of the tent as people ran around, pulling tarpaulins, and hustling gear out of the weather. Just about to walk out into the wet, David stopped. The truck’s engine was turning over. Someone had decided to move the chairs to a dryer location.

Stroke of luck, David thought. Stroke of luck. He balled his fists and ground them into the sockets of his eyes. Nearly thirty-two years of nothing but shit—most people would have learned. But not him. For three weeks, ever since he first heard the news of today’s event, he’d been letting a stupid fantasy grow in the back of his mind. Maybe, maybe, maybe—maybe it was his turn again. Maybe. The coincidences had started to pile
up a bit and—well, maybe for once fate was on his side. Maybe God had something better in store for David Metzenbergen.

Maybe—but not too fucking likely. More like the malevolent prick wanted every last ounce of Metz’s hope, humanity and self-respect squeezed right out of him. Feng! Christ-fucking-God! David’s hands fell limply to his sides. It seemed clear he was about to be punished for imagining he might be worth any more consideration than the dirt he was made of.

“I love watching those bastards run, don’t you?”

It was Hodge. He’d crept up behind David, still hoping, perhaps, to hear some kind of story. He was smiling at the flurry among blue-bands and red-bands in the square. “The way their fat asses wiggle, it cracks me up.”

Metz observed that there was a certain irony in the comment, since Hodge himself was unaccountably fat for a slave. He said nothing however, choosing instead to watch the motion in the square.

The owners of the shops that lined the square were mingled with the knots of shoppers that lagged, here and there, over the cobblestones. They’d all come out to observe the transformations taking place for the day’s celebration. The armed militia that lined the barriers had been moving them along, but suddenly they were more or less relieved of the task by the rain that sent the freemen scurrying for shelter. From their perches, leaning against the barriers that encircled the tent, the blue-bands, the red, and white-bands all hustled to get beneath either the canopies that dot the square, or the shop awnings at its edges. Though they were mostly dressed for the consistently sodden weather, they did what they could to avoid the downpour’s potentially caustic or poisonous side-effects.

Metz put his hand under a stream of water as it slid from the roof of the tent. He pulled it back to look at his callused palm. Nothing. Nothing noticeable, anyway. No burn or irritation, and hopefully nothing more microscopically insidious. For the present, at least, it looked like he needn’t worry. The truck with the chairs loaded into it was pulling away from its spot by the curb.

“Guess they’ll pull it round and back it under the tent’s edge over there,” Hodge said.
David accepted the idea without acknowledging its source. A dry seat for the major stockholders was the main purpose of the tent, after all. It was important that those prestigious behinds should not have to risk the snub of moistness.

About fifteen meters farther along the truck started to work its way forward and back, trying to direct itself through a narrow gap between tent-posts. There was an audible grind of impacting gears, and the truck made a sudden, jolting leap into one of the canvas’s supports. Chairs spilled over the tailgate. A new commotion developed around the scene as a few people gathered to watch a couple of militiamen drag the driver out to harangue her with words and fists. A few of the shopkeepers, their blue armbands identifying them as minor stockholders, hooted and laughed, while some of the red-banded customers made a show of disgust.

Tension built when one of the blue-bands called out, “That’s right, officer, beat some sense into the fool!”

A burly red-band, well-muscled from what had probably been years of physical labour, took a step or two toward the gathering of stockholders. “It’s not right. You shouldn’t treat a worker like a slave.”

The portly blue-band shied away. He knew the labourer couldn’t do anything about the militia’s behaviour, but there was little to prevent him from taking a bit of aggression out on his soft body.

“Think they’ll fight?” Hodge asked hopefully, as the other blue-bands closed in around their fellow owner. Metz shrugged indifferently, but he knew it wouldn’t be allowed to happen, not today. Sure enough, after another second passed, more militiamen swept into the tiny crowd, dispersing it roughly.

No, not today, David thought, watching Hodge’s apple shape scurry off to make himself useful picking up the scattered chairs. Metz decided to take advantage of the momentary disruption to remain idle. He retreated into the shadow of scaffolding set up for lights and cameras.

He scanned the crowds of companymen beneath the awnings nearest him. The variety of them, long, squat, oblong, or rectangular, skins loose or smooth, shaded or pale, firm-muscled or flabby, all neatly divided by the colours of the cloth wrapped round their arms. At one time, they had all been citizens of the city-state of Perm, now they
were either employees of the Protectorate of Tovarisch Enterprises, or, like Metz, its property.

The crowd stared back vaguely in David's direction. It was, of course, not him they were looking at—David knew that the white band on his arm, the insignia of his slavery, made him invisible to most of them. In the way a flame pulls in its eddy of moths, it was the spectacle being erected in the central square that drew the inhabitants of Perm.

A series of honks and wails started up by the stage at the front of the tent. The band, still tuning up, had begun its sound-check. All around them, crews clambered over ladders to adjust the streamers and lights, or struggled to remove the last of the scaffolding that was used to hang the backdrops and curtains. Companymen with headgear and micro-mikes wandered round the camera equipment babbling to unseen audio-and-visual engineers. A crew of militia was scattered strategically over the platform, eyes peeled for the slightest hint of menace. Their badges designated them as Tovarisch elite forces, as if their stature, drug-enhanced and bio-induced, weren't enough.

Though there was only room for two or three hundred under the shelter of the tent, Metz had seen the giant screens and amplification stacks that hung all around the kilometer-by-kilometer central square. Sparsely populated right then, the fifteen hundred people milling around the wide-open space would expand a hundredfold over the next few hours. A hundred-and-fifty thousand would crack crackers and throw confetti at the gold-banded elite that filled the seats David had lined up on the cobblestones. And these, the owners of no less than a quarter-percent of Tovarisch's shares, with their incalculably expensive clothes and their re-engineered bodies, were not even the afternoon's main draw.

In just a few hours, with a final fanfare of the orchestra, Sunjin, President of the Protectorate, would greet Ditto Straub himself on the stage not thirty meters from where David now stands. Ditto Straub, the great American industrialist, sole owner of Straub Inc., and all the Straub Protectorates.

Ditto—Metzenbergen's mind reeled back the years. Not American at all, but born within hailing distance of David's first home, in what used to be called Canada. Not
Ditto, nor Straub either, but Derek—Derek Straw, the source of one of the only happy times David could really remember. Instigator of a variety of the greatest marketing coups in the history of the world. Creator of the mightiest brand the world has ever known: B-Solo—and that pinnacle of marketing tools: Babe Solomon.

When David first heard the news, he thought it must have been pure rumour. It had been Hodge, of course, that gasbag, talking to the semi-comatose woman in the bed next to David. Bent over her, pretending to give comfort, the slack skin of his face drooping as his hands found their ways into all her private places. “I heard he was bringing Babe, too.” Of course, that was of the utmost interest to Hodge. Babe, whose ever-changing face represented all Straub’s biggest products, the B-Solos included.

“She’s the one that started that trend—you know the one—where she had four breasts added on to her chest?” Laughter hissed out of him. “That’s the Americans for you, two’s enough for most of us.”

It had been about as repulsive a thing as David could imagine watching. He was almost glad for the woman when she died four days later. Almost, except when Hodge came over and found her gone, he turned his attentions to Metz. “My God, think of it, six titties—”

David was there in the hospital recovering from internal injuries. A giant splinter had kicked back off a log they were milling and speared him to the left of his navel. Hodge was in there because of some unidentifiable but virulent venereal disease. The only part of Hodge’s conversation Metz enjoyed was when he referred to the agony of going to the bathroom. A certain relief was also derived when, from time to time, Hodge would turn suddenly white and crumple as a searing bout of pain arose from his swollen genitals. Hodge’s constant stream of shit almost made him long for the back-breaking days at the saw-mill, the dank confines of the room he shared with the other, quieter slaves in its basement. Almost.

Then, to his amazement, the announcement came over the central broadcast. Ditto really was coming for a visit. He was thinking of buying Tovarisch shares. Leaflets were handed round announcing the big event, and Hodge came round with his.
“Look! Look at the picture!” Even though David already had the leaflet spread in his lap, Hodge shoved his own copy into his face. A photo of Ditto showing off Babe graced the single-paged broadsheet. “She’s got wings! Wings!”

And it appeared to be true. Babe stood at the centre of a broad expanse of white feathers, angelically organized and apparently attached to her shoulders.

Hodge took his leaflet back. “I wonder if they really work. That fucking Straub—he’ll sell a billion pairs for sure.” He brought the picture up close to his wide-open, avaricious eyes. “Jeezis. If I could only jack off without killing—” Suddenly his expression changed. “Her titties!”

The hand holding the flyer dropped down to his side. Hodge’s jittering wattle lent a certain authenticity to the hangdog expression he then pointed at David. “They’re gone.” He looked at the picture again. “All of them.” His head shook—he looked as though he might cry. “How awful.”

David nearly laughed at Hodge’s idiotic sense of loss. But he didn’t. Hodge, he realized, was thinking about something else: the price of wings was doubtless well outside the budget of most women. Mastectomies, on the other hand, were cheap.

It was in this strange moment of empathy with this horrible man that David let it slip that he once actually knew Ditto Straub, owner of both Straub Inc., and the image, if not the flesh, of Babe Solomon. He’d regretted it then, and, if possible, he now regretted it even more.

It was Hodge who’d germinated the fantasy that had taken root in his head, “Maybe he’ll recognize you! Maybe he’ll buy your freedom!”

Indeed. Maybe he would. God knew he could afford to. Maybe he’d show up in the hospital—everyone knew Ditto liked augurs and liked to read the signs—Metz remembered seeing the I Ching on his desk in grade two nearly every day—maybe the book would suggest being charitable to the injured. Metz couldn’t help imagining it—the tearful reunion—

The great Ditto Straub’s eyes widen in recognition “David? David Metzenbergen? My God, I can’t believe it.” He wraps his arms around the stunned patient, bubbling with amazement. “I was just thinking about those simple, old days. The students, bright with
promise, heroic in their striving—and the one especially—oh, David!” He leans back, eyes shining, and looks around the room, “Who would you like me to punish first?”

In the beginning, David had been able to shake off the idea as obviously ridiculous. But then, an Overseer arrived with the news that the patients who were mobile would be put to work in the central square. Slaves were wanted and none could be spared from active production lines. The scenario shifted, the fact of David’s injury was suddenly a convenience. The improbability of Ditto coming to him was resolved—David would be going to Ditto. It couldn’t help but make the dream that much more lucid—

Metz is serving drinks, or picking up trash right under the nose of the Great Man on the stage. Suddenly, he’s unfairly assaulted by some militia thug for some imaginary transgression. Senses finely tuned to injustice, Ditto’s down off the platform and striding among the commoners to set the world aright. Recognition and the ensuing scene of passion plays itself out again. Metz is given a pistol so he can personally execute the militiaman.

In the there and then of the central square, of course, the idea was revealed for what it was: patently absurd. The reality of the situation was that David and the other slaves would finish setting up the seats, hauling in and cleaning the portable toilets, building the bar, toting the food and drink, hanging the banners, and a couple dozen other things, and then be hauled away, back to the hospital well before even the first guests arrive.

Predictably, Hodge had gleefully pointed this out before they’d been transported. “Looks like Cinderella won’t be meeting his prince, after all.”

Remembered now, the comment brought the taste of acid up in his throat. He rebuked himself for his indulgence in fantasy, in the luxury of hope.

The truck and its cargo of chairs, the mess around it all straightened out, had been backed successfully under the edge of the tent. Metz saw Hodge, looking obsequious, shrugging his shoulders at the Overseer that had come with them from the hospital. Metzenbergen stepped quickly out from the shadows to amble over.

He sidled up, and the conversation ceased, their eyes turning toward him. Without saying a word, David hopped up into the back of the truck and grabbed a couple of folded chairs. The rain had lightened, the sound of its roll across the roof had diminished, but
hadn’t ceased, and Metz was glad, at least, that for now he didn’t have to step out into the wet. He almost smiled. And besides, that asshole Feng was still nowhere to be seen.

The slave-gang was given programs to place on the seats after they’re all finally arranged. Hodge arrived to take half of the stack in David’s hands. The jelly around his neck quivered. “Did you read it?”

David said nothing, just wished Hodge would notice that he long ago stopped speaking to him. He placed a program on the seat of a chair, and was moving on to the next, but found Hodge in the way, placing the pages quickly down before David could.

“He’s not just coming for a visit.”

David shouldered by, dropping a program on the next chair in line as Hodge followed along.

“He’s not just buying shares.” Hodge was whispering harshly, idiotically—there was no one near enough to overhear.

“He’s thinking of buying the whole company!” Again, Hodge put a program down on a chair just as Metz got ready to place one of his own there. The two of them were now ludicrously leapfrogging each other, jostling as if engaged in competition.

“Don’t you see, Metz? If Tovarisch becomes American owned—”

Metz jabbed quickly, his fist swinging sharply into Hodge’s cankerous scrotum. Hodge crumpled, tumbling into the row of chairs, a few of which toppled beneath him. Metz stepped over the man and walked quickly away. He was well away from the scene, laying programs on the seats of a different row, by the time the Overseer began to make his way over.

It was the most common delusion of them all. Slaves all loved dreaming of the American Free Trade Zones. The rumour, which persisted despite ample evidence disproving it, was that slavery wasn’t allowed there. Metz knows different—he worked at the mill with a woman who was made a slave in America. She defaulted on a loan for something—a house, some surgery, something. The woman was shipped to Perm when her owner, OrrCorp., in its turn, went into receivership.

The Industrial Protectorates in America ran just like the ones here. Slavery was just something nobody over there much liked to talk about—they still had a kind of national government, one who’s survival depended mostly on rhetoric. The reality was,
though, that inside the Protectorates each company made its own rules. It was true, more companies in the AFTZs realized the value of some stunted form of enlightened self-interest—some, for instance let slaves work to own their papers—but David had had enough of fantasy for one day.

Metz gave himself over to his task. Through the years, he'd found that, through labour, he could sometimes achieve a semi-meditative state, enabling him to perform without being overcome by the wretchedness of his situation. He polished the floor of the stage in silence, watching the sudsy streaks join and divide. Scrubbing the white plastic of the portable toilets, he let the swish of the brush fill his mind. He didn't read the banners he tacked along the length of the bar, and he made no effort to guess the contents of the crates he stacked behind it. When he was rolling kegs into place, and he heard Mr. Straub had moved his schedule ahead by an hour-and-a-half, the Overseers yelled, and the pace of the work increased, but David refused to consider what it might mean. The afternoon dusk of the far north had started setting in. All around the tent the militia were pushing back the crowds that were thickening all over the square, pressing against the barriers.

The first of the gold-bands showed up not long afterward. David was polishing plates that needed no polishing. He picked them up, wiped, and replaced them alongside a buffet of sweets and roasts and breads that David would never get to taste. He had been able to ignore the foods, so unreal to him that he convinced himself they were a fiction, but when the entourage of the stockholder arrived he could not help but be distracted.

Leading the small pack was a kaleidoscope of colour that glided across the cobblestones to be met by a crew of the waiting staff. A female shape flashed in and out of sight beneath the amorphous swirl of greens and golds, amaranthine and sapphire. So unlike clothes, which merely hang, her costume was like flames that sprang from the dark, human-shaped fuel at their core. David glimpsed feathers and jewels, then four naked breasts, the slender arm that took a drink, and then the luxurious mouth that sipped it. Desire was unavoidable, his erection was instant. She swayed toward him, toward the table of food. It was only then that David noticed the mass of the serving staff had moved past her. Through the rainbow he made out a white band—this gossamer apparition was no owner.
A retinue of four giants was delayed at the tent's security perimeter. While they produced and surrendered a small arsenal of weapons, a pack of militia scanned and re-scanned the many square meters of their too-muscled bodies. Metz noted how efficiently they did this, each of them sporting a bonus limb or two. Between them hovered a pallet on which sat a collection of wire and circuitry. He knew that there was flesh at the heart of that machine, that it was human, but could make no sense of the idea. He was wondering whether the pallet was a part, or apart of the individual when the band struck up behind him. Percussion and horns. A hum of synth-sitar.

The stage burst into whiteness under the beams of countless artificial lights. The Tovarisch elite militia in the corners leapt to attention as a conservatively dressed woman stepped out from behind a curtain and hustled up onto the stage. A vocal trio layered in their harmony over the atmospheric sitar-work. A stream of greyish men and women began to emerge from behind the curtain. Dressed identically to the first woman, they followed her into the light.

Metz recognized several of them. He'd seen them speaking on the Tovarisch network broadcasts. Chairman Shin; Gogol, the head of marketing; Baird, chief of finance, and a couple dozen others—the Tovarisch executive board.

Traces of confusion among the executive seemed conspicuous in contrast to the exaggerated stillness of the elite forces, and the sonorous ascent of the music. Metz was surprised, and strangely gratified, to observe a certain lack of dignity among the Tovarisch management, jockeying uncertainly for position on the stage. The accelerated pace of the event had thrown them off balance. Metz smiled—they appeared to have been inadequately briefed.

Chairman Shin, taking centre-stage, flanked by two huge well-armed men, barked in the direction of her colleagues. From where David stood, the boom of a kettle drum swallowed the order, but the executive abruptly ceased their jostling.

Metz put the dinner-plate in his hand down onto the stack in front of him. His gaze returned to the gates where the gold-bands had begun parading through in all their outlandish variety. A flourish of golden armours and teddy-bear fur, mechanical accessories and holograms entered alongside the many suits. David's eyes, however, wandered continuously. He couldn't help himself—he was hoping to spot the great Ditto
Straub. Instead he spied the flaccid shape of Hodge advancing toward him along the edge of the growing throng.

"There you are, Metzie." His smile amazed David. Apparently this man’s brain operated somewhere beyond the realm of normal communication—not even a belt in the nuts could sunder the connection he'd imagined between them.

"Come on," Hodge said, signaling Metz to follow. "It's time to get back on the bus."

Metz didn’t understand at first.

"Let's go, Metzie. Time to get back to our beds—the hospital, remember?"

It seemed odd that Hodge should be the one that came and got him. "Where's the Overseer?"

"Waiting for us at the bus. Probably getting pissed while you play around at sightseeing. Let's go."

Hodge turned and went back the way he came. Metz hesitated, looking for the Overseer that came with them from the hospital. Then, with a shrug, he followed.

David dodged through the mix, keeping an eye on Hodge’s waddling retreat, trying to catch up. As he approached the edge of the tent, the purity of the slow, eerie sitar solo was steadily replaced by a mix of its own amplified echo, projected out over the square, and the noise of the crowd squeezed in around the tent. Hodge stopped when he got to the barrier. The bus that the convalescing slaves all came in waited a few meters on the other side of it. Over the heads of the militia and the gawkers, David could see his fellow slaves boarding in single file. An over-enthusiastic voice cut in over the music. It bellowed a welcome to the workers, the shareholders, to all the denizens of the Tovarisch Industrial Protectorate of Perm.

Hodge double-checked to make sure Metz was on his heels, then spoke to the militia on the fence’s other side. A couple of the guards created a small breach, and Hodge ducked through. Metz followed, coming up in a small space cleared amid the bystanders. Hodge was waiting for him there, grinning ludicrously.

Metz frowned. The look was entirely too satisfied, too—

"Halt, slave." The voice, guttural and filled with malice, was immediately recognizable. It was Feng.
David felt the blood drain from his features. Hodge was delighted by the effect—his face cracked open in loud, cruel laughter. “Oh, Metzie, if you could only see yourself—not so high and mighty now, are you!”

The crowd cheered for the voice coming over the loudspeakers in a demonstration of brand loyalty. Those nearby clapped somewhat distractedly, however, their attentions drawn more to the spectacle of a slave’s distress than to whoever had been introduced on the stage.

Metz, terrified, wished for the moment to stop, wished he could simply, finally go mad—anything rather than have his head, so puppet-like, turn.

Smooth skin marred by the welted ridge running from forehead to chin, eyes slitted and the dead black of coal—it’s Feng alright, bristling with menace and jagged edges—razor-blade nails, hair spiked up, tits jutting into sharpened points. David stepped backward, wanting to run though he knew there was nowhere to go. Feng’s taloned hand reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder. Fingernails bit flesh.

“I have a little job for you.” So cold, so hollow—David shivered. Feng spun him halfway round and shoved him forward. “Move it, slave.”

David stumbled forward. Blue-bands, red and white bands alike, all parted in front of him, wanting no part of Feng.

Stiffened fingers jabbed into the centre of Mezenbergen’s back, and he tripped a meter or two further over the cobbledstones. Metz looked over his shoulder in the direction of the bus. Standing on its steps, smirking between the open doors, Hodge was waving goodbye in David’s direction.

“Eyes front, slave,” and another jab. It wouldn’t be long, David knows, till the blood began to trickle down from the hole poked through the skin of his back. A roaming spotlight strafed across them, Metz looked up. A towering hologram of a Tovarisch executive stood astride the tent top, declaiming to the masses spread out in the square. Jab. Leering militia let the two of them pass back through the barrier.

“Where are we go—”

There was a flash of pain from the impact of a billy-club on David’s arm. “This way, slave.” David allowed himself to be steered by the intermittent blows. “No, no. Yes,
that’s right. Straight ahead.” The band kicked in with another crescendo as another roar went up from the audience.

They were heading to a space between the scaffolding that supported, among other things, the backdrop of the stage. David started to panic.

“But the hospital—”

The billy-club arced. They walked a few more steps and then they were alone, out of sight of the milling crowds, but deeper, it seemed, into the band’s rolling percussion.

“Never mind the hospital,” Feng shouted. “I’ve got a repair job for you. Some antenna-thing has come loose, and someone’s got to go up and fix it.” Jab.

“Tent supports? But that’s a job for Tech—”

The billy-club cut him off.

“Since when did you get a union card, slave? You’ll do what I fucking tell you.” Jab. “Besides, that shit about the job is just what I told your puff-ball boss from the hospital. I just thought you’re buddy there had a good point: Why miss this perfect opportunity to catch up on old times?”

Hodge. The picture in David’s head, of Hodge with his guts pulled out of his body, was erased as the night-stick lit up his elbow.

“You wouldn’t want to miss the chance to catch up on old times would you, Davey-slavey?”

The pet name, buried so carefully in the recesses of David’s mind, welled up in a massive wave of revulsion. He leaned forward to expel a thin stream of green bile.

A well-aimed kick in the tailbone lifted Metz a few centimeters, and then he sprawled forward onto his hands and knees, his face in the dirt and his ass in the air. A grim bark of laughter exploded behind him.

“Oh, yes. That’s what I like to see.”

Metz spun over and scrambled backward. Feng’s laugh struck out again.

“And I see you remember as well as I do. How nice, Davey-slavey.”

The glow from the holographed titan straddling the tent flickered and fell through the frames of the scaffold. In the shattered light Feng was a cubist vision of swimming shadow. The billy-club slapped into Feng’s palm, fingers wrapping round its base and caressing its length. “Just how far did I get it up you the last time?” The shout was just
audible over the waves of noise that came from all over the square. “Can you remember that, too?” Feng’s hand choked up on the night-stick. “Was it this far?” The hand moves downward. “This far?” The overseer charged suddenly at Metz, and pinned him to the ground with tip of the club, grinding it into his Adam’s apple. “Or was it in all the way? Open your mouth, Davey.”

David refused to obey, turning his head to the side. The billy-club jammed into his throat. His mouth opened involuntarily as he gasped for air. “Good boy, Davey. Now look at me. Look at me! Keep it open, Davey—that’s right.”

Sweat was beading on Feng’s scarred face. It ran the length of the discoloured welt and dripped onto Metz’s chest. The hand that wasn’t holding the club clamped onto a breast and twisted it violently. Feng grimaced with pain and pleasure. The hand ran downward to massage Feng’s crotch. “Do you remember what I’ve got here for you, Davey? My special treat?”

He didn’t want to. He really, really didn’t want to. But how can he not? He’s seen the she-male’s pierced, chained and studded dick so many times and in so many ways—

“Keep that fucking mouth of yours open, slave! I feel like taking a piss!”

Motion somewhere outside of David’s field of vision distracted Feng for a moment. The knot of the overseer’s features untangled suddenly. As if from a great distance, muffled by the boom of the speech being made on the other side of the backdrop, Metz heard someone yell.

“What’s going on back here?”

The billy-club rose a few centimeters. Metz gasped for air, coughing.

“Unruly slave!” Feng shouted. “Disciplining him!”

David tilted his head to see a young militiaman leaning out from behind a web of wires and scaffolding.

“You shouldn’t be back here.” The young man’s gun was out of its holster and pointed at Feng. Metz prayed for it to go off.

Feng straightened. Without taking his eyes from the militiaman, he pointed his stick and inclined his head upward. “There’s a support up there that’s come loose. I was told to—”
“Put your weapon down!” Metz saw the militiaman’s gloved hand tighten, his finger pulling back behind his pistol’s trigger-guard.

Feng jerked his arm down. “Hey! Take it easy—”

“Drop it!”

Feng did. The militiaman spoke into a microphone at his chin. He was frowning at Metzenberg’s white armband.

“The Tech divisions already got their hands full,” Feng shouted. The band was playing again. Metz realized that the crowd in the square was singing.

The militiaman looks quizzically at Feng.

“Yes, he’s a slave and not a Tech,” Feng put on a look of utter exasperation. He raised his voice another notch. He had to, to be heard over the thousands of voices that were singing the Tovarish Corporate Anthem. “And I’m a fucking Overseer!” He slapped the badge on his uniform, emphasizing the obviousness of it. “Who the fuck was I supposed to bring? CEO Shin? Would you stop pointing that fucking thing at me already?”

The gun didn’t budge. “Where’re your tools?”

Jubilation surged through David—Feng has fucked up—he was going to get nabbed—

David’s gaze flashed up at Feng. Feng is looking down. He captured David’s expression, and smiled. The Overseer unslung a bag from his shoulder, laughing now. He tipped it over. A wrench, some screw-drivers, a monofilament saw, and a ratchet set clanked out and onto David’s stomach.

The militiaman spoke into his headgear.

Feng hissed. “So, somehow you still imagine that I’m an idiot, hmm? Little Davey-slavey? And I bet you thought you’d gotten away from me.” Then, looking back up at the militiaman, he shouted, “A truck ran into a tent pole earlier! Threw everything out of whack up there!” He hauled Metz to his feet.

The militiaman was still conversing with invisible authorities.

“Foreperson Elts!” Feng bellowed. “He’s the boss who asked me. Kreebo Elts. Get them to ask him.”
The information was passed on. The gun wavered. David longed to shout, to
scream.

Feng spoke through clenched teeth. “You belonged to me then, and you belong to
me now.”

The militiaman nodded at something he heard. The lowering muzzle of his gun
coincided with the sink in David’s gut.

“I’ll prove it to you when you get back down.” Feng smiled at David as the
militiaman’s sidearm went back into its holster.

“Alright,” said the militiaman. “But you should probably take it a bit easier.” He
jutted his chin in Metzenbergen’s direction. “Company property.”

Feng gave the militiaman an evil stare. “I don’t tell you how to do your job, do
I?”

“Just make sure your job’s all you do. I won’t be going anywhere, and I guess I’ll
shoot you if you do anything funny.”

Feng looked at Metz. “Pick that shit up,” he said, and pointed at the scattered
tools.

Metz was collecting the last few when a thundering applause brought the anthem
to an end. The fuzz of the synth-sitar fell back to a simmer. Another of the Tovarisch
executive began rumbling the air with her praise for the company and its vision for the
future.

Metz swung the toolbag over his shoulder.

“And that,” Feng said, pointing at his billy-club. David looked reluctantly down at
the stick. Wearily, he scooped it up and handed it to Feng. He flinched during the
transfer, and his faith in the blow that would follow was duly rewarded.

“Slave! A broadband aerial went down earlier.” Feng dragged David over to a
tower of scaffolding that hugged the backdrop of the stage. “The thing’s slipped partly
off the edge of the roof, you can’t miss it. Look up, slave.”

Metz did. He followed the lip of the canvas thirty meters up. He saw a spike
sticking out at an incongruous angle, and assumed that’s what Feng was talking about.
Feng shook him.
“Off this main scaffold, about two thirds of the way up this support here,” Feng slapped the tower next to them, “you’ll see a support that shoots off at about a sixty-degree angle. It’s about a fifth as big, and probably pretty wet, but still safe enough for someone who’s done log-lifts in the Urals, right Davey-slavey?” Feng pauses. “Do the job right. As bad as you think it’s going to be, I can make it worse.” Feng thumped a pulley about fifteen centimeters across against David’s chest. “Get up there, harness it, and lower it down.”

“Wait a minute,” said the militiaman. He approached Metz while waving Feng back at the same time. He took the bag from Metz—checked the contents of the ratchet set. He patted Metzenbergen down, taking the pulley from him at the last. After turning it over once, twice, he handed it back.

“I’ll be keeping an eye on you, bud.” The militiaman stood back. David stared at his youthful face—handsome, was the only thought that comes to David’s mind, but probably a clone.

Metz clippeed the pulley to the shoulder strap of his toolbag. He turned, resisting the urge to look to Feng for further instruction, and stepped with deliberation onto the lowest of the rungs going up the scaffold’s side. He began to climb, slowly rising against the back of the stage’s backdrop, the red of it turned black by a combination of the onset of evening, and the flash of the holo staring down from the tent-top.

The rungs were about half again the height of a normal man’s footstep, so the climbing was awkward. That they were wet was no help. Metz, however, was more than glad to have to take his time.

On the way up he figured out the crisscross geometry of the lightweight girders that framed the arched stage-end of the tent. The arch was about thirty-five meters at its highest, and the broadband aerial was just off to one side of the peak. The tower that he was clinging to rose up farther along the curve, but it didn’t touch the roof itself. A festoon of smaller beams that angled off it, beginning about halfway up, branched out to prop up the suspended canvas.

When, at about four meters David looked out, away from the backdrop, toward the short end of the square, he saw over the rows of cable and transformer cubes, the files of barbed wire, tracked vehicles, lamps and rods—he saw the colour splashing across the
flat-faced rectangles of the buildings that surrounded the square. Their façades peered over a wall of trailers, circled and reinforced by a crew of Tovarisch elite and others.

At about eight meters, he saw the fence and the ring of militia beyond the trailers. A couple of clubs were being swung. Someone was dragged back through the barrier and thrown into a paddy wagon. The crowd seemed very thick, indeed—David was surprised to see so many people watching from behind the stage.

He came up to the first of the angled beams. He paused to follow the one nearest the fallen aerial back down to the tower with his eyes. It branched off from the scaffolding another five meters above him, angling out from both the scaffold and the backdrop to support the broad overhang of the tent’s roof.

David looked down at the upturned faces of Feng and the militiaman. He imagined his wrench tumbling from his hand, end over end, slowly crossing the distance between him and the centre of Feng’s face. The invented sound of Feng’s shattering facial bones, however, did little to ease Metz’s dread of his eventual return to the ground. He focused instead on the vibrations that the percussion and bass on stage were driving through the scaffold and into his hands. He resumed climbing.

A skirt dangled a few meters down from where another set of supports touched the tent’s roof. This short curtain came down to meet the fabric of the backdrop which was braced by a variety of towers like the one Metz was clambering on. The backdrop fell away from the tops of the towers in six massive pieces of what Hodge had said was Kevlar when they’d been carrying it earlier. Between the towers, girders placed horizontally served as perches for the hundreds of stage-lights that shined through the gap between the lower edge of the skirt above, and the top of the backdrop below.

David paused again when he got to the place where his path forked, away from the tower, toward where the antenna stuck out over the lip of the canvas roof. His hands, chilled from touching the wet, vibrating metal, had lost some feeling and agility. He rubbed them together, and then jammed them into his armpits. About a sixty degree slant, Metz thought, confirming Feng’s estimate, and probably less than forty centimeters across. Steep, but the girder, built of interlocking X’s, are ladder-like enough that the job should still be easy.

Metz listened to the executive on stage.
“—this expansion means a great day for Tovarisch Enterprises, already the eastern leader of fibre exports to Northern Europe, bringing the Tovarisch prosperity and way of life to millions—” The voice sounded as if it could be that of CEO Shin.

Metz leaned out, putting his hands onto the beam, just as the rain started pelting down again. “Stroke of luck,” he said through gritted teeth. He waited a bit, and like clockwork, the wind gusted in shortly after.

“Stroke by fucking stroke—” he spat harsh laughter into the air. “I should be so fucking lucky, it kills me!” The new warmth in David’s fingertips departed instantly. He flipped a numbing digit at the throng below. “It should only kill you all!”

Metz got his feet under him on the girder, and looked up into the falling rain. The drops were small, but they came in fast on the suddenly blustery air. He blinked, wiped the water from his eyes, then started climbing. He kept his eyes fixed down at the X’s of the girder as he moved out of the sheltered corner between the scaffold and the backdrop.

His numbing hands started losing their grip again at about twenty-five meters up. He secured his arms through the middle of the girder, stuffing his hands under his sleeves, clasping opposite wrists. The cold of the metal drew a line down David’s face as it pressed against the beam. Water ran off the straight edge, down his cheek and into the neck of his overalls. He opened his eyes. He was gazing down at top of the scaffold tower, and the asymptotic flashing of lights.

Metz stared at them, rubbing at his wrists. The rubbing slowed, and then stopped altogether. In the minute spaces between the lights’ incandescent flaring, David could see through the gap into the interior of the tent. He made out very little through the flickering strip—a far away view of the wealthy, their expensive designs shrunk to look like the jackets of so many carefully collected beetles.

“No! Not far away at all!” The voice thundered from the stage. Metz was almost certain then that the speaker was CEO Shin. He recognized the rhetoric of the Tovarisch’s manifest corporate destiny—“Getting closer all the time!”—the exploitation of values, and the values of exploitation. “What does not swallow is swallowed! Now you say it!” Everyone in the square obediently shouted, repeating the Tovarisch litany.
Metz tuned out the words, and continued his climb, resigned to growing ache in his knuckles. By the time he got within a meter of the roof, the cold was a sharp pain in his feet, and his hands were practically numb.

The end of the aerial, thick as David’s thigh, tapered slightly to a blunt tip about two meters off the lip of the canvas tent-top. In the wind, the roof’s overhang fluttered and snapped. Where it lay, the weight of the aerial kept the canvas relatively taught. Instead of fluttering, the canvas seemed to breathe, moving with a steady rise and fall, the aerial lifting and settling with each breath. Metz followed the indentation of it as far back as he could, estimating the thing to be no more than seven meters. It could slip at any minute—David didn’t really understand what was keeping it there to begin with.

To get the yarder-pulley safely fixed to both the antenna and the girder beneath him, David knew he would have to get closer. He looked down at his chest to make sure the pulley was still clipped there, then reached a freezing hand up to the next rung. He was brought up short. Some strange quality in the roar of the crowd made his hand back down.

He looked at the mass of people spread out beneath him, the body of it streaming back from the streets that receded from the square. The cheer, he realized, sounded different because it came only from the crowd directly below. He looked down at the faces, the raised arms, the boys on the streetlamps and the families on the rooftops—he squinted through the rain at segment after segment of the audience, becoming slowly, fearfully convinced their eyes were all turned his way.

David stiffened with fear. He thought of Feng and looked down. Neither Feng nor the militiaman were aiming pistols up at him. Indeed, they were not looking at him at all, gazing instead at a quite different place above them. The force of the air currents, breaking in every direction against the contours of the tent’s eaves, suddenly redoubled. The crackling of the flapping canvas intensified, drawing Metz’s attention back to the indentation above that held the aerial. It puffed massively upward. As it peaked, then began to settle, Metz watched the rod slide another half a meter, and then another half before it came to an uneasy rest once again.

David started as the source of the new bluster revealed itself. A triumvirate of heli-carriers descended into David’s line of vision, beneath the lip of the tent’s roof.
Painted on the largest of them was the unmistakable slanted red of the words B-Solo. The logo was painted sideways, next to the half-profile of the world's most recognized face, Babe Solomon, her tongue rolled voluptuously out to touch the top end of the 'r'. Ditto Straub, Derek—Mr. Straw—was arriving, and all eyes, including Feng's, Metz realized, were glued to the airborne evidence of it. Behind the tent, behind the stage, the audience was thick with the hope of catching sight of the real Babe Solomon, the flesh of all their secret desires.

At the periphery of David's vision, the antenna slipped slightly further. He had only moments to act. He unclipped the pulley from his chest, and fastened it to the girder where he was. He unreeled a few meters of the high tensile line, coiling it carefully in loose loops around one white and unfeeling hand, and dangling the last three meters of its end from the other.

On the slopes of a clearcut, standing right next to the log to be harnessed, dangling so much line would have been unnecessary, but here—David began to swing the line with its weighted clip at the end. The regular, slow pendulum motion he wished to create was severely hobbled by the wind, and when he tossed the line, it was carried well away from its target. He began again, recoiling the wire carefully over his numbed palm. The antenna slid another few centimeters, then began its slow rise on the inflating edge of the tent's roof.

Metz waited. He swung the line, looking back and forth between it and the antenna. He watched it crest the wave of the canvas and then begin its descent. When it troughed again, he tossed. The weighted end went up and over the top of the aerial. Instantly his hand flashed to a button at the centre of the pulley, jabbing twice at it with his unfeeling fingers. The signature beacon in the pulley drew the weighted clip at the end of the line back to itself. Metz fastened it around the line near the pulley, and the clip automatically ran up the cable, closing the loop Metz had made and cinching the aerial tight in its grip. The aerial responded by sliding the rest of the way off the roof.

David watched the rod fall, the excess line tumbling after it. His hand, too late to reel in the line, now hurried to join the other, interlocking through the middle of the girder. The wire jerked suddenly straight. Metz, despite the tightness of his grip, was nearly shot off the beam by the reverberation. His head, shoulders and knees impacted
against the hardened springboard of the girder once, twice, three times, and then the motion stopped as abruptly as it began.

He looked down and saw Feng, his fists in the air and his mouth open, screaming. David scanned the ground below him for the antenna, but didn’t see it. Instead of dropping straight down, the line curved in toward the backdrop. The cables that hung from the antenna’s swinging base had gotten tangled in the scaffolding, hanging it up in mid-swing.

In a wasted effort to be reassuring, David waved down at Feng and the militiaman. He’d have to go down and disentangle the aerial before he could finish lowering it to the ground. He pulled a little lever on the pulley and it took up the slack in the line, and then he sent his foot in search for a lower rung to begin his descent.

Where the girder met the scaffolding he looked up the scaffold to where the antenna had gotten hung up. He stomped his feet and flapped his arms.

The voice, CEO Shin’s voice, said the name, “Ditto Straub!” The crowd roared, the music blasted. The richest, perhaps the most powerful man in the world had just been introduced to the stage of Tovarisch’s Perm Protectorate, not twenty meters from where Metzenbergen was standing.

David looked up again. Maybe, just maybe—yes! The cables were tangled close enough to the gap above the backdrop that he would be able to get a peek at his hero—his one connection to better times. He began to climb again. A new voice began talking from the centre of the stage. It was the voice of Derek Straw, his grade two teacher.

“Thank you! Thank you for that warm welcome. Made all the warmer by the fact that not long ago it could never have happened. It’s beyond great to be greeted this way by the stockholders of Tovarisch Enterprises—Tovarisch, who until lately was our fiercest and most worthy competition. Times, the climate in which we do business, have clearly changed—”

As he passed the knot of tangled cable, David gave it a cursory glance—enough to know that the monofilament saw in his bag would make quick work of it. He climbed another two meters and dropped his toolbag onto the tiny platform at the top of the scaffold. Quickly, he took the wrench and the saw out of the bag. He leaned out from the
scaffold and waved the tools down at Feng, then he turned to stick his head between two lights to look down at the stage.

On the other side of the backdrop, the scene was like nothing Metz could have imagined. He felt like he was looking into an aquarium, it was like an alien circus, or the set of a holo-feature. The stage was covered with four-limbed, multiply-armed and strangely muscled soldiers, girls danced among them, their nakedness appearing intermittently through their writhing holo-wear. The audience took to their feet, some to the air, some bellowing from flushed faces, others with sparks swimming over their bodies, or jetting out from their interface-masks. The adulation was all aimed at the one man.

Ditto Straub, aside from his clothing, was quite recognizable to David, even without the glasses that he wore as Mr. Straw.

"—the Book of Changes, the I Ching, is a book about leadership, and I use it every day. Not long ago, it started to tell me of a great reconciliation. It was a mirror to my own thoughts—and, I think, all of our unspoken desires—" He raised his arms to indicate the audience seen and unseen. It was the gesture he used in grade two to include the class in the history he was teaching.

"Heng is a sign in which the threatening power of thunder is met and blown away by a steady gentle breeze."

The Ee-Ching. Metz remembered Mr. Straw closing the battered yellow cover in the mornings as the sun filtered in, sweeping those funny sticks off his desk.

"Heng means the victory of duration!"

He walked down to the crowd—Metz saw him walking up to front of the class. Up to the desk of that little red-haired girl—the crowd, like the class, went quiet.

"Duration is not worn down by hindrances! It is not a state of rest, for mere standstill is regression."

David looked into the crowd for the red hair, but saw instead the slave he’d seen enter the tent with the first of the gold-bands. Her costume swam more closely to her body now, the tones muted, but Metz recognized her hair and her pride of ‘titties.’
Metz blinked, and looked to the left. CEO Shin was seated off to the side amidst his phalanx of Tovarisch faithful. He blinked again, looked further left. He blinked—someone was flashing a light into his eyes—there—the guard was one of Straub’s.

From one side of his headgear a laser sighting raked again over Metzenbergen’s eyes. The two hands on his left were tapping fists into the palms of his right, then all four of them pointed in Metz’s direction. They were the overseers’ hand-signals for ‘work-harder,’ and ‘understand?’

David pulled his head back, but not all the way. He watched the guard repeat the sequence, then snuck his own two hands up to the edge of the backdrop. He closed his pointed fingers back into his fists, signaling that he did understand. He pulled his head completely back from the gap. The militiaman below had obviously let people know Metz’d be up there. He felt once again beholden to the young man, if he hadn’t called, Metz would probably have gotten his head shot off.

“In the same way, the independence of the superior person is not based on rigidity and immobility of character—”

But Metz was too attracted by the voice, resonating of a time he had grown to think of as imaginary.

“—instead, he keeps abreast of the time and changes with it.”

He stepped up onto the nearest of the girders that sprout from the top of the scaffold. He stepped up another rung, but, still, from here the only thing he could see through the gap were lighting towers. From another girder, he saw CEO Shin and three other Tovarisch executives being followed off the stage by a trio of security guards. David stepped down, uninterested in why the Chairman would be leaving so early.

“And I say to you, this is not the time for our two companies to continue as they have—not that we haven’t each sought change, but we’ve both sought it for too long in the same old ways.”

David continued experimenting until he found a perch from which he could line up a view of Ditto.

“It’s time we recognized that all the qualities that make us adversaries in the marketplace, are the qualities that would make us formidable allies. Duration! For whom
can one have more respect than the enemy that endures our every blow, and dishes out the same?"

Ditto worked the audience, singling out stockholders with his body language, infecting them with his passion. He swept his upper body back and forth, swaying in a fine, controlled frenzy.

Ditto danced a few steps to the right, and David saw something that made him step down off the girder. He returned to his previous position, his head pushed between the lights.

"Slave!"

He heard it from far off, but there was no mistaking Feng’s voice.

"Metz, you em-fucker!"

He looked down and saw Feng halfway up the side of the scaffold, but he knew, somehow that there was no time to think about that right now.

David looked back out over the backdrop. The woman in the front row, the one he recognized from earlier, had lost two of her breasts. The holo-wear seemed to be trying to cover it up, but from above her, it was clear that her two lower breasts were gone.

"Duration! Though we cannot change the underlying rules, we can change the external conditions—we can endure together! It is time to let the steady breeze of our two enduring wills blow away the thundercloud of our corporate war."

Metzenbergen blinked. He looked down at the Straub guard who pointed the laser sight at him earlier. Once again he was making the ‘work harder’ signal, this time, though the fingers that pointed at Metz were accompanied by thumbs pointed up to make triggers—‘back to work, or be killed,’ it was Metz’s choice.

He looked back at the girl in the front row, searching for her missing tits. Her hand was buried in a purse that he was pretty sure she didn’t have before.

"Davey, you are gonna pay—" Feng’s hand closed around his ankle.

Ditto turned to walk back up the stage. Metz kicked his leg free of Feng’s grasp.
The lazzer came out of the purse at the same time as the girl came out of her seat.
The wrench flew out of Metz’s hand—Metz, who had somehow gotten himself halfway out, over the lip of the backdrop. He watched it leave his fingertips. It took to the
air like a big sloppy butterfly, flipping and falling end over end, for what seemed like a thousand years.

Feng’s claws were digging into his backside, he felt them take purchase with the slowness of roots pushing into the ground.

The wrench lowered itself millimeter by millimeter, and the hand that was there, at the end, seemed as if it were made of stones that had always been waiting—always, though really it appeared as if from nowhere—the hand of a Straub guard stepping forward to catch the thrown tool. The way the lazj in the guard’s other hand came up and pointed at Metz, brought time back to its usual pace. By the time the sidearm went off, though, its aim had been disturbed by the laser that had cut into the guard from behind. The man had inadvertently stepped between the assassin in the front row and Ditto, the assassin’s target.

As he toppled to the stage, the guard’s lazj-pistol fire cut somewhere below David’s feet. He felt the scaffold lurch, and then he was dragged back through the gap to receive the butt of Feng’s gun across his cheek. Metz fell to his knees.

“I can’t fuckin believe—do you have any idea what you’ve done?” Feng’s lazj was pointed in Metz’s face. Metz looked down the muzzle, wishing he knew the answer to Feng’s question.

Feng’s fire, in its turn, went wide. The scaffold had begun to collapse beneath them. Feng’s surprised face fell away as Metz watched, clinging to the fabric of the backdrop. His amazement at his purchase in the cloth competed against the incredible satisfaction of watching Feng disappear among the rubble tumbling to the ground twenty-five meters below. Both sensations, however, faded quickly away when he realized how quickly his grip on the backdrop was slipping. Laser fire pierced the cloth in two other places. All hell was breaking loose on the stage.

A few meters below, he saw the rent in the material where the laser cut through. Hodge was wrong, he thought, the backdrop wasn’t Kevlar at all.

His hands, cold and tired, were pulled open by the dragging weight of his body. He dropped, the red fabric sliding by under his fingertips. When his hands plunged through the rent in the cloth, his body braked, but his fall was not halted—the fabric tore, bringing Metz to a slow stop about five meters above the ground.
He hung there staring wildly over his shoulder at the chaos on stage. The guards were all killing each other, exchanging laser-fire over the bodies already strewn across the platform. He released the dangling red fabric and let himself drop to the stage.

He felt an ankle pop as he hit, but did nothing about it, intent on disappearing among the piling folds. He watched as one half of the Straub Praetorian beat a huddled retreat, gathered around what he supposed was their leader, Ditto Straub.

A Tovarisch guard ran up and knelt beside him. He lifted his pistol, taking aim at the knot of Straub guards. Melted flesh splashed onto Metz as the man’s back split wide open.

A second man ran to take his place—a Straub employee, this time. Metz looked up at him. The man was looking down at him—Metz had been seen.

“Grab that guy!” the order was barked from somewhere nearby.

The man looked over to his right. “What?” he asked.

“You heard me! Grab him—he’s coming with us!”

Metz lifted his head from its nest of red cloth, looking for the guard who made the order. He was standing not far away, lasers in all four of his hands, blazing out covering fire for the three of them. Metz recognized the man as the one who’d been hand-signalling an idea of killing him moments ago. Without ceasing his firing, he turned to look at Metz.

“I think Mr. Straub’s gonna want to meet you, buddy.”

* * *

Five days after, 1:00 PM

“I don’t know,” Suzy says. She balances another nail point down on one end of the board she’s fixing into place. She aims her hammer. “It sounds to me like Erin may have had it right.”

From the ground in their back yard, MacAfferty looks up at his married, perched at about the height of his shoulders. Her face disappears under the brim of her knitted cap as she drives the spike into the wood, smacking it in with six quick strokes.
Suzy had been planning to build the deck since they’d moved into their bungalow five years before. About a month ago, she’d managed to salvage the last of the wood she thought she’d need. They’d been dismantling an unsafe compappartment complex in Tofino, eleven kilometers north, for most of the winter, and Suzy had been dutifully going back and forth on the public-trans, standing in lines to acquire the rare building materials she wanted for the project. She’d been straightening nails for weeks.

From all fours, Suzy rolls back onto her knees to fish for another nail in the pouch on her belt.

“You know, I wish you’d wear your rad-suit out here,” MacAfferty says.

“Well,” says Suzy, and shifts her weight over to sit sideways and look back at him. “That’s one way to avoid the issue.”

“I just wish you’d be more careful with that body of yours. I think you forget sometimes it’s the last one you’ll ever have.”

The hammer clunks as it falls from Suzy’s loosened grasp. “The climate reports said it was going to be a clear day, no chemical fronts, and a thick ozone for the next three weeks.”

MacAfferty puts a hand on the edge of the deck’s partial floor, leaning into it.

“Those reports are useless.”

The yard is pocked with the rock gardens they’d painstakingly built three years previous, tufting them with shrubs hardy enough to survive the Pacific’s polluted onslaughts. MacAfferty looks past them, down the slope of their yard, to where the land falls away in a steep, rocky drop to the sea. Suzy told him that when she lived here as a little girl the ocean-front was one huge beach. The sand must have all been sucked away with the receding oceans of the twenty-second century.

“I’ve got the detector out. If something weird comes this way I should have plenty of time to get inside.”

“You hope.”

“Alright, Dan. I’m sorry your boss couldn’t see things your way, but taking it out on me won’t really help, will it?”

MacAfferty fingers the zippers on his own skintight rad-leathers. He’s just arrived home after the Captain stamped his case closed that morning. The hoverbus had let him
off and he’d walked, fuming every step of the way, down to the steeped slope of the ocean-front. He’d found Suzy putting the floor of the deck onto the framing she’d erected on the stone footings she’d dug and levelled into the ground. Bobby was still at the Jantsens where he was home-schooling this month.

MacAfferty kicks at the ground. “You know one has nothing to do with the other—”

“Yes, I do,” Suzy says, “It’s you that don’t seem to.”

“Now, that’s nor fair—”

“Dan, just slow down for a minute.” Suzy stands and wipes the palms of her hands on the front of the old, tattered slacks she’s donned to do her carpentry work. She walks toward the stepladder leaning against one of the deck’s central beams. “You come home, I haven’t seen you in two days, and no ‘hello’, no ‘how are you’, you just start ranting about Erin Singh.” She stares down at him for a moment, then starts down the ladder. “You seemed to be asking for my opinion, and so I gave it to you.”

“Yeah, but—”

“But you didn’t really want my opinion,” she says, lighting on the ground and turning toward him. “You just wanted me to agree with you, right?”

MacAfferty looks away, chagrined.

Suzy goes on, “It’s time for a break anyway. Let’s go inside, you can pour me something cold, and we can talk.” The arm she sneaks around him goes just above his waist, reaching only to the middle of his back. MacAfferty bends to kiss her upturned face.

“Welcome home, darling,” says Suzy.

“Thanks, Suze.” He puts his arm around her shoulders and they start walking together up the incline at the side of their house to go inside. At the corner MacAfferty says, “I just worry, sometimes, you know that.”

Suzy laughs, “I thought that when we agreed that you’d be the ‘man’ about the house, we also agreed that no patronizing attitudes would come with it.”

His hand on the latch to their front door, MacAfferty stops, feeling the brief moment of goodwill quickly chill. He turns to see Suzy staring gleefully at his frozen features.
“Alright, alright, Dan. Maybe I’ll put on a rad-suit before I come out again.”

“Maybe?” asks MacAfferty, and he watches his married walk past him and into their house.

In the kitchen, MacAfferty screws the cap off a two-litre bottle of his homemade beer. He puts the cap on the counter and reaches into a cupboard for two tall glasses. He is shouting the whole time, re-iterating some of the finer points of what he has already said to Suzy, who waits for him in the living room. After pouring, he unsnaps his collar, and pulls the zipper of his rad-suit down across his chest. Padding from the kitchen out onto the caramel shag of the living room carpet, he finds Suzy gazing through the floor-to-ceiling picture window at the morning’s handiwork.

“That deck’s going to look great,” she says enthusiastically, taking a glass of beer from Dan’s hand.

He watches her take a big swallow and when, afterward, she releases a satisfied gasp, MacAfferty can only ask, “Have you been listening to me at all?”

She laughs. “I have been. More closely than you think, my dear Danny-boy.”

“Who’s patronizing whom, now?” MacAfferty says, his voice dropping half an octave.

“No, really, Dan. I have been. It’s just—” she interrupts herself with a hand waving abstractly in the air. MacAfferty sees for a moment the scruffy little Irishman she had been when he fell in love with her, and is slightly, grudgingly, mollified. Suzy takes a couple of steps toward their long tan-and-mocha striped couch. She sits and pats the cushion beside her. “Have a seat, Dan. It’s been a long day—you’ve had a hell of a week. Relax, and we’ll talk.”

“Can’t you understand? I don’t feel like relaxing.”

“Please, Dan,” Suzy says, and rubs the cushion a bit more with the flat of her hand.

MacAfferty puts his glass down slowly and deliberately on the teapoy next to the spindly-legged chair that no one but Bobby’s cat practically ever uses. He lowers himself onto its uneven seat and glowers at Suzy.

“Yes, well,” says his married, folding her hand back into her lap. She takes another swig of her beer and then leans forward, staring down into the glass at the ring of
foam floating on the drink’s surface. “Even if it’s all true—and I’m not saying it’s not, but even if your suspicions are correct—what would you do about it?”

“What? Well, I—I don’t really know.”

“Oh, come on, Dan. I hate it when you get like this.” She pulls the cap from her head, revealing the swirls of ink beneath. “You get all wrought up and start acting like a child. I’m the one who should be offended, you know. You get like this, and suddenly it’s all about you—like you were born yesterday!”

MacAfferty looks at the pink of his thumbnail at the end of his thick brown thumb. His hand is resting on the teapoy, twisting the glass of beer in slow quarter-turns.

“I’m sorry, Suze.”

“Yeah, well.” She leans back and takes another swallow of beer. MacAfferty watches her adams’s apple dip in the tender shades of her neck.

“You need to talk about it,” Suzy says, swirling the last of her beer in its glass.

“We’ll talk about it. But make some sense, Dan, don’t just sit there spitting.”

“I’m not sure—“

“What are you going to do? And don’t say ‘I don’t know,’ because I know you do. You’ve been thinking about it all night, I bet.”

He looks down, unwilling to make that exact admission. “I can’t just let it go. I’ve got a bad feeling—I have to go after it.”

“Yeah, there it is.”

MacAfferty gets up from the cat’s seat and moves over to the couch. He sits down sidewise so he’s speaking at Suzy’s profile. “There’s something going on. It’s big, and it’s bad—lives are stake. I can smell it.”

Suzy swallows the last of her beer. She turns her dark eyes toward him and glares.

“You know, when you talk like that, I can’t help but wonder if Erin didn’t have it pegged.” She stands.

“What? What do you mean?”

Suzy, her small body tight, MacAfferty knows, beneath the looseness of her worn work clothes, points her empty glass at him. “Maybe you are feeling the loss of Citizenship more than you say. Maybe you are just looking for the big case to re-establish what you think is your ‘lost reputation.””
“Suzy, I—” MacAfferty stutters, his arms spreading wide in disbelief.

“I’m going to pour another.” Suzy starts walking toward the kitchen. At the door she stops and turns again. “And all that other stuff, how Erin’s a fool, how you can’t good work done in the Alberni department—that was all about getting me to say ‘Gee, Dan, since you’re obviously the only one who can save us, you’d better traipse off and get to the bottom of it.’ Wasn’t it?” She disappears through the doorway.

MacAfferty listens to Suzy moving around, the fridge door opening and closing. He reminds himself that her knowledge of him is something he loves. Then Suzy’s back. He watches her cross the room. “Maybe you’re right, Suze.”

She picks up the half-empty glass that MacAfferty left on the teapoy. She hands it to him and resumes her seat on the striped couch. “Yeah, well. What are you going to do, then? Some details, please.”

MacAfferty ponders briefly and tips his glass to his lips. “I need to go to Manaimo.” He looks at Suzy. She’s watching him, but her expression is blank. “Find this Lynyrd.”

“So, what, you’ll go there on the weekend?”

“I thinks it’s going to be a bigger job than that. Erin gave me the week off. Hopefully I’ll be able to see Metzenbergen in the morning. After that I was going to go start poking around in the suburbs. I’ll probably have to spend the night.”

“And how long will this all take? A week? Two? When will I see you again? When will you see Bobby?”

“I—” MacAfferty looks back down at the lump of his hands. “I can’t say for sure. Suze.” He looks out the picture window at the greyish haze that fills the sky above his married’s half-constructed deck. He thinks of the ocean breakers washing up on the stones about a kilometer down and away.

Next to MacAfferty, Suzy stirs. He turns in time to see her transferring her glass from one hand to the other. With her freed hand she grabs his thigh, hardly spanning even the top of its thick quadriiceps. She gives it a squeeze. “Well,” she says, “alright then.”

“What?” MacAfferty nearly drops his glass, just catching it by the rim at the last instant. “Suze, I—”
“Look, Dan, it sounds like something you have to do. What else can I really say? I just don’t like it when you come in here and try to convince me that it was all my idea. If you have to do something, well, you have to—but it’s you doing it, don’t try to make me take responsibility for it.”

“I don’t want you to agree just because—”

“You’re not listening to me. I’m not agreeing with anything.”

“But—”

“Look out there,” Suzy points out the picture window. “You see that deck?”

“What?”

“Look at the deck, Dan.”

Dan looks back out at the wrinkled-sheet sky and the wood planks Suzy has sanded down to clean out the age from their grain. Through the half-filled in outlines of the deck he can see a resolute tangle of blackberry bushes reaching up from below.

“Do you know why building that deck is so important to me?”

MacAfferty looks at his married. “Well, yes. Because your Dad—”

“The question was rhetorical, Dan. Look at the deck, and listen—show me the patience of your hundred-and-eighty years.”

Dan sighs, and looks back out the picture window. Man or woman, Suzger Moran never makes a point directly if she can avoid it.

“I was born, just a few years after you were, in 2069, just a few miles from here. Those seemed like happy days.” Since Bobby was born, she also begins every anecdote as if it were a children’s story. “Terrible things were happening in the world, but I was really too young to understand.”

MacAfferty’s attention drifts from the scene outdoors to the ones he imagines are being viewed behind the blank mask of Suzy’s face. He remembers the newsclips he watched, as a teenager, from New Zealand, where he was born. Along with the north of Vancity Isle, and a few other places, it had been one of the few motes in the worldwide calamities of 2053-90. The aftermath of the fifties’ nuclear holocaust were nearly everywhere. Refugees flooded west from the civil wars in Europe and the eastern seaboard. There where famines, plagues, you name it—WWIII, Ice Age A.D., mass ecological die-outs—the Cyclic Disasters.
Suzy points her faraway look at the ceiling. “The climate was haywire. Even though the ocean had begun receding as icecaps started to grow, the flood damage had already been done. The Greater Arctic Sea made salt flats of the great plains. Deserts everywhere were eating up hectares by the minute, while up here it rained, or snowed all the time. We never saw the sun. But I never noticed—who could miss a sun they’d never seen? Or long for more private space in the overcrowding that was always there? To me, it just meant that when I went down to play between the stumps in the surf, I had that many more friends to play with.”

From about 2010 into the 30s, the oceans warmed and rose. When the shoreline stopped and held for about twenty years, the Moran family property was suddenly graced with a two kilometer stretch of recently-logged and boggy ocean-front. By the time Suzy was born, it was a neighbourhood of variously slapped together homes. The waves and the rain had sifted the soil out from under the trees’ dead roots, and left a bed of gravelly sand.

“My Dad, of course, knew exactly what was going on. For him, those days must have been one long nightmare from which there was no waking up.”

MacAfferty had seen the holo-pics of Suzger and her father together: a tall, gangly man with a shock of red hair, and the girl, freckle-faced, wild-eyed and always in boy’s clothing. The woman he sees now, small, dark, feminine, had nearly nothing in common with that waif of the past. But the emotion, the integrity and honour in her memory had outlasted mere flesh—this is the essence of Suzy. This is what he’d seen in that pint-sized Celtic man he’d met on routine assignment thirty-eight years ago, what he wants to have by him always.

Suzy stands up from the couch, and, placing her beer on the teapoy where his had been previously, she walks over to the picture window and leans against the radiation-resistant plastic. “The only future most people could see was just a festering wound too big to heal—so deep, so big no one could see across it.” Her body was a dark, motionless figure outlined by the featureless grey beyond. “My Dad wasn’t like most people, though. He laughed all the time. He used to come down to the beach with us and build sandcastles, catapult kids off his shoulders into the water. He’d ask me what I was going to be when I grew up—kept after me about my studies when schools seemed like ideas of the
past.” She draws a long, wet breath and turns back toward MacAfferty with dry eyes. “Do you know what it was that set him apart, Dan?”

MacAfferty does know. Even if Suzy’s telling the story with a bit more intensity than she usually does, he’s heard it before. Still, he finds himself asking, “Hope?”

“That’s right. My Dad refused to give up hope. ‘Humanity,’ he used to say, ‘will last only as long as there’s hope—hope for something better.’”

Suzy’s Dad died in Bella Coola. That’s where they went after VanCity was hit in ’73. Only she and her father made it—at the time, her Mom and two brothers were visiting their Nan on Bowen Island, twenty kilometers from ground zero. That year, the sheiks of Robson Street wanted more than the Mexican States would pay for access to the fresh water of their North Columbian ice. The Mexes decided they didn’t care if their citizens got thirsty for a while, and sent a bird from Bald Mountain. Such were the days.

“Rain, rain, and more rain.” Her arms are crossed over her chest, her hands invisible in the folds of her loose work-shirt. “Poisonous sometimes. And always cold. Gobbets of slush slapping down, a lot of the time hard enough to hurt. It stuck to the cold, bare stone higher up where the earth was washed away, and made a hard-pack of frozen white, refrigerating everything and coming our way.”

Indeed, thought MacAfferty, only the re-discovery of nano-containment technology, the erection of the Walls in 2140, had prevented the glacial advance from scraping across VanCity Isle. You can see them from the roof of the house: a faraway shimmer in the air bordered by a second and third horizon drawn above the land—one that divides flat white from the shimmer, and another above it where the shimmer turns into the mist of the sky—one line for crest of the snow, drifting in epic proportion, and another for the top edge of the energy field against which it’s blown.

“And despite it all,” says Suzy, “my Dad decided to build a deck. ‘When the sun comes out again,’ he said, ‘I want to be ready.’ He even salvaged a barbecue from somewhere.” Her head flops onto her shoulder as her arms drop to her sides. She pushes off the floor-to-ceiling window. “When VanCity was dusted, he was outside working.”

MacAfferty sees his married, the unphysical shape of her with its penumbra of flesh, come toward him as if from far away. She hoves into view—gaining mass as if the
living room had acreage, she eclipses the mist-sky framed behind her. She resumes her seat beside him on the sofa.

“I was watching him from down in our yard, sitting in the roots of a table-sized stump, neck deep in the warmed ocean, while dollops of cold rain patted down all around. Behind our house you could see the ice-drenched backbone of the island rising into the south. Then, suddenly, Mount Arrowsmith was thrown into stark relief, backlit by a million-megaton flash—my Dad, running in my direction, yelling. Then carrying me, terrified and bouncing over his shoulder, trying to get inland before the ocean was shot into the air by the shock wave. I remember seeing the stunned faces of our neighbours, coming out to stare—my Dad yelling at them too. Some started running right after us—” She slouches down to gaze at the ceiling, her head straight back against the top edge of the couch. “And then the wave that chased us uphill, swallowing everything behind us—ahh, you know the rest.”

MacAfferty looks down at his hands. Together between his knees, they envelope his forgotten glass of beer. He raises it to his lips and swallows the last millilitres of stale, warm suds.

“Suzy,” he says, rising, “I can only think that you’re telling me this because of Bobby.”

Her head still tilted back, her gaze points down at him through slitted eyes.

MacAfferty takes in the familiar coloured slashes of the abstract hanging on the wall above her head. “My priorities haven’t changed.” His gaze traces a thin green line that undulates through the canvas from border to border. “I was there when we made our decision to start a new life, remember?” He even feels that it was he who first suggested it—a life that included parenthood and death, faith in renewal—foregoing the fact of transpiration for the potentials of hope. He looks down at his married, her face placid beneath its weighing gaze. “I’m going to get more beer.”

“Finish mine.” Suzy’s arm rises slowly to point behind him.

On the teapoy, the nearly full glass rests where Suzy left it. MacAfferty ambles over to it and picks it up, replacing it with his own empty mug. “Let me see if I can finish your story for you.” He turns back toward Suzy while swallowing a mouthful of beer.
“When we decided to go ‘natural,’ and start a family, things were changing. Ten years ago—was it ten? Or eleven?”

“Our twenty-fifth anniversary—fall, 2236.”

“Nearly ten years ago. We’d just had dinner at the GR Citizen’s Club—our favourite.”

“I miss that view.”

“We’ll get back to Zeeland someday. Anyway—”

“It was a clear day—you could see past the suburbs of Te Anau, down to the coast where the grey salt water was magically blurred through both sets of Walls—”

“Yeah, yeah. And I was wearing a burgundy blazer, and you had on those pin-striped skin-tights you used to have. Anyway—”

“I think you were wearing—”

“Anyway,” MacAfferty gives his married a hard look, refusing to let her make light of his point. “The centennial of the Council Constitution was two years off, and we were talking about it. Everyone was; the hundredth year meant its re-negotiation. Eventually I came round to the same thought I always did. That constitution presided over a hundred years of worldwide peace—what’s left of the world, anyway. But it’s a constitution forged out of fear and weariness. Officiated by old, old people, who craved stasis.”

Suzy laughs. “You still love that speech, don’t you?”

MacAfferty’s gaze focuses upon her from faraway. “Meaningful change, I said—”

“Well, I guess I asked for it.”

“Meaningful change, I said, comes out of the new; ideals are a young person’s game. We should listen to the New Citizens’ Coalition—maybe the Earth has recovered enough, maybe technology could be sensibly be applied to expansion again—Mars might be an answer—”

“And I said, save it for the Council, MacAfferty—”

“No, you didn’t.”

“No, I suppose I didn’t.”
“No, you had that weird light in your eyes you get when you’ve been drinking.”
Not too different, he thinks, from the one you’ve got right now. “And, to my amazement,
you didn’t say anything like that. In fact, you agreed with me.”
“It surprised me, too.”
MacAfferty takes his seat beside her. Suzy’s head has flopped down onto the back
of the couch once again.
“Who’d have thought such bad rhetoric could finally have worn me down?”
MacAfferty finally allows himself to laugh. “Who’d have guessed to what ends
my thoughts were taking you?”
Suzy’s head turns onto its side to look at him. She’s smiling out to one side, her
folded ear peeking out from under the cheekbone that’s pressed against the sofa’s
cushion. “I asked if you still thought about having a baby.”
“Yes. You quoted your dad to me on hope back then, too. But giving up
Citizenship—”
“Citizenship was making us moribund. You were persuasive. The future had to
embrace change if it was worth working for.”
“And leaving the Council?”
“It was time to make way. You knew I was a man of action, Dan. Talk’s just talk
until you do something about it. If we really believed in Mars and life’s need to spread
and evolve, we owed it to ourselves to live the ideal: life without failsafes.”
“We had Bobby.”
“Yes.” Suzy’s not smiling anymore. “Are you having second thoughts, Dan?”
MacAfferty leans back into the couch, air hisses out from the cushion. He takes a
swig of beer. It takes him by surprise. He’d known, earlier, that this is what it would
come to, but Suzy, in her convoluted way has still managed to surprise him with it. “I’m
telling you, Suzy, there’s something going on. There’s evidence of powerful
manipulation—extinct technology.” He raises his hand in front of his face and counts
with his fingers. “Contempt for Citizenship. Penetration into the industrial zone—from
outside the Wall!” his hands sweeps out toward the grey mist beyond the edge of their
deck.
MacAfferthy stands and empties his drink. The warped reflection of himself in the curved surface of the of the glass looks back at him; a big, black, bear of a man, balding now, and a good section of his bulk going to fat. Strangely, MacAfferthy thought of his original skin—black, yes, but a girl—

“If there’s something threatening our future, it’s Bobby’s future, too!”
“So you’re going to do this for Bobby?”
And now, somehow, she’s forced him into saying something stupid. She makes it seem so easy—maybe he really is acting stupidly.

“Suze—” he says.

“You’re going to go away and leave us alone. That’s how you’re going to help Bobby? That’s an interesting take on fatherhood, Dan.”

“Hey, now—”

“Can you be sure you’re not manufacturing this conspiracy out of some feeling of inadequacy? Do you miss being a Citizen?”
What could he say? Of course there were things he missed about Citizenship. “It’s not that simple—”

“We opted to live our politics, and not just talk about them at Council, didn’t we?”

“Of course, I—”

“You don’t seem so sure. Everything’s changed now, maybe you miss the prestige, the hint of obsequiousness—being known as ‘Citizen’ Daniel MacAfferthy—”

“Enough!” MacAfferthy smacks the butt of the empty glass into his palm, but the sheer meat of his thick hand mutes the gesture’s effect. “No, no, and no. The answers to all your questions are no. This is not some mortal ride to immortal glory. Citizens have been killed, more may be at risk.”

“You talk like murder never happens.”

“It’s rare, and you know it. And never quite like this! It was a slaughterhouse—”

“Mass murders still happen.”

“In the sububs, sometimes. Not behind the Walls!”

“Erin didn’t seem to feel that way about it.”

“Ah, Erin eff-pixing Singh—

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“I’ve met your Captain. You may not like him, but he’s no fool—”

MacAfferty sighs, pressing his hands with the glass up against the sides of his face. When he takes them away, he finds he’s once again staring at the painting above his married’s head. He shifts his gaze downward. “Suzy,” he says, and goes back to sit by her. He touches her. Her shoulder seems as small as an egg in his oversized palm, and his fingers reach over her collar-bone to graze her neck. “Suzy, we don’t have to do this.”

“Maybe not, Dan,” she answers, standing up and shrugging off the weight of his touch. “But we all do what we have to do, don’t we?”

MacAfferty meets the black of her stare, unflinching, but silent.

She takes the glass from his hand and then goes to get the other from off of the teapoy. “Well,” she says, turning once again toward him. “If you’re going to do it anyway, Dan, just make sure you eff-pixing do it well. That’s another thing my Dad used to tell me. ‘If you’ve got to do something, do it well.’ You go, if you have to, but—hallucination or not—do it right and make sure you get it out of your system—all out of your system by the time you get back here.”

“Suze—”

“I’ve got a deck to get together, Dan,” she says and heads toward the kitchen door. Halfway there she stops and turns. “Someone’s got to go get our son from the Jansen’s place.” And then she’s gone.

MacAfferty sits in silence, watching out the picture window until he sees Suzy appear coming up the ladder to the deck, without her rad-suit. He sighs and rises, feeling old, getting his thoughts together to go collect Bobby.

*   *   *   *

Nine days before, 3:30 PM

E walks between the racks suspended from the ceiling. The wardrobe, though very large, is smaller than Sigma Rejuve’s cryo-labs, its lighting more diffuse. Nonetheless, walking through the one, David Metzenbergen is reminded of the other. The long lead-gray bars that hang down from above are not templates, but, festooned
with clothing as they are, the comparison seems natural—costumes for the guests of
Heidi-Gwai's Remote Resort versus new bodies to house their personal matrices—

Metzenbergen's meanders forward a few more steps, es hand stretching out to
graze the passing hems. E could go as the Buddha, e thinks, make sly references to
the illusion of ego and mortal things, find a sari, pass out bindies. The resort's
monthly masquerade is taking place that night, and David has been putting off the
selection of his costume. Beverly had vetoed the idea of choosing together so as to
find complementing outfits. E told David e wanted it to be a surprise, then they'd
have the 'fun' of trying to find each other. At first, Metzenbergen had pointed out that
'fun' isn't really the point of the night's homage. Finally, though, he'd agreed.

Beverly Toe, he thinks. Who are you really? The freshborn, like the fleshborn,
are generally somewhat inscrutable. They allow what they think of themselves to
define them, though what they know about themselves amounts to practically
nothing—the very idea of 'self' being, after all, improbably limiting. Even so,
Beverly is proving to be something more than the typical enigma.

But if it isn't the amorphousness of Bev's character that seems unusual to
Metzenbergen, what exactly is it?

E pushes es hands into the fabrics on his left, making a space between two
costumes. The back of a black coat-and-tails faces the frilled lace-and-leather mixture
of studs and sequins that has drawn David's attention. Attached to it somewhere is a
tag that identifies its character, but Metz doesn't need to look. E recognizes the
colours of Dusty Dale's T.Viz character, Belle Nestor on The Cow Boy-Girl Blues.

E pulls a leg of the costume's diaphanous leotard out into the aisle to see it
better—a bright blue g-string and a wide belt with its lazz-pistol holster. The leotard
snaps back into the tangle of clothing as Metz releases it and moves on. E likes Boy-
Girl Blues, but e's after something with a little more gravity for tonight; if it turns
Bev on to see em as some kind of icon, e doesn't mind encouraging the idea.

Beverly's interest in Metz's personal history is typical of the freshborn. It
arises, Metz knows, from the desire to reduce history to isolated moments, to imagine
it as a mid-sized neighbourhood of isolated abodes in which particular individuals
live. The sequence of events that puts Metz at the heart of one chapter in the collected
essays of history is manifestly haphazard, but that doesn’t matter; Bev will still try to fabricate significance for herself through association with David Metzenbergen, the unique historical embodiment. For ‘herself’—Metz rolls the word in es mind as if it were es hand running along the rise-and-fall of her spine. ‘She’, e thinks, for, despite her new body, Beverly still carries the habits of the flesh in which ‘she’ was born.

Dusty Dale’s fascist-fairy-tale outfit hangs appropriately among the rest of the costumes devoted to contemporary T.Viz and virtual entertainment personalities. Nearing the rack’s far end, David passes a thick section devoted to *The Fastened Nation*. Randy Mann, Egan Stack, and a variety of other characters are there—Change Police uniforms, and a plethora of mutant suits representing the gangs that rule Randy’s world. Metzenbergen steps past them.

Lining the wall that faces em is a rack of furred, fluffed and feathered outfits categorized as ‘Creatures of the Natural World’. E sees a set of segmented legs and antennae bristling from somewhere in the press of material.

Metzenbergen is reminded of the ants e and Bev had seen the day before. Cutting through the forests of Heidi-Gwai, their path was intersected by the catastrophic merging of two columns, one red and one black, into a single stripe of warring insects that led off into the forest for dozens of meters in either direction. David had just renewed es efforts to change the topic of conversation, get Beverly to speak about emself, or Sigma, or even es family. E was receiving only the most nominal responses when they came across the narrow, and oddly uniform seam of battle.

Shifting to the devastating tribalism of the Lifeform’s evolutionary phase, their discussion regained its vitality—how astonishing was the Lifeform’s genius in using destruction to create—in using it, finally, to create a species that could escape evolutionary imperatives. From there, Bev found an easy segú back to the topic of history, and David found emself talking about how e’d been indentured into slavery. David’s attempts to get away from the subject could, perhaps, have been more sincere. Nonetheless Bev’s determination to hear about es past, about Ditto, about Babe and Vertigo Bay seems just a bit too intractable.
The sign that hangs above the next aisle over has two arrows pointing off to either side: to the left, ‘The Peoples of the World—Traditional,’ and on the right, ‘Mythological Beasts and Legendary Personages.’ E supposes e’d find that Buddha costume somewhere up on the right. Briefly, e imagines emself as an ancient Dutch clog-dancer, or a Catholic nun. E skips on to the next row.

Then again, Metz thinks, perhaps it’s me who’s looking too hard for adventures. Bev’s doggedness, while not exactly commonplace, isn’t that out of the ordinary either. In fact, it’s a characteristic that seems very suitable for a young Citizen. Besides, either way, it’s hard for David to really see why it should matter. It’s the competition between freshbom carnality and fleshbom modesty that interests em, and this bubbles up from inside Beverly’s skin with plenty of authenticity. Metzenbergen recalls the afternoon after their picnic—naked on the orange blanket, sipping wine from Bev’s mouth while the sap misted down from the great Douglas fir.

An orange, hirsute sleeve protrudes into the aisle from the right. Absently, Metzenbergen reaches out and grabs the elasticized arm. He’s right, the suit’s been misfiled—the tag reads: ‘Primate’—nothing ‘mythological’ about that.

Beneath the outfit’s title there is a list of signatures—the Citizens who have previously signed this costume out, and, alongside of them, the dates they’d done it. David recognizes some of the names, each one representing a variety of faces, bodies. E wonders how many of the twenty-or-so borrowers knew that the ‘Primate’ they were dressing as was in fact an orangutan. Not one of them, after all, was likely to have seen one.

Humanity had been able to re-create, through clones and genetic engineering, many of the great beasts that vanished at the turn of the millennium, but the orangutan is not one of them. The thought makes em wonder how they would have classified the dolphands. Somewhere in this room, e’s sure, a few prehensile dolphin shells must be stored and ready to be crawled into, but where? There’s nothing ‘mythological’ about them either, but their not really from the ‘natural world’ either, are they?

Metzenbergen moves on to ‘Characters from Literature’, and ‘Miscellaneous’. E could have made es choice from the display-screen in es suite, but e’s come down here anyway, ready to spend an hour or so tickling es fancy. The inclination has

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subsided. E knows what costume e came for anyway. E walks to the last aisle, the first one e passed when he entered at the other side of the room about twenty minutes ago. The sign above the racks reads ‘Historical Personnages.’

*

2033

The dream was always the same:

An anonymous mountain range standing sentinel in the distance; the green-yellow of the cultivated river-valley sloping up into its rolling foothills; a town, halfway up the rise, unrecognizable but familiar all the same: white clapboard and acid-rain-stained concrete; the buildings, with roofs flat-topped, or peaked with mossy shingles, interspersed with orange trees and sycamores, accented by the occasional burst of ivy-red.

The view: personless, silent—and somehow a relief to David Metzenbergen. The broad sky, the village beneath it, and all the waving grasses dwelt in utter silence.

Darting over the landscape, his gaze followed the shadowed furrows between crops, upward along the undulating slopes, jumping from flat blankness of closed windows to the solidity of closed doors. The town’s buildings seemed more healed-over than simply paned and shut. Despite the apparently breathless air, crops moved as if they were crawling over the fields. His relief began fading, the silence became weighted. David couldn’t even hear himself breathe. Were his lungs still functioning? The frantic search for evidence of his own physical presence revealed nothing—invisible hands grasped air where his head should have been—the search for his beating heart was in vain.

A vague grind and shudder made it to his ears. He forgot the absence in the place where his feet should have met the ground, and strained to hear the sound again.

When it came, louder this time, it scraped into a coughing chug and then died away again, and he realized it came from far away. David scanned the horizon. The grind and cough spat into the air again, still louder, and, as he recognized the sound, it caught
and rumbled into a dull, continuous roar. In the distance, on the flat of the valley bottom, he made out the orange daub of a tractor snailing its way along.

The human presence jumped out at him like a life raft on a restless, barren sea. Its draw on him was transformed into motion as he rushed, bodiless, over the terrain toward the machine. His speed was enormous, but he'd misjudged the distance—he must have; row after row of potatoes and tea shrubs, barley and corn whipped by just below him, and yet the nearness of the machine was hardly affected. Yet the noise of its engine grew steadily—the stumbling rhythm, the vociferous clank of rusted spark plugs, of a cylinder not firing.

David's plunge into the scenery added a sharpness of detail to the feathered pastels; shape devolved into texture as proximity grew—as if the corn-stalk greens, the yellows of a windbreak's lemon trees were just veneers stretched over the crags of foundation paint.

Metzenbergen arrived suddenly—a stone's throw from the dust-cloud tossed up by the labouring machine. Its orange skin, scraped and chipped, was peeling to reveal the brush-strokes that had pieced the tractor together—layer upon layer of slapped on steel, swatches of rust and smeared patches, riveted and strapped into place. The sound of its engine, a roar of barely controlled combustion, reached a nearly intolerable level.

The driver was hunched and intent on his task. From the back, David could make out his plaid shirt and the straps of his overalls. Metzenbergen attempted to hail the fellow, but no words were heard above the strained-metal shriek and the bullet-like firing of pistons. He was moved closer, to the foot of the slow-turning, pocked rubber of the tractor-tire. Looking up with a greeting on the tip of his tongue, Metzenbergen was shocked to see that the farmhand was quite dead.

One eye-socket sat empty in his head and the eye in the other was lightlessly grey. The red-streaked yellow of his cheek was a tatter of muscle and adipose uprooted from the bone. The plaid of the farmer's shirt was patterned from the splatter of darkening blood. Its fabric began to swell. David watched until it finally gave way, and innards spat over the dash, gear shifts and steering wheel. As the farmer slid from his seat, David reached up automatically. The body came apart, slipping through his hands.
Then, as if it being seen through binoculars with the zoom reversing, the scene recoiled from David and his terror. Even as the tractor was catapulted into the background, its engine rumbled louder still, joined by a chorus of new machine-metal voices. Metzenbergen looked down and found the meat of the driver still at his feet.

David felt his body had become a container of screams—in fact, it had merely become flesh. Still looking down, he realized he could see his own feet. The tennis shoes, though bleared with mud and gore, were his most faithful pair. His legs and trunk were draped in a one piece nurse’s smock, the uniform of his profession. The smock was half-drenched with blood and fluids. They run down his arm, dribbling from the warm length of intestine in his hand. David looked up.

The sun shone down from the cloud-spotted blue sky, and in the surrounding field, distributed through the knee-high corn, were stretchers and gurneys, men and women sitting or sprawled, prone or supine. All had limbs mangled, or heads broken, were wounded, mostly, beyond repair. And now he breathed—infection and alcohol, gangrene and sweat. He felt he could vanish on a paroxysm of hysterical air. He longed to, but he knew how important it was to try to stay human. The woman on the gurney before him, laid out at waist height on sheets of white and spreading red, was the owner of the intestine in his hand. Her UN private’s uniform was torn open in the front to match the cavity in her torso. The girl was quite dead, Metzenbergen knew, but she hadn’t been for very long—if only he could fit the intestine back into place—but she was spilling out in such abundance, it was hard to be sure where.

He considered the rest of the wounded, and looking up he found the nearby scenery seemed to fracture and part. Again, the smooth surface rippled, and he saw what he knew was there all along: blackened stubble of corn stalks and the scorched ground beneath, the heads of the enemy bobbing among the remnants of the cultivated rows.

David’s frantic gaze took in the ruined bodies nearest him, UN soldiers—and friends. Jimmy from his hometown. Gabby and that girl whose name he could never remember. The faceless woman, he knew, was his mother. Dead, all dead. But, somehow—if he had acted quicker—

The cacophony of industrial babble reasserted itself with a series of sudden, sharp cracks. The shoulder of the woman in front of him burst and her arm rolled from the edge
of the gurney. He bent to retrieve it, feeling around while he stared up at the town where snipers were crouched on the rooftops, and a tank rolled the narrow main street.

David draped the flopping intestine over its owner and tried instead to replace the arm. It wouldn’t quite go, the angle of approach wasn’t quite right. He pulled rags of tattered flesh back from the hole to better see the empty socket. A shock of cold and wet rose up from his feet. He looked down to find himself ankle deep in water—the river, he knew, had over-flowed its banks. He looked at the bodies around him as some started to rock in the mounting water. Sniper-fire removed the blond head of a cross-legged soldier. He glanced back down at the gutted, armless woman on the gurney before him. The intestine slithered from her midsection and fell, disappearing into the water. A hundred-and-fifty decibels of engine screamed. He knew he should run—he wanted to run, but mud had swallowed his feet beneath the now thigh-deep rush of river-water—

Tangled in the sheets of his bed, David Metzenbergen awoke to the rasp of his own laboured breathing. He closed his eyes and cut off the sound, shutting his mouth, blocking in the pressure of his fully-expanded lungs. He held it till dizziness lulled in his eardrums, then let it go in a rush. Afterward, he still panted, but more lightly, purely to feed his muscles now, oxygen-starved from exertion. He stared into the darkness above him.

“David.” It was a male voice, sharp and commanding, and it startled Metzenbergen. His internal organs lurched unpleasantly.

“It’s 3:55 A.M.,” the voice cracked again. “Time to rise and shine.” It was Ajax, the computer. Metzenbergen rolled onto his side, folding his pillow over the back of his head to cover his upward-facing ear. He was exhausted from his nightmare—as if he hadn’t slept at all.

“David,” came the voice again, its brittleness more emphasized. “It’s three-fifty-six—”

“I heard you the first time.” David flailed with his pillow pointlessly through the dark, it struck the bed beside his legs.

“Good morning, David.” More mellifluous now, but still, to Metzenbergen’s ears, insincere. He couldn’t help but think sometimes that the machine didn’t like him, that
perhaps it held a grudge against him. As Babe Solomon’s first-servant he was, in a way, the machine’s main rival.

“Lights on, please,” said Metzenbergen, and swung his legs out over the edge of his mattress as the ceiling took on its milky glow.

“I trust you slept well?”

The computer must be goading him. Its surveillance capabilities would surely have already discerned the truth. He answered anyway, “No. I didn’t.”

“More bad dreams, David?” It was spoken, Metzenbergen thought, with a hint of malicious joy.

“Computer, did I say I wanted to talk? Shut-up and give me a Brandenburg concerto—sound-level three. And run the shower for me, please.”

The sweet timbres of violins and horns vibrated to life in the air, accompanied by the hiss of steam spraying in the bathroom. He looked down at his toes, curling them in the short fibers of the throw-rug laid across the grey tile of his private quarters. The room was small, barely three times the size of the bed. Sparsely furnished, with just a dresser and a table aside from the bed, the floorspace seemed crowded nonetheless. The colour of the walls didn’t help. Their shade of dark salmon, chosen by Babe because Metzenbergen accidentally let it slip that he hated it, tinted everything with just that extra touch of claustrophobia. His private space. A prison to him.

He knew he shouldn’t complain. Most slaves had to spend their nights chained up outdoors, or locked in sheds.

The corners of Metzenbergen’s lips twisted downward. He stood, unsteadily, stretching, pigeon-toed and arms out, fists rotating at their ends. While the air swooned with insistent oboes and cellos, David collapsed into a hunch and scratched, flinching when, just above his temple, his fingers ran across the thin pad of a bandage. Behind the seam where the temporal and parietal bones met—that was where the wine-bottle she’d swung had hit him. It had been the wrong vintage. And he’d been wrong to turn his back on her—always, always step back before looking away—how could he have forgotten his own rule? He sighed, and shook his head gently, wary of the tenderness. His molars ground. It hadn’t even been him that had gone out to get the effing stuff, but what did
Babe care? As long as somebody suffered—the delivery-boy was as good as anyone. Metzenbergen was almost always the delivery-boy.

He remembered spinning a few steps and falling.

"Get up!" She was behind him, screaming. "If you bleed on my rug—"

He was on the persian, the dense wool imprinting itself on his cheek, it filled his horizon—he was in the livingroom of Babe Solomon's New York penthouse.

"I'm warning you, Mess—if you don't get up this fistfucking instant—" her sentence ended in a wordless half-roar, half-shriek of rage. She was having a tantrum—he heard the violent sounds of her body thrashing in her motorized Morris chair.

"Mess!" the sound was a needle pushed into his ear. His hand crumpled against the carpet in front of his eyes as he struggled to move, his limbs strengthless, barely maneuverable. The hum of her chair came in his direction, and his arm shot out spasmodically. With maddening slowness, his fingers take root in the rug.

The blurred, bare, balloons of her calves strode into view. Metz was dumbfounded—she'd gotten up. Her breath rasped and wheezed above him.

"You useless em-fuck! I knew it! Blood on my rug—"

One of her melon-feet lifted precariously from the ground—she was going to step on him. He pushed off quickly, rolling away through a world doubled in flashing pain. Sitting now, pressing his head between his hands, he looked up at her through spread fingers.

Babe Solomon, the mass of her, fish-white and pink-splotched, naked and spilling in every direction. Breasts indiscernible, camouflaged alongside all the other pendulums of flopping flesh—bush buried in the confluence of her thighs and belly. She perspired from the effort of carrying herself. Fire, the world-famous Babe fire, insatiable, salacious, raw, and destructive, spat at David from her velvet-green eyes. The bag of her forearm swam to join the amorphous swing of flesh below her tricep. She hefted the bottle of wine up beside the ball of her head. Metzenbergen was sure he saw a few strands of his hair, glinting on the butt of the glass.

"You worm. You're just lucky it didn't break." Her arm flowed again as she dropped the bottle back to her side. Her lungs, struggling at the centre of a quarter-ton of
meat, were wailing with each breath. When she talked again, the words were pumped out between whistles. "Get my—my chair—cocklicker—get it now!"

Metzenbergen relaxed the muscles of his face before taking his hand away from his features. He refused to give her the satisfaction of seeing his helpless rage. Nor did he express any glee when he saw her chair foundered on its side a few metres away, unable to come to her call.

From behind his placid slave’s mask, he stared dumbly—she would collapse onto the floor, perhaps break a leg if he didn’t get the chair for her. He removed his other hand from behind his ear. It was covered in the crimson-black of his blood.

"Emfucker—chair—fuck—killyou—"

Gingerly, David fingered the wound. It wanted stitches. He hadn’t blacked out though—no concussion, and probably no fracture. The mass of her shifted as she took a step toward him. He saw the tremors in her legs.

"—killyou—Mess—"

He stood smoothly. He gathered his dignity, trying to steady himself, feeling his blood rush, like it was beating his brain against the shore of his skull. He ambled to the head of the chair. He took a handkerchief out from his jacket’s inner pocket, then basked in the howl of frustration Babe let out as he scrupulously wiped the blood from his hands.

"Sorry, Mistress," he said, and bent to right the motorized chair. If he hadn’t gotten it to her, Metzenbergen thought, he would have only had to deal with the perilous task of getting her up off the ground. It was hard enough getting her out of bed. He still had the mark on his shoulder where she’d bitten him that morning, weeks ago.

David closed his eyes, shutting out the cloying salmon of the walls around him. He felt the burden of days past, the one to come, the ones after that, all pushing down on him. He fell back onto the rumpled blankets of his bed. Eyes still closed, he rolled over, and pulled his pillow back under his head. Bach’s trumpet bursts and piccolo trills gave way to a restrained chorus of strings. A single violin warbled free from the rest. David began to drift off.

"David Metzenbergen," the computer’s voice was louder now, impossible to ignore. "The time is 4:05 A.M."

"I thought I told you to shut up."
“David Metzenbergen—our Mistress requires her breakfast be served to her at a quarter of five. You will rise and—”

“Alright, alright.”

He stood up and padded into the bathroom. The machine, no matter how annoying, was absolutely right. Babe’s latest adfeature was being shot in town. Today’s scene took place on a yacht moored to one of the gargoyles on the Chrystler building. The director wanted to catch the first light of the morning. There would be hell to pay if Babe wasn’t there by 5:30.

The glass door to the shower-stall vibrated slightly as he popped it open. The steam was thick, and swirled gently out onto the floor. He turned in the jets, waiting for the steam to collect and streak down his skin. After a couple of minutes, he stooped to fill a basin of cold fresh water from the lower spigot. Goddamn New York, he thought, the whole place on stilts, nothing but ocean all around, and still with the water austerity—

“Steam off, please.”

The shower’s hiss ended abruptly, replaced by a splash and flap as Metzenbergen wiped himself down with a cloth that he’d dipped in the basin. He soaped his armpits and groin. While digging into the flap of his only ear, he thought about soaping the bit of hair on the sides of his head, but decided against it. He brushed his teeth. A slight echo in the bathroom made a jangle out of the concerto’s harmonies.

“Computer, rinse,” he said, and the water in the basin was sucked out its bottom to pour down on him from above. He cupped it in his hands to rinse out his creases and crevices. He gargled, then spat, looking down at the water swirling around his feet, staring while the dregs sprinkled down on his bald scalp, and even after that was gone.

He was thinking of the eddies in another time, another place. He was remembering a basement in Tblisi. Waiting for the evacuation. Fifteen weeks after whoever it was made rubble out of Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock—about a year before the Chinese invaded Taiwan while the Western world, distracted by problems of its own, looked the other way.

The Georgian robber barons had seen their chance to take back what they’d had before the peace-keepers arrived. Firefights had broken out all over the city. The sound of traffic and shouts of commerce at the city’s centre gave way to the whoosh-and-burst of
mortar shells, screams, shouts, screeching tires and the crackling of automatic weapons—and then the wounded. The hospital itself, of course, was alternately filled with the moans and wailing of damaged men and women, the odd child, or a thunderhead of silence.

The building was an abandoned school. It had been filled with Red Cross equipment as the UN expanded its role in Eurasia. Metzenbergen had been transferred from the Ambulance Corps in Kiev. He'd been grateful for the transfer. In Kiev, he delivered babies, splinted legs, dealt with contusions and car accidents, stabilized minor wounds of all kinds. In Tblisi, though, he got to move inside, where the real work was happening, where, though just an orderly, he could train as a nurse.

When he arrived, the patients, mostly locals, among whom all the real violence occurred, fit into two classrooms, with a third set aside for the sporadic influxes of ill or hurt UN soldiers. The wards were looked after by Red Cross unit 5225, about twenty-five medical personnel, all serious, but optimistic, working with a small group of local professionals. The air was thick with antiseptic and purpose.

Now, though, the place stank with fear and exhaustion. The first wave of military casualties had showed up with a platoon of Italian Army wearing both Euro and UN insignia. A squad of French infantry had been ambushed on a patrol through Zhirinovzky Square—eleven injured, a few of them just scratched by flying shrapnel, but two came in dead. The fighting went on, the badly wounded were sewn up and air-vacced away, but the Italians stayed, commandeering the school's second floor, and exchanging a little gunfire now and then with shadows and automobiles.

Their young commander, Major Ciccione, had guns set up on the roof and sandbags stacked up against everything. The Georgian doctors and attendants started to dissipate in drips and drabs. Dr. Oblansky, who's foreign, fatherly way had been a source of encouragement to David, was beaten badly for 'co-operating.' This, even though the majority of the patients the shot-up and bleeding, were his attackers' own neighbors, and not UN troops at all. The doctor was stopped on his way home, dragged out of his car, and savagely kicked and bludgeoned by one of the recently armed gangs engaged in the city's turf-wars. He went to another hospital for medical help. No one but the Red Cross team came back to the school after that. And all of them started spending their nights there.
There were rumors the UN was pulling back past the Dniester river, that the 5225 would be re-grouping in Warsaw, or was getting shipped to some other hotspot in the Balkans. The international coalition was fracturing, everyone was terrified of the growing land war in the Mid-East. One night, another orderly woke David up to tell him someone had heard the rumors confirmed on the radio—the retreat had begun.

Dr. James, the medical chief-of-staff and a First Lieutenant himself, had gone to confront Ciccione, furious that, as head of Metz’s unit, he hadn’t been officially informed. The doctor came back flustered, he’d been stonewalled with an official “need to know basis.” The Major hadn’t felt any of the meds had any “need to know” about the impending evacuation. Besides, as they’d be among the last to go, he’d seen no reason to add to the existing tension.

He was right, too. After that, distrust settled like a bad debt between the Red Cross unit and the Italians. Everyone was very afraid, and inexorably that fear worked its way into all their relationships. The local brigands, it seemed, had begun to really enjoy the cat-and-mouse game they were playing with the UN medical station. The incidents of random gunfire aimed at the hospital became quite regular, and mortar shells started landing in the buildings around the appropriated school. The electricity was cut off.

The Major decided to move the recovery rooms into the basement. There were a few large, low-ceilinged storage rooms down there, but the wounded had been coming in all the while, and beds had to be lined up in the pipe laden hallways. The grind of generators vibrated continually in the air. The Major said it was for safety, but the talk among the Red Cross staff focussed mostly on the two floors of fragile concrete above their heads.

They were all working around the clock. Metzenbergen was everywhere, emptying bedpans, giving injections, and handing instruments to the doctors in surgery. They worked with what they thought was a minimum of grumbling, but the Major gave Dr. James a public dressing down about insubordination in the ranks, and after that the 5225 was left even more in the dark.

Then, one evening, the medi-vac choppers were on a typical run out—broken arm, stab wound, three cases of dysentery—and one of its gunship escorts was shot down.
Metzenbergen had just run back from the stinging winds of the rotors after carrying out the stab wound. In an alcove of the school’s side-doorway, he stopped to look back over the sandbags and watch the flight. He loved to watch those bug-like birds angle up over the abandoned tenements—especially into an evening sky, as this was—a purpled atmosphere laced with red-fingered clouds.

In less than a minute they were already blocks away, halved in size by perspective, when one of them started to fly sideways, and dropped into the town below. The chopper’s tail had been shot off, but that strange, sinking pirouette was so unlikely to Metzenbergen that, at first, he didn’t understand what had happened. The scene seemed so dissassociated from reality that the whoosh and pop that accompanied it could not be related. His bewilderment grew when he saw the other gunship turn around, abandoning the medi-vacs. The blaze of its .70 calibers, though, and the rush and jabber of men at the school doors behind him drove home the facts of what he’d seen.

In what looked like an overzealous rush, the Italians tried to get to the downed crew. Air support came and went. From various deserted classrooms, an electrified 5225 watched, armed and unmoving, listening to a constant clatter of gunfire. Nearly all of them were still watching after darkness set in, even though there were patients to be looked after, even though they couldn’t see anything. And then, around 2 a.m., a pallid Major Ciccione came in with an entirely new set of Italian soldiers, they were dragging a few of the original bunch, all horribly wounded. Metz remembered the tatters of one woman’s arm—a woman he’d first hungered for, and then hated as one of the ‘fascist eye-ties.’ He remembered a doctor yelling at him to stop staring and hand him some clamps.

Hours later, the surgeries were swamped. David had been in the basement, putting new sheets on some empty gurneys, when he felt the rumble. Plaster rained down from the ceiling and he dropped to the ground. A volley of rockets had landed in the school’s compound, close enough to level one end of the building, and turn the rest into chaos.

The explosion, unbelievably, hurt no one, but damaged water mains started pumping water liberally into the basement recovery rooms. The new Italians cobbled together a pump, and stacked sandbags, but they could only do so much. The water rose
steadily for the next eight days. The medi-vacs stopped coming, and the recovery rooms became crowded with islands of injured and dying men and women.

The liquid floor’s gurgle as it rose to meet the low ceiling, the pump’s irregular clank, the generator’s rumble—the constant noise had been nearly more than he could stand. That and the growing rot in his constantly soaked feet—the grey water licking at his calves, at the backs of his knees, at his thighs, while he sloshed back and forth among patients, trying to explain their shortage of pain-killers. Eight days, and then Major Ciccione finally gave the word that it was time to go.

Metzenbergen pulled his face back from the misted see-through wall of the shower stall. He looked at the clear smudge left behind by his smooth, round forehead.

“Fistfucking dream,” he said, and banged open the shower door with the butt of his palm. He stepped out of the shower and crossed the bathroom. When was the last time he’d had it, anyway? Months ago.

“Dryer, on.” Warm air coursed over his body.

It was this place, he thought. New York, the floating-fucking-apple—

He stepped back into his bedroom.

“Computer,” he said, “Show me the day.”

A seam appeared in the salmon above the bed. Two panels in the wall parted and withdrew from an three-by-one meter window looking westward into the blackness of pre-dawn New York. The light in the room obscured the view with a piecemeal reflection of the bedroom and its contents, including himself.

“As you see, David,” said the computer, “It is not quite yet daytime. If you like, however, I can supply you with a report of the upcoming weather.”

Metz ignored the suggestion. He’s sure the only reason Ajax, the name which David refused to use, had made the offer was to break the silence he’d tried to impose upon it. It was possible—even likely—that Babe had it programmed to be as contrary with him as possible.

“Lights at twenty percent, please.”

The Bach concerto seemed suddenly annoying. Its transporting strain collided with his thoughts, their movements at odds with each other.

“Music—off.”
In the softly-lit silence, David began to pick out the details in the darkness outside his window. He could make out no real horizon in the murk that engulfed the distance. His eyes were attracted by the lights that bobbed here and there at the top of the buoys that formed lines as they receded into invisibility. Metzenbergen walked round the foot of his bed to approach the transparent polymer. He looked down. A choreography of gilded waves danced within the haloes cast from the buoying lights.

Babe’s penthouse was six floors propped forty meters up over the waves of the Atlantic. Metzenbergen’s room was on the second floor, with the other servants quarters and the kitchens, above the laundry and the boiler systems. Above these two opaquely walled floors were the four stories of one-way glass—Babe’s penthouse, a stilt-world anchored to the ocean floor, eighty metres below, amid the ruined home of some long-ago president’s wife.

Metzenbergen was distracted by a group of multi-coloured lights in motion. A water-taxi had emerged from behind a tangle of rusting girders that jutted up from the roil of water—the wreckage of an old tenement. Most of the city had collapsed under the pounding of waves that from time-to-time used to come in fifteen meter swells. A breakwater, built in 2027, had saved a few, and enabled the construction of a new, ridiculously expensive sort of dwelling, like Babe’s—built on stilts of super-strong metal. Only a few such functioning buildings were within eyesight, their roof-tops aglow with the illumination from their helipads. The neighbourhood was a step beyond exclusive.

A resort for the ultra-rich, David thought. The ultra-stupid, more like it. Who else could be so arrogant to use the permanently shifting ocean as a foundation for a house? He remembered a poem from his schooldays, and mumbled, “My name is Ozymandias—look on my works and tremble.” David imagined the storm that he knew one day would wash the last of New York out to sea—he saw the wall of water curling toward him, inevitable, indomitable, uprooting the nearby homes like so many feeble weeds.

He’d seen it happen before. He remembered the last moments of his freedom, eighty kilometers outside of Tblisi. He remembered running, and falling, dragged down by the flow of the Kura river—the rough hands that grabbed and pulled him to his feet only to pummel him back onto his knees. The rage he saw in the villagers’ faces, their
need to blame someone for the thigh-high water in their streets—the flattened houses, the waterlogged livestock—all convinced him he was about to die.

The villagers had lost nearly everything when the hydro-electric dam upstream had been destroyed. No one knew who was responsible, but there among the remnants of their crushed houses, they didn’t care one bit. They’d caught him, and, to make a proper scapegoat of him, they’d dragged him back to the site of their misfortune.

Two nights before, on the run in the in the foothills of the Caucasus, skirting the top edge of a sloped clearing, he’d seen the river strike. He’d heard a faint roar and hiss, saw the flash-flood convulsing down the ribbon of the Kura. He watched it for a moment, expanding as it swallowed fields and homesteads, and then he kept moving. He had to get to Batumi, on the Black Sea—two hundred and fifty miles—ten days—he was sure the UN would hold on to the port for at least another ten days. He moved mostly at night, trying to stay hidden during the day.

Two days later, he was making good time—or so he thought. He’d managed to stay off the roads, but had found a lot of good horse-trails and paths, and his energy was still good. As the sun was rising, he’d found a cave in which he thought he could get some rest.

The cave—Metzenbergen remembered the relief he had felt discovering it. He slammed his fists into the sides of his head. The wound in his temple flared, and David welcomed the pain, squeezing his eyes shut, the view of New York forgotten.

How could have been so stupid? He had practically tripped over the sentry that was placed at the cave’s entrance. The village’s evacuees were packed into it. Of course! Fucked! Obviously!

The young man at the door had shouted, and then the chase, the smack of bullets passing through bark and leaves, and the tears of begging surrender. And then, the cat-and-mouse—pummelled and pushed, the promise of escape dangled then denied—out of the woods and down into the eddies and sticks of their town, sure, the whole time, he was about to die.

Of course he hadn’t. They’d put him to work, diving and sifting through the unstable buildings, retrieving clothing and tools, and the bodies of the drowned. Things
had gotten a little easier for him when they’d found out he had some medical skill, but not a lot.

His last hours of freedom.

Metzenbergen opened his eyes to the confines of his private quarters.

Eleven years ago. It had taken a few months for him to realize it at the time, but he’d been a slave.

“David, you know it’s not productive to dwell on the past.”

He whirled away from the window and yelled into the ceiling, “You diode! I told you to shut up!”

“I prefer to be called Ajax, thank you.”

Metzenbergen realized he’d succumbed to the instinct to look upward for the source of the computer’s disembodied voice, as if it were his superior, as if it were God. He loathed himself for it. He turned back toward the window. “I prefer my machines to be seen and not heard.”

“This is no time for self-pity, David. Your mistress requires your attention. It’s 4:22 A.M., and she refuses to wake up.”

Maybe she was finally dead, he thought, and a bark of joyous laughter leapt from the back of his throat. He revelled in the thought for a moment, and then his shoulders sagged. He knew how unlikely it was. Babe’s latest set of internal organs had all been installed just months ago. She was probably just too drunk.

Now, instead of just bringing her breakfast, he would have to bring his little-black-bag to administer a shot of noradrenaline. It was going to be a horrible day. “You could wake her up if you wanted to,” he said, accusing the computer.

“Neither, I’m afraid, is this the time to re-iterate our respective duties toward our mistress, David. It’s 4:23—”

“Alright,” he screamed. “All-emfucking-right.” He waved his hand furiously. “Light’s up, then.”

In the viewing panel, he watched the room’s likeness reassert itself atop the view of New York. If only Ditto were here, David thought. Babe was always better when Ditto was there. But Ditto was elsewhere. Gone to talk to someone about “building a pool on the moon.” Metzenbergen wasn’t sure he really understood, but he’d been there when
Ditto promised Babe he’d build a house up there for her. The idea of the instant weight-loss had made her positively giddy.

“It’s 4:24—”

“I’m not deaf!”

“David—”

“Can’t you just—” His eyes closed.

“Our mistress—”

“Just give me a few minutes, please?” His lids clicked open and he stared at the fractured reflection of himself.

“Why you should want time to pick at the scab of your past, David, does not compute. But I will alert you again at 4:28 A.M.”

The face on the flat polymer sneered back at him. Fuck-you, he thought, very much for reminding me.

The twenty-three year-old face he’d seen in the dream was not the face he saw now. The eyes were sunken, darker at the edges, drooping at the bottom. The sphere of his cranium had become that much more visible as his hair has eroded away from his crown. He saw it as a round, heavy rock stained with a layer of hairless skin, the browning moss dying away from its peak, calcifying, here and there, to white. His nose had narrowed to the hook that the beak of his younger days had prophesied.

David was only thirty-five, but he looked fifty. Grooves were etched into the sheerness of his cheeks and forehead. And then, of course, there was the hole in the side of his head where his ear used to be. He turned to the right so that he could see it—the open tunnel to his brain, a black spot at the centre of a cropped semi-circle of hair. In more fanciful moments, he saw it as a kind of obscene eye, or as an impact crater. Mostly, though, he saw a visible echo of the bullet that tore away the flap of flesh and cartilage—the terse syllable of his sentencing.

Major Ciccione had given the anticipated order. The unit was to evacuate the school as expeditiously as possible. Metzenbergen was moving through the recovery rooms, preparing the wounded for air-lift, when the word came that there would be no air-lift, at least not from the hospital. Patients and all essential equipment were to be loaded into ambulances and troop-trucks and driven to the UN-held Tblisi airport. From
there they’d all be flown clear of the combat-zone. Apparently, some general had decided that the fighting was too thick around the hospital to risk a prolonged fly-over operation. They believed it would be safer for everybody simply to drive out under the inviolable auspices of the Red Cross insignia.

David had been very afraid many times since he had arrived in Tbilisi. He’d been confronted by armed street toughs, and saved lives—his fear had galvanized him and he’d performed well under pressure. When, in the last weeks, the fear became constant, he hadn’t cracked. In the dark, sometimes, when no one could see him, if the pump coughed in just the right way, he literally dove for cover, but mostly he was a rock. His sleepless attention, and constant good humour, made him an inspiration to the wounded.

David had spent thousands of hours pathologically remembering those days. The violent parting of his ear from his head had become its central, symbolic moment. In that decisive instant, Metzenbergen had put the hopes of his youth forever out of reach. With his actions he proved himself worthless as a man, and was condemned to become no more than property.

He was spilled with a tangle of bloody, hurt bodies out the back of his overturned ambulance. Their convoy had been stopped by three, maybe four pre-millenial SUV’s—Metzenbergen, dazed, hadn’t really counted. Sprawled at the edge of the road, he saw the lead troop-truck in flames and the enemy’s battered vehicles straddling the road beyond. Searching his memory, he found an explosion—the troop-truck, he supposed—and then the bullets blowing through the cab of the ambulance.

Sitting up, bizarrely clear-minded, he guessed Chuck, their driver, had been shot, leaving the ambulance to careen into something that had turned it sideways. As he struggled to his feet, he heard shouts in Italian behind him and realized that he was about to be caught in a crossfire. He looked down at his patients strewn over the concrete around him. He knew them all to some degree, talked with them about their families, their hometowns. By himself, he’d wept in pity for their condition, and prayed that he could help them better. He looked down at the man nearest him, his legs splayed and useless, straining to get under the cover of the upset vehicle, gasping out for help.

It was then he felt it—the briefest tug at the side of his skull. With irresistible force, it spun his head to the left, and then mercifully let go. His hand went up and came
down covered in blood. He turned full circle and saw nothing but guns pointed in his direction. He bolted.

He ran to the closest building and dove through a window whose pane had been broken out. He rolled and kept running, out the back and down a narrow, twisted alleyway.

He recognized now that the only way he'd gotten through the Georgians' gauntlet was by the sure hand of God, saving him for a more fitting, and severe punishment.

He spent four nights in the wreckage of a caved-in restaurant, knowing he had to leave, but unable to move. By the time he got to the Tblisi airport, it was half in flames.

David had wandered away from the window in his room. He was staring at the blank salmon shade of the wall beside his dresser. He would do anything to be able to change that moment.

"David, it's 4:28 A.M."

*

Seven days after, 11:30 AM

Citizen Altavera Cruz steps between the two passengers already aboard the levitator. "Level thirty-one, please." An unnatural echo accompanies es words—an other fem voice has simultaneously piped up with an identical request.

The doors swish shut and the lev speaks, confirming the dual command, but Altavera isn't listening. E turns and gives the girl behind em a look that pushes her a step back, into the wall of the closed doors.

The fleshborn fool has been dogging Altavera’s heels since the moment e entered the hospital—chased em through the atrium, and now, apparently, into the lev as well. It is the first time Altavera has acknowledged her presence.

The medtech looks down, speaking to cover for her clumsiness, "Your spouse has responded excellently to treatment, Citizen Cruz."

The girl, perhaps fifty-years-old and hungry for rejuvenation, wants to show em the way to the recovery ward. Altavera knows very well where David's room is located.
What the medtech really wants is to be noticed by a Citizen, thinking it will help her to shed her sagging, thin as ash, first skin.

The lev's voice whispers a number, and momentum lurches in Altveta's gut. As the medtech jostles side-to-side to let the other two passengers off, Altveta reads the nametag fixed to her white uniform: 'M. Blake.' The doors swish closed. 'M' for mistake, e thinks, and looks up at the floor-display. Altveta's innards roll as the digits flash.

E thinks of David as e last saw em: unconscious, new plumbing—a bladder and a length of intestine—sutured in and smeared with enhanced tissue fragments. Seeing the puckered wounds, watching them slowly heal, Altveta recognized impatience—a long forgotten feeling. Ridiculously, e'd found emself trying to will the injury to heal faster.

The medtech speaks. Altveta grimaces.

"Citizen Metzenbergen only regained consciousness about an hour ago, but e’s very close to full recovery."

Altveta, two hundred and twenty-six years old, was quite familiar with the aftermath of organ transplant. Though not instant, cellular adjustments rendered the whole process very speedy. How to shake this Blake? The flash of changing digits slows and ceases. E would indeed remember this bothersome girl—

"E's been talking, and laughing—"

The doors slide open. Altveta steps past the girl.

"E's talking to the police right now."

Altveta stops, putting es hands out against the open panels of the lev’s door.

"You mean to the guard who was on duty?"

"No. It’s a detective MacAfferty who’s in there now, Citizen Cruz. He arrived about twenty minutes ago."

M. Blake—awake after all? She'd deflected the blame, then given the name, even provided a time-frame.

MacAfferty—that was the detective, the ex-Citizen, who'd talked to em earlier—the one who'd made that spectacular arrest. Alberni Precinct Investigation—only them. Altveta feels a cool internal wash that e identifies as relief. E despises the puerile
physical reaction and thinks of Metz, the cause of this juvenile, autonomic riot. E turns in the doorway.

"What does the ‘M’ stand for anyway, medtech Blake?"

The girl’s cheeks colour, she ducks her head to look at the nameplate, as if it’s only now come into existence.

"Millicent.” Her watery eyes shine, an illusion of youth.

Altavera steps backward, staring at the girl until the doors begin to slide shut.

The medtech unfreezes, hurrying to shout through the narrowing seam, “It’s an honour to be of service—”

Altavera turns again. Millicent, oh, Millicent, you are far too innocent. E steps onto a conveyor disc. “Room 3144b. Direct, double-quick.” The disc tilts, accelerating past the attendant in reception, who straightens, ejaculating a hasty “Greetings, Citizen.”

The Albernii Infirmary is a long, tiered structure, forty-five stories tall at one end, dropping down, staircase-like, to a mere three at the other. The hall Altavera sails down skirts along the transparent curve of the outer wall at the taller end. Though the dayshine of Albernii Industrial Park seeps unimpeded into the corridor, such is its strength that glow-panels in the roof are still required. The wall opposite is broken by doorways at regular intervals, some closed, but others that open onto the view of a bed, blankets either stretched flat, or mounded over a human form.

Two docs, neither of them Citizens, are coming down the hall toward Altavera. They step off their conveyor disc and enter a room just ahead. Altavera cruises by just as one laughs at something the other has said.

The patients—the squirming infirm—that Altavera observes in passing are mostly sububbanites. Here and there, she witnesses a family scene: the visitors in from between the walls—the decay of out there, magically halted in here, even reversed—a new hip or heart for auntie, a spine for the twisted son.

Around the hall’s curve, a stretch of closed doors comes into view.

“Stop transport.” The disc glides to a standstill, and Altavera steps off. Satisfied e’s outside the view of human eyes she leans heavily against the one, long rail that interrupts the smoothness of the transparent wall. Nothing can stay hidden for long in the IP, but that’s no reason to put up with the prying of just any flesh eyes.
“A small glass of lemon-water, please,” e says. Perhaps a drink will help e think.

Altavera looks out into the soup of rainbow-streaked grey that shrouds the concrete promontories and alloyed swells of the city’s buildings. Lights twinkle through the clouds of nanotech that wend purposefully into every nook and cranny. Haunting spirits—Altavera likes to thinks of them that way—restless, but anchored to these remnants of the high-tech past, trapped beneath the city’s domed wall—or so it is fervently hoped, as they’d likely dismantle the Earth if they got out on their own. Leashed behind the Wall, though, the microscopic machinery serves, doing all the real work—sanitation, maintenance, surveillance—

Altavera hears a tiny click, and turns to watch the little tray with its liquid burden float out from behind a small, square opening in the wall. A voice murmurs, “Your lemon-water, Citizen Altavera.”

Surveillance. Altavera repeats the word to emself as e removes the glass from its perch. Surveillance and the decorum of privacy—this is the key to approaching this MacAfferty—who is he to invade the patient’s space before even es married has spoken to em? E takes a mouthful of es drink.

The nanotech clusters have thickened since the incident. Between the Earth’s perpetual fog, the dulling shimmer of the Wall, and the now thickened swirl of nanotech, the city seems reduced to a mere silhouette of itself—a dark, angled horizon with a single, black spike jabbing precipitously up from its centre. The tower, nailed through the Earth’s crust, is kilometers long, though only a fraction of it rises above the ground. It is the energy source for the broadcast that powers the Industrial Zone in its bubble, trickles over the sububs, and gives vitality to the Wall that holds back the ice.

Looking out now at the source of the lights that glint through the darkened cityscape, Altavera is reminded of an antiquated ritual. Like a candle, e thinks, stuck into a—what were they called again? A jack-o-lantern—a candle shining through the features pricked through the pumpkin mask. E takes another sip of the lemon-water, then replaces the half-full glass on the floating tray.
Yes, e thinks, the detective has stolen David’s first waking moments from em. E’ll make a scene—make the boy share whatever conversation merited such bad behaviour. E waves a hand. “Finished,” e says, and the tray vanishes into the wall.

Altavera looks down and yet another image flashes through es head. The building directly opposite is the public body bank, a mirror-image to the infirmary, though smaller. It’s the final resting place of criminals and victims of disease or accident—a new hip for auntie, a spine for the twisted son, a tainted heart to replace the failing one—an aquarium, a billion litres worth, limbs and livers swimming—eel intestines, dendrite tendrils of jellyfish brains, anemone arms with fingers waving. Altavera imagines them coming together, here and there, in monstrous combinations, then falling apart again—a primordial soup, combining and re-combining. Es hands drop from the rail.

Altavera gives es head a shake and steps back onto es conveyor disc. “Continue transport. Destination as before.” Since being forced from the Council fifteen years ago, e’s been pursuing es poetry more seriously. E hasn’t been too successful—the urge always comes at such awkward times.

Suppressing es imagination, Altavera focuses on specific physiological functions. E increases the bloodstream to the capillaries in es cheeks, adds half a degree to es body temperature, and forces a sheen of dampness to film over es eyes. As the disc banks right, away from the curve of the transparent wall, the adrenal stink of anxiety is squeezed from es pores. When, a short time later, e turns right again, the effect is complete. And not a moment too soon—still about ten meters from es married’s recovery room, Altavera recognizes Chief Detective Daniel MacAfferty, squeezing his way into the hall, his bulk eclipsing the officer on duty by the door. “Stop transport.”

The whites of the detective’s eyes, highlighted in the deep black of his face, vanish as his gaze drops away after seeing her. He’s looking at the hat in his hands, worrying its brim between his sausage-thick fingers, a child caught red-handed in his transgression. E watches the detective steeling himself—broad shoulders broaden, and his height straightens upward as he comes toward her down the hall—scorning, Altavera notes, the use of a conveyor disc. Watching es long strides, Altavera finds emself wondering who manufactured this body for him. Why so huge? Making up for some flesh-fostered insecurity—likely the reason he couldn’t make it as a Citizen.
“Citizen Cruz,” the Detective’s baritone rumbles at em as he draws near. “Your married seems fully recovered, I’m happy to say.” His hand comes out, “Chief Detective Daniel MacAfferty.”

Altavera ignores the proffered mitt. Apparently the boy’s forgotten he’s a Citizen no longer. Forced to tilt es head well-back to look into the detective’s face, Altavera surmises how wrong-doers must tremble when faced with this mass of carved flesh. The detective’s slicker is black, scarred, rises up from the ground like some strange architectural feature of the corridor. His rad-suit, unnecessary inside the Walls, is still on, the boots peek out below, and the hood, pulled back from the globe of his stubbly head is gathered around the slicker’s collar. The first time they’d met, briefly in Altavera’s offices, this MacAfferty had exuded a similar kind of needless readiness. She saw now that the look had been cultivated. It made it easy to imagine heads flying, holes punched through flesh, the danger of this man in action.

At present though, Altavera reminds emself, it is this boy who has something to answer for.

“I would thank you for the news, officer,” e says, “but it is no news to me.”

Looking at em, the detective openly smiles, displaying a crescent-moon glow of teeth. “No, course not.” He steps sideways to go round Altavera. “Good day to you, Citizen.”

She speaks sharply, her inflection studied, impossible to ignore, “Why then is e not with you?”

Cruz has used the vocal technique e employs with unruly sububban servants. MacAfferty turns to look down at the small female body before him. It was a mistake, he thinks, to find this woman amusing—or at least to let it show. He’s aware, after all, of this Citizen’s origins. Indeed, he sees Cruz too clearly—the delicate dress of blue chiffon, the delicate hands, the soft halo of dark hair, all betrayed by the unblemishable iron detectible beneath es seamless features. His Citizenship gone, MacAfferty’s face was the last place that should be sporting any kind of knowing smile. Whatever else Cruz had intended by her insulting inflection, e’d succeeded in making his smile go away.
Briefly, MacAfferty contemplates throwing Altavera’s vocal technique straight back at em, but knows it would only make things worse. Instead, he simply responds to es question, “Why is who not with me, ma’am?”

“Citizen Metzenbergen,” says Altavera, with the slightest hiss, like that of falling snow. “I can only assume that your immediate presence was required to make some kind of arrest.”

MacAfferty feels he should be getting used to being upbraided by the Citizenry by now, but he isn’t. He unclenches his jaws. “Well, no. I——”

“Thank the Lifeform. It’s good to have the assurance of the police that my married was not complicit in shooting out es own small intestine.” Altavera pauses to let the insult sink in. “Or was this just a friendly visit?”

MacAfferty sighs, looking down the hall where he now longs to be going. “No, Citizen Cruz. I wish it were, but really, I just had a few questions about the incident.”

“Questions? I thought the perpetrators had been caught.”

“Well, yes——”

“These must have been very important inquiries.”

Something in the way this last question is asked makes MacAfferty look back into the well of Cruz’s eyes. The colour in es cheeks, he realizes, is a put-on. He waits, forcing Cruz to come to es point.

Altavera notes an infinitesimal shift in the Detective’s demeanor. “Such important inquiries, that no more civilized time could be found to ask them?”

“Perhaps not, Citizen Cruz.” MacAfferty chooses his words carefully. “One can never be sure what a few inquiries might turn up.” Let the woman insult him, he thinks, this is getting interesting.

“I trust David’s answers were all satisfactory?”

“They were.” At least he’d thought so up until a minute ago. “He answered them all quite happily.” And he had, indeed the man’s exuberance had struck MacAfferty as a bit strange—making jokes at es own expense, referring to MacAfferty with a comradely ‘Dan.’ Had MacAfferty even told the patient his first name?

“And did your inquiries,” Altavera asks, slipping into a persuasive lilt, “‘turn’ anything ‘up,’ Detective MacAfferty?”
Cruz’s verbal trick is wasted on MacAfferty. He has nothing to hide. “No, Citizen Cruz.” Metzenbergen couldn’t remember anything after the moment he was shot. “Your married had nothing new to add to the case.” He lets his answer hang while Cruz scrutinizes his features for the lie. He waits until he sees that Altavera’s satisfied before does a bit of his own baiting. “It’s been a pleasure to meet your married. I’ve never seen a victim of such barbarity display such joviality. E seemed quite—” he pretends to search for the word, “—unrestrained.”

Altavera stares at the detective. ‘Unrestrained’? It’s a word he really doesn’t like.

“But I forget my manners,” the Detective says. An understatement! Altavera waits for the apology to continue, but when he opens his mouth it’s only to say, “I’m keeping you from your visit.” The hat goes onto his head. “Good day to you, Citizen Cruz.”

Altavera is left watching the black, craggy wall of the man retreating down the hall—on foot. The red that now comes up in es complexion is completely unintentional. Yet another long dead emotion—anger is still familiar, but humiliation! E wonders suddenly if e’s told more than e’s learned. Who is this Daniel MacAfferty? Not at all the incompetent the ‘ex’ of his ex-Citizenship implied. Misjudging a medtech, that was harmless, but this—this could have dangerous consequences.

Es head turns again toward the entrance to es married’s recovery room farther down the hall. Metz—what had e gotten them into this time?

Altavera takes a few quick steps down the corridor, but stops just outside the room.

Through the doorway, narrowed by perspective, a smear of colour stands out from the luminous white of the walls. Flowers, bouquets and bouquets of them. Altavera closes es eyes and draws the air deeply into es lungs. Carnation. Peony. And another breath. Primrose. Altavera chides emself—e’s been acting as if e were nothing but freshflesh! Azalea, eglantine. Can’t forget—the hidey-eyes are watching. Thimbleberry, tulip, daffodil. ‘Unrestrained’! What the fix had that eff-pixing fixer of a detective meant?

Altavera sweeps into es married’s recovery room. The smell of flesh quick-stitching punches through the fake smells of the fake flowers. E comes to a halt just inside the thresh-hold. Metz is sitting up, bare-chested, in es bed. Enconced in a twist of
white sheets, e stretches es arms open, displaying the white crisscross of scar marbled onto es torso.

"Al-ta-vera!" e says, stringing out es words in a way that matches the smile strung out, cheek to cheek, across es face. "I thought it must be you! I heard voices in the hall—"

Altavera looks at the flowers. Artificial, e thinks, like the friends that sent them, like that unbecoming smile. E looks back at es married. "You act surprised. Were you expecting anyone else?" The dig is old, a reference to the many girls of Metz’s past, the girls that were forever, finally, left for Altavera to deal with. It’s meant to shut es married up. But it doesn’t. David’s arms only open farther in invitation.

"Why are you standing so far away? Come closer, my love."

Altavera recalls the deep shadow of MacAfferty’s face, the dark tunnel of his voice, "Unrestrained."

"I want a better look at you," adds Metz.

The comment, made after nearly two hundred years of looking at each other, through each other, body after body, is beyond unexpected. It’s Altavera that has been ‘shut up.’ Reversal—the third time in less than an hour—it feels so oddly familiar now, e can do nothing but surrender to it. E strays to the foot of the bed.

"It feels like forever since I last saw you," David says, his hands finally falling back onto the bed.

Altavera can only shake es head. "It was only—"

Metz leans forward to pat the bed to his right with the flat of his hand. "Closer."

"I saw you less than ten days ago." E steps round the bed’s corner to lean a buttock on the edge of the bedspread.

"Practically a lifetime ago! When that madman shot me, he was about as far away as you are now. There were skulls in his eyes, sugar! Skulls!" E reaches out and grabs Altavera around the shoulders, pulling es married down in the bed beside em. Altavera finds no power to resist.

"Touch me," Metz says. "Kiss me, sugar. Remind me I’m alive." Es face blocks out Altavera’s view, Metz’s tongue invades es mouth.

Altavera pulls es face away. "You’ve had accidents before, Metz."
"I heard your voice in the hall," Metz says. Then e leans closer, wanting to whisper something. Altavera tilts an ear toward es lips.

"I got ready for you." Metz pulls the sheets down from es waist to reveal es erection. "Ready and waiting for you, sugar." E grabs es penis, gyrates es hips and gives it a vigorous jerking.

Altavera is on es feet in an instant. "Alright, David. Enough." E smoothes out the fluffed-up cobalt of es clothes. "I didn't come here to play games." E watches as a pained expression leaks out to the edges of Metzenbergen's face. David's arms stretch out again like useless wings.

"But, sugar, its been so long."

Probably thirty-five years, thinks Altavera. Half the Council laughing at me, and you saying you loved whichever freshborn flesh it was that time. Back when the cock was mine, and you deserved a good rape. "You'll have to wait a while, David." Maybe till alfalfa grows on Mars.

The arms drop back to the bedspread. "Has all the passion really gone?"

Altavera tastes a sourness spreading on es palate. Passion! Such an ugly word.

"Stop." Without moving es head, Altavera inclines her gaze to the ceiling, asking Metzenbergen to think about the hidey-eyes. Metz laughs. Altavera makes a second gesture, a private one, understood only by the two of them. Metz covers himself, but chuckles on.

"Stop," says Altavera, employing es command inflection. "Now really isn't the time." The likelihood of direct monitoring was too high.

"But, sugar—"

"And you can stop calling me that. You know I don't like it."

"Since when?"

"Since always, Metz." Could something have gone wrong in organ-trans? "I'm glad you're feeling well." Surely someone would have told em? "You are feeling well, aren't you David?"

"Perfectly," e says, but adds, once again, that disconcerting laugh.

"Metz, a madman tried to kill you."
“Yes. I guess he must have been mad. That Detective was telling me some sordid stuff about him defiling the templates. Some kind of obsession over the one we were about to embody with Citizen Donsacker—”

Altavera makes another sign. Metzenbergen is telling em things e already knows. Es pinky finger folds in, and e taps it twice with es thumb.

David starts laughing uproariously. “He told me that I’d been some kind of hero! Crawling around with a hole in my gut trying to save the other victims. Sound familiar?”

Altavera gives the sign again, tapping with es thumb. This time the internal wash of relief e feels is most welcome; the face of David’s template, in its tertiary stage, oldish and stilted with the amazed conceits of es centuries-worth of survival, takes on its most calculating blankness.

“Do you remember, Alta-ver-a—” A smile flickers, but is gone. “When we left the Moon, that last time?”

“Of course I do.” Altavera inclines es head to the right. The Moon is indeed what e wants to talk about, “But please stop that.”

“Stop what, Alta-v—”

“Mimicking that criminal, Ditto Straub, when you say my name.”

“Was I?”

“You promised you’d never do that again.”

“I—”

“Honour your word, Citizen.”

“I was remembering the Moon, I—” Metzenbergen looks up, acknowledging the hidey-eye’s vigilance and his promise. “I apologize for my transgression, Citizen Altavera.”

“What else did the Detective tell you, David? The facts indicate they’ve caught their culprits in the flesh of the act. Was his need to see the convalescent really so very pressing?”

“He told me of the events, of course. I don’t think he was really looking for anything.”

What Metz ‘thinks’ is of no interest to Altavera. E waits.
“Lifeform preserve us—Can you imagine, Altavera? Three of them—all deviant. And somehow all in the same place.”

So, the truth—that cop must have been after something.

“And me, Altavera, somehow in the middle. Again! I’ve squeaked through the needle’s eye again!”

There is no denying it.

“I’ve survived the odds again. I think this proves my theory.”

There is no denying it, but still—

“Anomalies attract anomaly. The more my life defies the statistics, the more unlikely must my surroundings become—

But still, that doesn’t mean Altavera wants to hear his eff-pixing fix of a theory again. “Metz—”

“I’ll have to perform a new document on the subject.”

Altavera is sure he will, too. “Metz—”

David looks up at em, and es face cracks open to spit out that laugh again. “But it’s all spam and fleshtesticals to you, isn’t it?” E laughs.

Altavera thought of Metz’s ‘theory of anomaly’ as a personal excuse to philander. The muscles of Altavera’s face have gained an unusual taughtness. E dislikes this mask. Metz practically barks his guffaws.

“What if I do, Metz? I never noticed you cared.”

Altavera’s married yaps once more, then suddenly regains composure. “You and me, Altavera—talk about anomalies!”

“I know you’ve been shot, David. It might be hard for you to be clear right now, but please try. You’ve been shot before. It might have been a while—”

“Eighty-three years since I was last so injured. And now it ends, the only lasting peace I’ve ever known.”

It seems to Altavera that David may be paraphrasing es own poetry at em, but it’s no part of their personal codes. E finishes es statement, “It may have been a while, but please be more mindful of how your words might implicate my Citizenship.”

“Yes, yes, Altavera. We’re under the spotlight now. But what of it?”
Metzenbergens leans forward off the cushions of es bed, “remember that this given flesh
is not mine,’” e says, “‘nor use it, nor see it, as my own.’ Isn’t that what we said in our Oath of Citizenship? The one you helped to write?”

“Citizen, if you are accusing me of something—”

“Oh, sugar! I just feel so alive,” e says, folding e great eyebrows toward one another. “Maybe I am lapsing into an unfortunate indulgence in ego. But I’m alive, and death hasn’t mattered much in far too long.” E falls back into es pillows.

Silence floats between them, wafting on the tender odours of the fake flowers.

“It just reminds of the Moon, Altavera. You remember?”

“How could I forget? It was the day the world ended.”

“Not for me. Because of you.”

“Yes,” says Altavera. E gave in. E had not planned to relive it, but it appears that es married will offer em no other choice. “I did.” The moon was what e’d come to talk about, after all.

“You had to kill me to do it! But you saved me, too.”

E had. Altavera had stopped up Metz’s nose and mouth. E remembers.

“Take a deep breath, Metzbergen—that’s right.” Now slap the plaz-stick over es mouth and hold it while it hardens. Wish again for the gills the ‘corps had wanted to put in for ’33. Wish again that the slave, Metzenbergen, hadn’t dropped their only oxygen plugs down that last vertical shaft.

Brace and hit the switch—pop goes the door. The last in the series. The end of Vertigo Bay.

The water, white as concrete, practically as hard. Ten thousand tons of pure motion. Most of it goes by, backing up at the far end of the corridor first. Not all of it, though.

Focus through the battering. Stay conscious and adjust to the pressure. Air condenses, lungs feel empty but they’re not.

Metzenbergen? Unconscious. Eardrums probably blown. Cut them both loose from the wall.

Now swim. That’s all. Swim like Fin the fix-fuckin Undersea-Sergeant.

“Two hundred metres,” says Metz from es bed, “down that corridor to the base’s central shaft. Then thirteen stories straight up.”
And not a lot of help from you, thinks Altavera.

“And I was dead around when, you figure?”

“From the colour of your face and fingernails, I’ve always thought your heart probably stopped beating with still about eight stories to go.” But you were my ticket weren’t you, Metz?

A laugh twists the sound of Metz’s voice. “The only time I’ve ever died—murdered by the same hands that saved me. Is it any wonder I love you so?”

Altavera had given him mouth-to-mouth among the waves on the water’s surface. Dragged him up onto a floating bulkhead and beat life into his heart. Altavera, in his fleshborn male body, pounded Metzenbergen’s chest as if that heart were his own. It was, in a way, after all. In Metz, that whacko, Francis Hamm, had installed the doorway to eternal life.

“Yes, Metz. It was a most formative part of our relationship.”

Somehow the puny sack of dead weight that nearly drowned em had survived the fusion. Psychosolvent drugs had blended assayer microfiber into the mitochondria and nuclei of all Metzenbergen’s cells. Maybe fifteen thousand people had either boiled or been burned out—criminals, debtor-slaves, anyone and everyone who ever crossed Straub Inc.—and then along comes Metz, who, for some reason, failed to die.

Other conduits—midwives they call them now—had followed, but not many. People started volunteering for the weeks of pain—some even paid for the chance to wake up immortal, selling life to the wealthy and powerful. Mostly, nearly entirely, they died.

“You and I,” Metz says, “we’d never even talked before then.” E remembers the long, black horse’s tail of Altavera’s topknot, his cut asian eyes looking down as he aimed his pistol. “I saw you shoot the backs off three people’s heads in Ditto’s office once, but we’d never talked.”

“You were a slave, David. Even after you were infused and made the special slave, I—”

“I couldn’t believe you were secretly working for XL Power.”
They’d climbed the final stories, Altavera pushing Metzenbergen up from behind. It was all he’d talked about, mumbling between gasps the whole way, rung after rung, “You—a Tiger of Straub’s praetorian—a traitor—”

When they finally made the airlock Altavera had threatened to kill him again if he didn’t shut up. He was suitting up the waterlogged slave and stragglers were starting to pipe up on the comm-links.

“Yes,” says Altavera. “I remember it all. What part do you think I could forget? The part where Orlov and his people blow the reservoir and vaporize themselves? The part where I stick that rivet into ensign Doe? Or maybe the part where the other ship—” es voice gives a skip, and es eyes fall into es lap. A moment passes before e continues, quietly, “Or maybe the part where we watch the lasers cut up the continents because we’re just too late.”

Orlov, Doe, Speransky—Vertigo Bay, so many lives—so many lifetimes—and all too late.

“You’d saved him a few times, too—Ditto that is.”

Ditto, building warheads and launch-pads all over the moon. He’d clearly gone insane. Bombs for terraforming Mars—who could take that explanation seriously? Altavera and a few others had made contacts—XL Power Industries, an Oceanic Pact Corporation.

“Of course,” Metz goes on, “it was a bit of the opposite than it was with me—”

Then Ditto announced the sale of the Wall technology to the Ottoman Central Markets. What choice was there? Unless he was stopped the global balance of power would fall apart like the house of cards it was. It fell apart anyway—someone decided a first strike was the better risk.

“Me you killed in order to save,” says Metz. “Whereas with Ditto, you saved him only so you could kill him later.”

“What do you mean, David? I didn’t kill Ditto, you did.”

“I pulled the trigger, but it was your plan, thank the Lifeform, that made it possible.”

“Whatever, Metz.”
But it was true. The plan was mostly Altavera’s. Orlow and the others bringing their power packs together in just the right way—e’d picked up that trick in Lebannon. Enough explosive force to pulverize the wall between the asteroid Straub Inc. had landed on the Moon, and Vertigo Bay right next to it. Half-a-billion gallons of melted space-ice and chaos. Half the Loonies dead immediately and enough confusion to sabotage the Wall, and still escape. E’d even managed to schedule Speransky for Ditto’s personal guard that day. But Ditto, cunning eff that he was, got the better of him.

A smile spreads across Metzenbergén’s face. “But you never really wanted any credit for the death of the tyrant, did you?”

The remark strikes home, weaving past Altavera’s already wobbling equilibrium.

“Yes, Altavera, that’s you all over. Nothing, if not loyal.”

Altavera recalls the despair of those final days and months. Ditto Straub was an astonishing creature. Though the tenure was brief, Ditto was the first ruler of the world. And the last.

“I couldn’t believe it when that guard—what was his name?”

“Anton Speransky.”

“Yes. When, after his head popped off, his lazz came spinning, neat as ballet, right up between my feet. Ditto was too busy making liquid out of what remained of the ex-praetorians to even notice. Alarms were going—the floor was moving—”

“Yes. I remember.” Altavera makes a jutting motion with the edge of es palm. Metzenbergén ignores the gesture. “I saw Babe screaming at me—I realized the lazz was in my hand and pointed at Ditto.”

“You told me when I found you on the way down to meet Speransky. It’s in the history-vids, David.”

Of course, the history-vids never got everything. The shriek Metz let go when he caught sight of Altavera, the pathetic chase—the terror writhing in David’s face—

“You killed me,” says David. “then saved me. And you’re right. It was me that killed Ditto, and that was after he’d saved me.”

“I’ve lived with that history for two hundred years—”

“We were made for each other, Altavera—”

“—I am done with it.”
“—it’s too bad that you seem to despise me.”

“Reminiscence is revisionism.’ That’s what the book says.”

“Yes.”

Altavera’s palm cuts again against the air. What is it that David’s trying to say? If he knows why the Central Council wants him to go to the Moon e should—Altavera jerks her hand again—get to the point.

Metz’s eyes drift away as es gaze travels through the room. E waves his hand to indicate something far away. “But now they’ve gone and thawed it all out.”

With an eye on his chronometer, Altavera had explained the situation to the Loonies that managed to find their way to the pre-flight deck for Vertigo Bay’s lifeboats. Fourteen minutes—thirteen, twelve, eleven—six minutes—

It had been Altavera’s job to kill everyone in the vicinity of the Wall machinery and prepare a few power packs of her own.

Eight Straub loyals got themselves shot, but the rest got onto the only ship e’d keyed to go. Only one lifeboat—Altavera wasn’t going to let anyone get out that wasn’t supposed to.

“I wish you could go instead of me. I don’t want to go back up there.” says David.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wasn’t allowed.”

“Well, I found out anyway. I’ve still got friends—I’m going with you.”

Metzenbergen reaches out and takes hold of Altavera’s hand. E squeezes, and Altavera feels compelled to smile. After a moment, with their palms still locked together David’s index finger reaches under es wrist and begins to tap. The code is old. Nearly as old as Altavera emself, but e recognizes it instantly as a cipher of the Straub praetorian.


* * *
Ten days after, 1:00 AM

MacAfferty sits, hunched over the last of his whiskey and water. He takes in a lungful of the bar’s recycled air, and wonders when the management of the Twig & Berries Pub last cleaned the filters on their air-detoxifier.

For the third time in the last half-hour, he looks at his watch. One o’clock. He considers the fact that it’s also the third night this week he’s spent this way, watching the minutes tick slowly past twelve—the hour of his hoped-for rendez-vous. He makes the same decision he made on each of the three previous evenings: he’ll wait till one-thirty before leaving.

The bar-tender wanders down to MacAfferty’s end of the bar and points at his nearly empty drink. MacAfferty shakes his head, sipping from the mixture which now consists almost entirely of melted ice. The bar-tender shrugs and moves off. It’s the third time the he’s been round to re-fill MacAfferty’s drink, and the third time MacAfferty’s indicated his willingness to nurse on its dregs for as long as possible.

Crunching on a shrunken cube, he notices the triangle of distinct water rings the glass has left glinting on the scuffed and dented metal of the bar. He puts the tumbler down in the one at the top and spins it. Suzy, he thinks, with her fondness for reading significance into ephemera of all kinds, would have found it here.

The entire tavern is on display in the mirror behind the bar. Even so, MacAfferty turns once again to survey the place in the flesh. Same sealed door, same thin crowd, same slowly dropping curtain of intoxication. He turns back to his drink. Three strikes, he thinks, and you’re out. He spins the drink a few more times, resisting the urge to look at his watch again. But three’s the ‘lucky’ number too. He remembers Suzy’s whispering voice, “Third time’s the charm.” He sighs.

He pulls the tumbler round in a circle, breaking the water rings into one great smear. He slides the glass down the bar, and when the bar-tender looks up, he lifts a finger, signalling for another. MacAfferty has never shared Suzy’s penchant for ‘signs.’ Some minutiae are interpretable—that’s called evidence—but ‘signs’? That’s just wishful thinking.
MacAfferty's investigation has been progressing little to not-at-all. Manaimo hasn't really welcomed him with open arms. In the Twig & Berries, for instance, the stools at either end of the bar are filled with patrons while MacAfferty sits alone at its centre. They're curious—what could make this Citiflesh want to haunt their local brew-shelter? But the mere fact of its presence insinuates something not wholly on the up-and-up, keeps them and their questions at bay.

MacAfferty pulls some crumpled plastic bills from his pocket, and drops them on the bar as the bar-tender returns. Leaving the drink, the bar-tender scoops up the bills, and for the fourth time in a row, crinkles his nose as he takes them away. They're good, of course, but when a Citizen uses them instead of es credit-chip, they carry an inference of something spoiled. There's nothing, MacAfferty thinks, a subub-dweller likes better than the chance to look down on a Citizen.

MacAfferty sips. Most of his questions in the tech-shops and the vending squares have gone unanswered or ignored. For three days he's stumbled around Manaimo's western neighbourhood, weaving between the bicycles and push-carts, doing his best to look like a fool ready for the taking. To anyone who showed interest, he'd share his perversity, whispering about his fascination for the past—for memorabilia—memorabilia from the wars, to be specific.

He'd tell the story about how Wall Security had caught him trying to transport a nuclear trigger salvaged from the H.M.S. Thatcher, sunk off the Grand Banks. It had cost him his Citizenship, which, of course, caused him no end of bitterness. The thing had been rusted, TNT totally washed away—as harmless as a teddy bear—and still they took away his Citizenship. This was the sad tale of Harlan Ell—or most of it was, anyway. Every good cover-story requires a few temporary additions. The real Harlan Ell, the one whose existence on the permanent record has been altered, will hopefully never know—especially since, in finding and adapting the persona for MacAfferty's off-duty use, Sergeant Wallace had stepped over more than a few protocols.

Wallace. MacAfferty nearly smiles, thinking of him. The sergeant had done an excellent job on very short notice—the story worked. Every so often, some bazaar loiterer would crook his finger, then lead him down some twisting alleyway or through the ancient sewer-system. Then, after an elaborate series of furtive looks, they'd pop a
trunk, or pull a tarp aside to reveal a tiny hideaway. These had all been pointless trips. Most of the stuff they had consisted of talking toasters and half-functioning fuel cells. MacAfferty would talk avidly with the black-marketers over the one half-slagged landmine they had, or their illegally hopped-up lazz. They'd burn a few rats, or a cat if one should appear, laughing, while MacAfferty slowly turned the conversation to what he was really interested in.

"But what about the old time stuff? Hunter-killer ordinance, neuro-disruptor grenades? I heard a rumour about some stuff from when the New Mexes hit Van---" at this point these types started shrugging their shoulders a lot, and dropped the tarp or the trunk lid back over their stash. MacAfferty talked about cash, waving the roll he had like it was just the tip of the iceberg. These penny-ante gangsters would slaver at the thought, making idle promises, but their eyes would turn shifty. They'd start wondering a bit too much at MacAfferty's Citiflesh and his fascination for the highly illegal. Minutes later MacAfferty would find himself alone again, finding his way to the next market to wait for the next crooked finger. The only satisfaction he'd gotten from the process so far was out of beating the one idiot who actually tried to rob him.

The boys and girls in the tech-shops usually had a bit more to show him. But still, though he found eye-jammers and single isotope en-generators in some of their 'secret' back rooms, none of it was what he was after. He made a note of the ones with the really dangerous stuff, so he could tell Judge Nguyen if she didn't already know.

MacAfferty takes another swallow from his whiskey. He looks through the bottle-laden shelves at the mirror behind the bar. The tavern’s walls are brown, stained with more brown. The shade is a match for the brown of the pillars that hold up the brown roof, as well as all the room’s brown stools, chairs and tables. The floor, with its scuffed, grey sheen of filth represents the artful exception to the general colour scheme. The sixteen patrons that populate the joint are equally exceptional, insofar, anyway, as their colour makes a good match for the floor.

MacAfferty spins his glass. The only real exception in the place, MacAfferty knows, is him. His brown is just that much richer than the walls, and his flesh that much less corpse-like than that of the other clients. Still, whatever stink permeates the place seems to be coming off him. When crossing the room, making their way from the holo-
porn show at one end of the bar to the bathrooms at the other, the sububbanites all take the same long, curving path around him.

After having the ‘ex’ stamped in front of his status as Citizen, MacAfferty’s used to being a bit of a pariah, but this is worse than he ever would have suspected. In the last three nights, just two people have said a word to him—only one, after discounting the bar-tender. The other was a drunk who was fishing for gossip about the Alberni murders. At first, MacAfferty had thought the man had recognized him somehow as the main investigator. He’d been relieved to find out it wasn’t the case—the shroud of secrecy around the investigation had been too thorough. After that, the situation devolved into one of finding the right variety of rudeness to get the inebriated sububbanite to go away. Finally, MacAfferty suggested that, while the Lifeform had use for parasites, he really didn’t, and the fellow got the message.

MacAfferty looks back down at his whiskey-and-water. The evidence—yes, and all the ‘signs,’ too—are indicating that Suzy had been right; his efforts in Manaimo are looking more and more pointless. MacAfferty remembers the looks of betrayal in both his married’s and his son’s eyes as he’d left their home five days ago, suitcase in hand.

“When are you coming home, Dad?”

“As soon as I can, son.”

MacAfferty starts a sip which ends in a large swallow.

In hindsight, even Captain Singh was starting to look like a bastion of wisdom.

The sububbanites of Manaimo are far more suspicious of the Citizens than they were around Lumsden. The nearest IP to Lumsden though, is Te Anau, the centre of the World government. The whole region is overrun with Citizens. By comparison, getting a straight answer in Manaimo from inside his Citiflesh was like trying to grow kidneys in dirt. Hunting down this Lynyrd was looking more and more like a job that only the Manaimo district judges could do. In fact, all his best leads to the area’s illicit tech-dealers had come straight from the mouth of his sometimes associate, Judge Aké Nguyen. There was only the one contact left from that list to be made. Hence MacAfferty’s nightly two hour sojourn in this dive of a saloon.
“Look for a nervous little bag of skin and bones,” Aké’d said. “Fifty-ish. Kotoba is what he’s called. I told him to look for you around midnight at the Twig and Berries Pub if he found anything out.”

She’d also told him she thought he was bazznatchi. “In a few weeks someone’ll put the brain of your deviant, Joe Regent, into a blender and download a picture. We’ll round up your Lynyrd then.” She said she thought he was being reckless—“You’re just gonna be making trouble for yourself. You won’t make me have to hunt you down and judge you, will you, Dan?” But she’d done what she could for him, anyway, and wished him good luck.

MacAfferty looks at his watch for the fourth time. Quarter after one. Actually, there was one other piece of evidence that hadn’t been accounted for yet. Two evenings ago, he thought he might have stumbled onto something. Before coming to the bar to get stood up for the first time, he’d formed the distinct impression he was being followed.

It’s often difficult to tell the difference between sububbanites—so many of them dress in nothing but rad-suits in public. As he returned to his rooming-block, though, after wending his way back through the closing market stalls, he could have sworn he glimpsed a plaid scarf that he recognized from two occasions earlier in the day.

He first saw it as he left Clancy’s Tech Repair after yet another fruitless inquiry. He noticed the tan rad-suit with its plaid accoutrement slip surreptitiously into an alley as his foot hit the curb. This small sign of irregularity had made him do a bit of a hopeful double-take, but when he got to the head of the alley whoever it was had vanished. Likely just another sububbanite curious about the combination of Citiflesh and dubious behaviour, but MacAfferty decided to keep an eye out nonetheless. He caught sight of it a second time in the midst of a second-rate textile district. Looking down one of the short rows of stalls, over the heads of the local buyers, a little checkered flag flashed between two pushcarts as they crossed paths. Coincidence? Maybe. Had he seen it at all? Maybe not.

Later, with night descending, MacAfferty returned to the rooming block he’d moved into. He’d been keeping to a schedule of trying to get a bit of sleep before going to the Twig & Berries to wait for Judge Nguyen’s contact. This time, though, MacAfferty didn’t go straight up to his rad-safe and windowless room. Instead, he’d sat tight in the
building’s decontamination chamber. The light changed from red to green, but rather than leave, he’d opened the inner door, covered both lights with his slicker, and then closed the door again without ever leaving. Then he stood, out of sight beside the exterior door, watching the street.

After a few minutes, in a sliver of light among the shadows of an abandoned shop, he saw it—a triangle of tan and plaid. He slipped on his night-goggles but there was no signature at all. He slipped them off. It was still there, the green fringe of a scarf. An illegally modified rad-suit? The tan vanished.

Three glimpses had been convincing at the time, but he hasn’t seen it since. And though he won’t just let it go, he knows that piece of evidence is slowly but surely turning into one of Suzy’s ‘signs’—evidence of nothing aside from wishful thinking. MacAfferty lifts his drink to have a look at its golden lees, so much more lush than the squalid browns all around. He contemplates finishing the whiskey off, twirling a whirlpool into the liquid. He puts the glass back down onto the plate-steel of the bar. Just a few more minutes.

He looks back into the mirror and its dismal portrayal of his surroundings. Tilting his head away, he catches a pair of evil stares aimed in his direction. They look away in a twitch of fright, but it isn’t long—a whisper and a snigger later—before their eyes come scavenging again. MacAfferty picks up the glass.

He raises a toast reflexively, directing it to the mirror-image of himself. The glass pauses at eye-level, and beside it, above the shoulder of the duplicated MacAfferty, a rectangle of particularly dark brown slides away—a new patron steps in to the tavern.


The man pulls off his goggles. Brown eyes. He pulls back his hood. Black hair—lots of it, with thick, curling side-burns lining most of his jaw.

Not at all a picture of nervous skin and bones.
MacAfferty looks at his watch. One twenty-seven.

The newcomer moves from the door to the bar by the shortest route. He signals to the bar-tender on his way, “Squirt me out a mug of your Twig ale, would ya?”
The barrier that divides the place's other customers away from MacAfferty seems no hindrance at all to the newcomer. He takes a seat three stools down, and leans into the bar. Pulling back his sleeve, he starts tapping the credit-chip in his wrist against its metal. He watches the barman pull the tap to draw his beer for a moment, then his eyes rove left, scanning the bottles behind the bar. When his gaze comes eventually to the reflection of Daniel MacAfferty, he smiles and looks over at the man himself.

"So you don't look too lost or nothin'."

MacAfferty faces his drink. "You can't judge a book by its cover."

"'Book,' eh? You even sound out of place. First impressions are always right."

MacAfferty looks at the man, restless with impatient, fleshborn energy—his curls practically writhing, "You don't look much like a Twig and Berries regular, either, now you mention it."

"Well, it's been a while." He presents his wrist to the bar-tender. "But I used to come in all the time." An accounting chart appears on the air as a wand passes over the chip in the man's arm. "Right, Jerry?" He looks at the bar-tender, who interrupts his figuring on the virtual screen to squint back at him.

"Sorry," says the barman. "Can't say I recognize ya. What's yer name?"

"Puente. Tito Puente." The man looks back at MacAfferty. "I was named after a great twentieth century trumpet player. Ever heard of him? Maybe you saw him play?"

MacAfferty shakes his head. He finishes his drink and signals to the barman for another.

Jerry nods, then turns to Tito. "Nope," he says, "Don't recognize the name either."

"Ah, c'mon, Jerry. I used to come for your pool tourneys. I was here when all that stuff went down with Chico."

Jerry squints a little harder. "You was?"

Tito gestures around the back of his head, giving his curls a shake. "I let my hair grow a bit."

The bar-tender shrugs. "Whatever you say." He heads back down the bar.

Tito takes a swallow from his beer as he watches the man go. He turns to MacAfferty. "I thought absence was supposed to make the heart grow fonder."
MacAfferty speaks into the bar. "To forget the past is to repeat it."

"I love when drunks quote the Rules at me. You’re not going to start singing in a
minute, are you?"

"George Santayana said it. I don’t think it’s in the Rules."

"Who?"

"Some guy who wrote some stuff—what do you care?"

"Hey. I guess I don’t when it comes to that."

Jerry returns to replace MacAfferty’s empty drink. Daniel checks the mirror to be
sure Tito sees the crumpled notes he exchanges for his whiskey. The man’s black
eyebrows arch.

"Having credit problems?"

MacAfferty makes a show of peeling cash from the wad he takes from his pocket.

"Drinks," he says, flourishing one bill after another, "for everyone in the house." He
reaches his tab’s likely total, then tosses down half again as many of the plastic bills.

Jerry hesitates, then actually smiles at MacAfferty as he stacks the money
together, then slips away.

Tito watches the man retreat again. He looks at MacAfferty. "Why you wanna
draw attention to yourself?"

"I’ve been waiting for something to happen. I’m sick of waiting."

"I think I heard about you. You were down around Sihota Salvage yesterday,
weren’t you?"

Sihota Salvage is by the coast. MacAfferty was in the central subub all day
yesterday.

Tito slaps the bar. "Big, black slab of Citiflesh. Of course, it’s got to be you." He
gives a look around himself. The furtive gesture is too familiar, and MacAfferty’s
strangely disappointed to see it performed by this young man. Tito’s eyes fasten
conspiratorially on his.

"What a wild coincidence."

MacAfferty finds himself spinning his full glass of whiskey on the bar.

"Coincidence?"
“Yeah. A friend of mine, a guy named Kotoba,” he pauses absurdly to be sure MacAfferty’s heard the name. “He said he’d been talking to you. He said you were looking for something.”

“And what if I was?”

“Well, Kotoba said he thought about me after talking to you. And here we are meeting like this—praise the Lifeform. Coincidence or design?” Tito raises his glass in a salute to the cosmos and drains his beer just as Jerry brings him the round MacAfferty’s just paid for.

“No thanks, Jerry. Your stuff always did taste like piss.” He wheels off his stool, and pulls down his night-goggles. He steps up close to MacAfferty. “Come back to Sibota’s two days from now, about two in the afternoon. I think we might be able to do something for each other.” He pulls his navy-blue hood up over his head, and strides out.

* * *

Eight days before, 10:30 PM

Metzenbergen comes to a sudden halt. After dodging past tails and ducking under swimming pinwheels of fabric, e spots the back of the motorized Morris chair. E has to stop to give es head a shake.

Though the general mood of the ball is fairly somber, in the immediate surroundings e feels embraced by soft laughter and conversation. Mechanical symbionts and the multi-armed clink their glasses and sway, heads roving to the music as the guests survey each other. The appearance of so many of the famed and the legendary ignites the game of identification being played throughout the room. More serious than fun to begin with, the game becomes steadily more so as each name put to a shape makes the tragedy associated with them all that much more real.

From the back, the head Metzenbergen is looking at is a ball nestled on an inner-tube of neck. For hair, a swatch of silver fur is drawn down its middle. Piled onto the Morris chair, hunched over the table, mounds of flesh overflow the edges of both, drooping like so much melted wax.
David finds the look to be in spectacularly poor taste. He has, however, foreseen the probability of the freshborn’s unfortunate choice of costume, and dressed accordingly. E approaches, rounding the motorized chair and placing both hands on the back of a second seat at the same table.

“Beverly.” E looks over the myriad plates of hors-d’oeuvres, the dozens of glasses and dips, at the flaccid bag of tissue seated across from where e’s standing.

“Doctor Hamm. I expected you would be here somewhere, though I rather hoped you might spare me your immediate presence. Couldn’t you have succumbed to some experimental fume or other?” E picks up a laden cracker and ogles its toppings.

Metzenbergen points to the dishes piled over the embroidered linen. “Very authentic, Beverly.”

A wave passes through the jelly mounded over the Morris chair as the cracker is flung at David’s chest. “Your insolence grows daily. Whom are you calling ‘Beverly’?”

The cracker leaves a daub of white on David’s blue waistcoat where it hits. E brushes it away. “Perhaps a little too authentic.”

“You worm. Show some respect.”

“If you’re hoping to hear me call you ‘Mistress’—”

“What I expect, Doctor Hamm, is for you to kiss my ass and call me—”

“Enough, Beverly.”

“Seriously, who is this Beverly you keep referring to?”

For the first time, Metzenbergen thinks of the possibility that this is not Beverly, that the costume might be enveloping some other of the Remote Resort’s guests. The Resort wouldn’t lend out two costumes of the same personnage for the night, would they?

E pulls out the chair e’s leaning on and sits.

“You look positively hideous.”

“How did you know it was me?” The green eyes narrow. Metzenbergen remembers the emerald fire of the real thing, burning through the adipose wads like coals through a field of fire-retardant.

“To be honest, Bev, only a freshborn would have worn it, knowing I was here.”

The Babe-body shudders at the way David says ‘freshborn.’

“Really, David? Is there some protocol—”
“No, no protocols.” Metzenbergen shrugs. It is the theme of the evening, after all—remembrance. “Never mind, I’m not offended. Just now, in fact, I find it endearing. Babe came in so many shapes, though, you could have found a better one to look at. I also find it hideous.”

“Hideous? I’ll have you know, Dr. Hamm, that I, Babe Solomon, am the pinnacle of the fashion world.” E giggles.

“Yes. Babe could make anything popular.” It had been a supremely logical move—body-sculpting became commonplace, so Babe rebelled against the classic shapes—made a style out of the consumption of organs. “It never really caught on with me, though.” David remembers wheeling Babe’s guests up to the troughs, changing their needles, hosing the blood and the vomit away.

“Doesn’t the toga look a bit off?” Bev asks.

“No, it’s pretty much right. You’re missing the laurel, though.”

“Oh, it’s here somewhere.” The python-weight drooping from Bev’s arm swings as e reaches out to search in the field of crockery between them. Metzenbergen lunges, ready to catch the flying china. E’s left holding air as the Babe-flesh passes through the hedge of tall glasses. From between some cups and a gravy ewer, Bev fishes up a little disc. E holds it up. “Holographic projectors. I wouldn’t wear it otherwise. Think of the weight.”

Metzenbergen resumes his seat. How strange, e thinks, two centuries gone, but the instinct’s still intact.

Beverly pushes the disc into the slab of Babe’s forehead. There’s a click and a golden horseshoe of laurel snaps into view around the back of Babe’s white-tufted skull.

“I can’t imagine wearing something like this for real. For pleasure.”

Babe made an industry out of her considerable addictions and indulgences. Ditto’s artificial organ boutiques had been thriving, but then they replaced the sculpting salons as the place to be seen.

“You don’t like laurels?”

“No, I mean the flesh. Look at the way it flows when I move. I feel like I’m slipping under and drowning.”

“It serves you right for wearing it.”
“That story you told made me do it. When I saw the costume I had to try it out.” Es eyes close and the back of es hand touches es forehead. “It’s your fault that I am suffering, Doctor Hamm, and I count on you to make me feel better.”

The gesture is one that Babe made often, in adfeatures as well as real life, and for an instant the resemblance is frightening. The hand drops and Bev speaks through es renewed giggling. “Have some food, David, it’s delicious. That plate there, and that one by the glass of blue stuff, they’re both real. You should drink the blue stuff, too. It’s tasty and it goes with your outfit.”

“Do you like it?” Metzenbergen sweeps his hands down es chest, parting es labcoat to reveal the blue velvet underneath.

“It suits you.”

“Even though I hated Frank Hamm, I always kind of liked the way he dressed—part Blue Boy, part Ben Franklin.”

“I’m glad you’re not offended by my Babe Solomon outfit.”

David samples from a tray of small, ornate sandwiches. “Are you?”

Tremors spread through the Babe-shape as Beverly laughs quietly. “Well, we’ve talking about the woman for two days straight, and you never seemed to mind.”

“You might as well admit it—you just didn’t want to risk changing the subject.”

“I admit nothing. Although I was kind of hoping you’d finish that story you started this morning.”

“You are relentless.” Metzenbergen pops the last bite of paté and bread into es mouth. E watches as Egan Stakk, Captain of the Change Police, walks past arm in arm with a female version of Randy Lammibust. How appropriate, he thinks. Their violent relationship on the T.Viz is always so obviously nothing but sublimated lust.

“Well, what you’re wearing’s no better, David.”

“I came as Francis Hamm precisely because I knew you might come as that.” E gesturing at Bev without looking at em. “Babe was terrified of the Doctor.”

“Wasn’t everybody?”

“Everybody except Ditto. Ditto worshipped Frank Hamm, or whatever his name was.”

“What do you mean, ‘whatever’?”
David is watching the band—a ten-piece, all dressed as primates, leaping over the stage, jabbering and scratching, firing a sinister dance beat into the crowd. Es eye is lured away by the multihued pirouette flashing across the dance-floor. “Look at that,” e says. “How beautiful.”

“How subversive of you to say so.”

“That’s part of what these costume balls are about—indulging in the past’s indulgences.” The feathered Citizen on the dance floor spins again. The music breaks into its sludgy chorus and the blue-red-green cacophony of plumage ruffles out into a ball of rainbows. “It’s unlikely you or I will ever see the like of that again.”

“You sound like you miss the days of body-sculpting.”

“A house on fire is a very beautiful thing, but it usually destroys someone’s life. Vanity, elitism—they all had pretty serious downsides.”

“How can you say that!”

Metzenbergen turns at the exclamation. Es holo reacts accordingly as Beverly grabs handfuls of Babe-flesh, pulling them out as if offering them for sampling. “Those are what created this, the unparalleled and unique beauty of Babe Solomon! Gaze and experience desire!”

Metzenbergen looks back at the dance floor. “You’re not going to wear that all night, are you? Doesn’t the projector have some other settings?”

“You’d rather I’d come looking like that?”

Metzenbergen turns as the flaps hanging from the Babe-arm sweep through the table again. Bev’s pointing at a little hobgoblin of a man in a tattered black suit.

Metzenbergen had known Hieronymous Beltane, who took the obscure writings of Novotny Miller and turned them into the Rules of Constructive Engagement. He was a warty, bent, and rat-faced little man.

“A tough call. Beltane was much kinder than Babe, but really a wretched conversationalist. You could have worn something like that, over there.” E points at one of the three four-armed giants reclining by the wall near the bar.

“Yes. I suppose you would have had a soft-spot for super-soldiers.”
"At least you always knew where you stood with them." Along with Altavera, they'd been all that kept him, Beltane and the rest of the original Council alive for the first, horrible years in Te Anau.

"And what about one of them?" asks Bev. "Have you always dreamt of a girl with a fishy-tail?"

The toothed beak and smooth head, the tail and the arms that look so stuck on remind David of the seriousness of the night's celebration.

"No. Lifeform preserve me, like most people I pretty much hated them at the time. I loved watching Undersea Sergeant." The dolphands were the original slaves—dolphins adapted to work the ocean depths. The secret, quite literally, of Ocean Savouries' success. Their rebellion led to one of humanity's ugliest moments. Metzenbergen remembers cheering Sergeant Fin on as he planted depth-charges in one dolphand village after another. Even as—especially as—the genocide reached its successful conclusion, the show's ratings were still going through the roof—even as Lee-Lee-Liayou, the dolphand's leader, set off the explosion that irradiated most of the North Atlantic.

"I think," says Beverly, "we should probably raise our first glass, David."

Metzenbergen nods. E picks the flute of electric blue up off the table. Holding the glass up high, he looks into Beverly's Babe-green eyes. "To Hieronymous Beltane, soldiers great and small, and the race of the dolphands"

The rim of Beverly's glass clinks into his. "May they rest well in the Lifeform."

Metzenbergen puts his glass back down on the table. The putty slabs of Babe's hologrammed face do what they can to communicate the expression of the actual one buried beneath it, but the effects are fairly muted. Looking at em, David wonders what this freshbool could be remembering to cause es far-away look. The death of some sububban relative? A lover? A toxic event?

Bev, meanwhile, is running through a file of data that was downloaded into the chip at the top of es spinal cord. E thinks e already knows the answer, but before e asks, e wants to be sure.

"David, a minute ago you were talking about Francis Hamm—"
Metzenbergen watches em gesture vaguely, apparently searching for words. “You’re leading questions are showing Beverly. No, I never believed Frank Hamm was the man’s real name.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me.”

“What?”

“You heard me. What it is that you really want to know, Bev?”

Bev’s confusion results in the mask of stupid inebriation that was always the calm before the storm with Babe. Metzenbergen looks away. “You’re going to be disappointed. I have no secrets.”

“But there are things the historians still disagree about.”

“So? The historians were done with me long ago. These days they keep all their little disagreements to themselves, thank the Lifeform.”

At a table nearby a leprechaun, two nuns, and an Uncle Sam bring their glasses together above their floral centerpiece. Their expressions are solemn as their lips move—a severe counterpoint to the jigging fiddle and banjo that drown out their words.

“I told them all long ago,” David says, “I thought they were all the same man—Frank Hamm, Greg Ormandle, Zack Nooten.”

“Hamm invented transpiration, Nooten created the Walls—who’s Greg Ormandle?”

“Pschotropic research. He walked out of the chemical dumps in the Mojave with the stuff that led to the transpiration inoculations. Next question?” The life has come quivering back to the Babe-cheeks. Metzenbergen can tell that whatever it is the freshbom’s after must be close.

Beverly changes the subject. “When I was little, my family moved to the South island. They’d just finished cleaning it up for habitation, and my mom, a welder, figured her business would take off in virgin territory—no competition, after all.” E takes a breath and looks up, pretending, as e had in all e rehearsals, to locate her distant memories. “Of course she’d failed to understand that the reason there was no competition was because there were no customers there to compete for.”
The Babe-flesh wadded around the Babe-green eyes takes on a tender expression Metzenbergen never witnessed on the real woman. It reminds him of the ad-feature Babe, the one that never existed outside of anyone’s imagination.

“It didn’t matter much,” says Bev. “We had just had to do some stuff we didn’t usually do. Greenhouse work. Bartering with salvage.” E smiles wistfully. “I used to love scavenging through the empty buildings in my neighborhood. Lifeform save me, I guess it was all a pretty hard time for my mom, but for me—well, it was really one of the best times of my life. Climbing through windows. Working up the courage to pull away the cobwebs in some attic. Or to creak down the stairs of a basement—but the stuff! I found a suitcase full of currency once—valueless, but what a toy for a kid. I found real toys too, of course. And jewelry. Clothes, ammunition, appliances, you name it.” Beverly breaks eye-contact with the treasures e’s imagined into the air above em. E sends a hard joyful look at David.

“But the best thing I ever found was this room full of books. Real books with most of the paper still holding together. Whoever owned these things must have loved them—every one, and there were thousands, was covered in plastic. Do you know what science fiction is, David?”

“Yes.” E smiles and leans forward. E suddenly understands where Bev’s story is going. Looking sidelong at the mound in the Morris chair, es eyebrows rise. “I did once wonder if Hamm, et al., was homo mutatis, a mutant—a creation of Straub Incorporated.”

Bev grips the edge of the table. “My favourite stories were always the ones about aliens.”

Metzenbergen’s leans back, es smile flattening out. E shakes es head again.
“When I was a kid, masses of people expected the aliens to come and cure all our woes with their space-faring wisdom. Nowadays, we look back and want to blame it all on them. Sorry, I can’t get on board.”

Babe-flesh sags. “It’s just something that occurred to me as a teenager, after I read about you, your story, what you said.” E fiddles with a canape. E’s just tossed out es best bait and the line’s come back empty. “I admit it. Seeing you brought the old curiousity straight back.” Maybe Metzenbergen really doesn’t know anything. Maybe not, but e still hasn’t explained es suspicions about Hamm. Es arms wade through the table as e leans
toward Metzenbergen, es open palms pointed upward. “But, David, it’s hardly the only reason I’m here with you. I’m sorry if I seem to be pumping you for information, but you’re a legend.”

Metzenbergen reaches out and folds Bev’s hands into es. “Never mind.” E gives a squeeze, then lets go as he leans back again.

E watches as a waiter, dressed in a neat suit with a studded collar and a white band around her arm, threads her way around the tables nearest them with a tray of drinks. Metzenbergen waves the girl off.

“David,” Beverly’s hesitant voice draws es attention back to em. “Does this mean you won’t finish the story you started this afternoon?”

Metzenbergen sips his blue, minty drink. “Well, there isn’t a lot more to it.” E takes a breath. “Let’s see, where were we—New York, 2033, personal slave of Ditto Straub, on permanent loan to Babe Solomon. It’s four-thirty and Babe’s due on set in an hour. Well, using a variety of the most expensive designer drugs, I got the behemoth out of her bed, and off to her ad-feature shoot. They only got about half the shots they wanted, though. Rain came pelting in and that was that.” David pauses, staring at Bev over the top of es glass. E remembers Babe glowering out at the weather from inside the Chrysler building. “The cast wound up sitting for most of the day.” She’d finish one drink and then start right in at another, screaming and flailing because the mix was never just right—not that it ever stopped her from drinking them.

“For whatever reason, around noon, Babe’s chair stopped working. I was sent to get another.” E’d gone by boat. It took a crew of four, with David supervising, to hoist the replacement up onto the docking platform. “A cable broke when we were getting the new chair out of the water-taxi. The thing sank to the bottom.” E remembers Babe’s livid, spitting face. She had two of her bodyguards beat em, chain em up, and ship em off. Ditto wasn’t around to stop her. “That was it. She sent me to Hamm’s lab where I found out there were worse things than being a slave. Hamm wasted no time. He had my skin off within a few days.”

Metzenbergen speaks the last sentence into silence as the band abruptly finishes its number. E waits until the applause dies down, then lifts es drink into the air. Beverly’s
rises to join it. "To Miriam, Stanislau, Huang, Reva—to all of them, even that eff-pixer Hodge. To all the slaves who died in factories and mines, and in games and in the Sport."

"Thank the Lifeform for accepting them all."

Their glasses touch and then they drink. Metzenbergen stares at the tiny pool of blue at the bottom of the fluted crystal. He looks up at Beverly, who is tapping the foot of her own finished drink with her index finger.

"Alright, Beverly. Out with it. What else?"

"I'm sorry, David. It's just been on my mind so much, I don't seem able to let it go. Why do you think they were all the same man? I know they shared similar drug habits, and that they were all volatile—"es fingers tap the glass. "I also read that some quirk of speech convinced you, but that's not much to go on, is it?"

"I'll tell you what, Bev. I'm kind of sick of sitting here. Nooten and Ormandle are probably here tonight. Why don't we find them? We'll do a little comparison." E stands. "We can freshen our drinks, too."

"Good idea." E begins to shift out of the Morris chair. "Wait a second. This shape isn't really made for mingling." Es hand reaches into the shapeless bulge of es torso to adjust a second holo-projector. Flab melts away, shrinking as if es insides were being sucked out by a straw. Bev's toga constricts along with the flesh, elongating into a gown, and coming to rest tightly stretched across a boyish chest. The bulk of the motorized seat dissolves, leaving behind a plush copper skeleton of itself, identical to the one Metzenbergen is sitting on. The tuft of white on top of Beverly's head descends in a great shower of curls. It parts over es shoulders only to be brushed aside by spreading growth of es wings.

Metzenbergen smiles. "Well, that's an improvement. I hated that Babe too, but at least she was a bit easier on the eyes."

* * *
Twelve days after, 11:20 PM

Daniel removes his hand from the breast-pocket of his rad-suit as two cyclists emerge from around a corner up ahead. Through his night-goggles, he watches them approach, pedaling lazily around the potholes in the street. As the first one nears, MacAfferty makes out that the hunch around her shoulders is a thoroughly stuffed backpack. The second cyclist, trailing a few metres behind, is towing a two-wheeled cart. As one of the cart’s bicycle wheels dips into a divot in the road, MacAfferty sees a heap of angular metal bounce up, and then settle again with a loud clank. Scavengers, he thinks, wondering how far they’d had to go out from Manaimo central to find anything worth dragging back.

He stops and waves goofily as the two go by. The second cyclist returns the greeting half-heartedly. These are the first two people MacAfferty’s seen in a while. He staggered away from the Prideaux Street strip nearly an hour ago, shaking his head at the whores, and swearing at whatever passersby he bumped into. Before that he’d sat in the Shamrock Tavern hammering back drink after drink until the bar-tender had suggested it was time for him to go home. He refused, of course, and then made a difficult job of it for the bouncers who had to forcefully remove him. His jaw still aches from leaning in and presenting his chin for a little target-practice.

MacAfferty listens as the squeak and rattle of the bikes recedes behind him. He resists the urge to turn and look, straining his ears instead as the noise fades. Once it’s gone, the only sounds that remain are the distant yowling of cats, and the hiss of the wind echoing through the shells of the abandoned buildings all around. E resumes es trudge up the sidewalk.

At the end of another block’s worth of collapsing masonry, MacAfferty comes to a teetering halt at the curb’s edge. He looks from side to side, up and down the cross-street. “Where the eff-pish—” e slurs the curse. E gives the words some volume to clear up their pronunciation, “Where the eff-pi-hix am I?” The wail of the cats ceases. He closes his eyes, listening. His breathing is the only sign of life in the vicinity. Sure that his rooming-block is to the left, he heads that way.
Hugging the building to his right, MacAfferty reaches once again into the breast-pocket of his rad-suit. He pulls out a small, but heavy hand-blown vase that he bought at the market earlier in the day. Holding it close to his chest with one hand, he goes into the pocket at his waist with the other to pull out a spool of thread. The thread he bought sometime before the vase, but after he bought the pills that would counteract the effects of alcohol. He’d bought a sackful of other junk, too, but, conveniently, that had to be left at the bar when he got kicked out.

He loops one end of the thread around the vase’s tapered neck and ties it off. Then, turning the vase, he winds the thread off the spool and onto the narrowed glass. After transferring several meters of the stuff from one to the other, he returns them both to the pocket at his waist without letting go of either.

MacAfferty walks past the place where he knows he should turn again to get to his rented compappartment. After another block-and-a-half, he trips off the curb, stepping between the corroded remains of two vehicles, and wanders into the middle of the street.

He stands there for a moment, then turns slowly in a full circle—a drunk, lost and looking for landmarks. He turns again, this time staggering backward as if losing his balance. Meandering over to base of a sheared-off lamppost, he leans into its stump, still looking up and down the street. After a moment, he shakes his head, then looks up, straight into the mouth of an alley. With an exaggerated shrug, he pushes of the rusted steel, and walks into the alley’s entrance.

Shielded by the closeness of the walls, MacAfferty straightens. Pulling the vase and thread from his pocket, he moves swiftly, silently, farther into the passageway. Keeping an eye to the ground, he dodges around puddles, and steps over the moldering trash, until he spots what he’s looking for.

As quickly as he can he stoops in to one of the walls to tie the spool end of the thread around a pipe about a foot up off the ground. He then crosses the lane, unspooling thread from the vase as he goes, careful not to break it, but keeping it taught nonetheless. After setting the vase down next to the other wall, MacAfferty resumes his stagger, crashing immediately into an old dented garbage can.

At the far end of the alley, MacAfferty turns in the direction of his rooming-block but then stops, pulling out his lazz, and stepping up against the wall to listen. He’s pretty
sure he saw his shadow again today. No scarf, but the tan rad-suit had been leaning out a
window as he emerged from his meet at Sihota Salvage.

The minute he saw it, he’d made plans. The first one was easy. By complicating
his trail, he’d confuse Tan-Rad-Suit into making a mistake—get close enough for
MacAfferty to get a good look, or maybe even lay hands on him.

His fall-back was to try to get the tail to come to the point. A good show of
getting blitzed might inspire a bit of bravery, make whoever it was more direct about
whatever he was after. MacAfferty would even provide just the right sort of
encouragement by getting somebody to give him a beating.

Later that afternoon, though, after spending three hours ducking through doors,
doubling back, and checking reflections in store-fronts, MacAfferty was back to doubting
Tan-Rad-Suit even existed. He couldn’t even spot the shadow again, let alone glean any
identifying characteristics.

He decided he should have a third plan in case the second one didn’t work—one
that would at least prove he wasn’t just imagining things. He bought the vase and the
thread, and then kicked around, eating a stick of dog from a street-vendor, waiting until it
was time for his performance. And now, sure enough, here he was—crapped out on both
plan one and plan two.

Some taller grasses at the far edge of the avenue rub up against each other,
whispering in the steady breeze. The faraway yowling of cats starts up again. Glass
smashes and MacAfferty leans into the mouth of the alley, pointing his lazz.

With the night-goggles on, he can see the details of the alley maybe better than he
can in daytime. Colours are a bit washed out, but the lines of the whole scene are clear
and sharp. He sees the pipe where he tied the thread, the trashcans he bumped into, but
there is no tan rad-suit anywhere. Now he knows it for sure—illegally modified. He
bluffs. “Put your hands up where I can see ‘em, eff-pixer!”

He listens intently, but hears only the cats still at it. Feeling increasingly
vulnerable, he pursues his bluff. “Who the spam are you? What do you want?”

And then he sees it, the vague blurr moving across the front of a battered
dumpster. He adjusts his aim, but a white lazz bolt fries the bricks above his head before
he can shoot. He rolls across the alley’s mouth firing continuously, aiming low for a leg-
shot. He hears the pounding of feet and leaps up to barrel his way down the lane, his lazz blazing the whole way. There's a cry, and MacAfferty sees a great splash fly up at the alley's other end. He crouches, knowing the downed man would be that much more dangerous. Water stirs, and then the pounding of feet resumes.

"Eff-pix!" MacAfferty's up and running, but when he gets to the laneway's other end, he stops. Trying to follow by sound alone would be futile. Instead he checks the ground. Damp footprints lead out of a large puddle, heading off to the right, but they peter out quickly. He bends to see the ground more closely, scanning the rough pavement as he takes one tiny step after another. His brow furrows as he retraces the path. Had the tail just tripped?

No. There it is—a speckling of splashed blood. He moves back to the where the footprints run out. A few meters after the last one he finds another—a trio of dark spots, sticky to the touch. He finds another set after a minute or so, but surrenders anyway. Clearly the wound had been completely minor—just enough to send its recipient sprawling. It would take all night just to trace it back to where it, too, would inevitably peter out.

Still, MacAfferty thinks, chuckling under his breath, let's hear it for plan three. He may not have gotten his man, but a fresh wound would make him easy to spot. Heading back down the alley, he considers what else he's learned. MacAfferty had surmised earlier that Tan-Rad-Suit's illegal costume meant he was some black-marketer's envoy. Arriving at the laneway's other end, he looks up and feels the idea confirmed. The bricks that the tail's lazz-fire had slagged were well out of reach. Tan-Rad-Suit had made a real effort not to kill him—he was obviously more interested in business.

As MacAfferty starts the last leg of his journey home, a tuneless little hum bubbles up from inside him. First, the meet at Sihota's, now this. He must be close. And not a moment too soon. Tomorrow is his last day free from work, and then the weekend, and then—what? Off to harangue the pixers at Wall Security? The hum peters out. He wasn't sure he could do it. MacAfferty decides to think about Sihota's instead.

MacAfferty recalls looking up at the light in the tech-shop's decon chamber. Pushing the inner door open as red turned to green, he heard the ring of the bell fixed in the top corner of the jamb. The floor to ceiling shelves along the walls of the shop's
single small room were loaded with jumbles of fiber optics, computer boards, and misshapen blends of plastic and tarnished metal. A single neon tube in the ceiling added a layer of dreariness to the scuffed floor, poking its sterile white into the room’s crevices, and leaving the rest thick with shadow. The proprietor was nowhere to be seen. MacAfferty stepped up to the counter at the back of the shop and peered over the top of it. No one was there either, but the ragged curtain on the back wall was probably draped over a second entrance. He supposed the proprietor would appear shortly.

He let his eyes wander over to the gear spread everywhere—T.Viz receivers and neuronets, chemical heat generators, variable energy receivers. He ambled over to pick up one of these last. Turning it over, he located the official mark of Council certification.

“Punctual aren’t we?”

MacAfferty turned to see the shaggy-headed man from the bar two nights ago. He put the receiver down, and stepped back toward the counter, extending his hand.

“How are you today, Tito?”

“Let’s not pretend either of us are looking for new friends, alright?”

MacAfferty shrugged. “So, where’s your guy Kotoba?”

“Never mind about Kotoba.”

“I thought that’s who I was here to see.”

“Well, I guess you thought wrong.”

“Nice attitude.” They stared, measuring. Feeling ridiculous, MacAfferty did his best impression of a junkyard dog. He gave it half-a-minute, and then, “Do you have anything for me, or not? Because if the answer is not, I’ll just be going and you can save the machismo for someone who cares.”

Tito nodded, satisfied somehow with the outcome of their stare-off. He went to the storefront window, where his hair flipped around his shoulders as he gave the street a thorough examination. After pulling the shades, he went over to the door and pushed home the lock. MacAfferty put his hand into his pocket to grip the butt of his lazz.

Looking at the bulging pocket, Tito held his hands up, palm outward. “Hey. Relax.” He walked back over to resume his place behind the counter. “So,” he said, leaning toward MacAfferty, “what exactly was it you were after?”

MacAfferty glared at the man. “You contacted me, remember?”
“Buddy, you got to learn to lighten up.” The shaggy head jogged. “Guess you’re right though.” He peered up from under the fringe of his bangs. “I heard you were after some tech from the Mexican-American States. Memorabilia, I heard.”

When MacAfferty nodded the sububbanite burst out laughing. “Yeah, right.” He laughed some more. “Memorabilia.”

“You got any?”

“Look, buddy, here’s the story: I know the Mexes like I know astrophysics—not at all. But I know a man who’s after a real good eye-jammer when I see one.”

MacAfferty’s hand darted over the counter-top. He snagged the loose hood of the man’s rad-suit and yanked him forward. “Who told you that?” MacAfferty hadn’t mentioned eye-jammers to anyone.

Tito’s hands pried uselessly at MacAfferty’s. “No one! No one had to! I just heard—eye-jammers getting a boost from some old-time tech. I guessed—”

Giving a good, hard shove, MacAfferty released him. There was a satisfying smack as the fleshborn flesh hit the wall behind the counter.

“So.” Tito pulled at the collar of his suit, trying to look nonplussed, “I guess I musta been right.”

MacAfferty was over the counter in one swift motion. “I think it’s time you stopped grading me on my answers, and started giving me yours instead.” He stepped in close. “Starting with what the spam I’m doing here.”

“Alright, alright. I know a guy—but he doesn’t talk to just anyone.”

“So?”

“So I arranged something for today. But then this morning he put me off.”

MacAfferty leaned—he was close enough now to see the black-ringed pores of Tito’s nose.

“But he told me he’s got! The stuff you’re after—he’s got some.”

“When?”

“Two days. Midnight.”

“Where?”

“Here. I’ll take you to him from here.”
Turning the last corner before arriving at his rooming-block, MacAfferty starts humming again as he remembers the ring of that bell above the door as he left the shop. Two days, he thinks, and I'll get my answers.

He steps out of the decon chamber into the lobby of his building feeling better than he has for a long while. He takes the stairs two at a time, ready for a good night's sleep. Six stories later, and a little out of breath, he steps onto the landing and turns to go down the hall to his room. When he hears the floor creak behind him he reacts instinctively, ducking and somersaulting over onto his knees, lazz out and pointed. Something smashes into his wrist and he watches the lazz spinning away, up over his head.

“Hold it.” The voice is close, but he sees nothing through the night-goggles. He plunges forward, his arms wrapping round an invisible limb. He stabs upward with two stiffened fingers, but something intercepts the motion, grabbing the fingers and twisting. Rolling with it, he kicks savagely upward, connecting, but only with the most glancing of blows. Then, all at once, he’s flat on his stomach, arm twisted into the middle of his back, and something bony pushing on the vertebrae in his neck, threatening to break it.

MacAfferty waits to hear the crack.

“I said hold it.” The voice is fem. MacAfferty’s can’t help it, he’s impressed. He can’t remember the last time he was so easily beaten in hand-to-hand. Whoever Tan-Rad-Suit is, she’s good. He tries to speak, but manages only a bit of a strangled sound.

“I’m not interested in a fight, Lieutenant.”

His cover’s blown.

MacAfferty senses the answers he’d been on the verge of bringing to the surface sink away into oblivion. He summons up the image of Suzy and his son for something to cling to.

“I know you’d like to know how I know, so let’s say I let you up and we go to your room and discuss it?”

The pressure on the back of his neck eases. “Yes,” the word gurgles from his lips.

“Let’s.”
His fingers are released, and as he rises, dusting himself off, he sees his lazz levitate off the ground in front of him and vanish—concealed somewhere in the illegal suit. He heads down the hall toward his room.

After keying in the code, he pushes the door to the compappartment open. As he steps inside, he casually reaches up to flick on the light switch next to the entrance. Next, he yanks on the edge of the door, whirling around as it slams into the woman behind him.

He can see her now, and as she puts up her arms to deflect the door, he aims a fist straight at the bridge of her nose. As it swishes through the empty air, MacAfferty grunts—she’s ducked under and past, hammering a blow into his kidneys from behind. He jerks his arm back, intending to bring the point of his elbow into her solar plexus, but she’s gone again. As he turns with the follow through, he sees her standing well out of the way with his own lazz pointed at his chest. Pain shoots up from his arm which now hangs uselessly at his side. She’s managed to chop into one of his pressure points without him even noticing.

Whoever she is, she’s better than good.

Keeping the lazz pointed in his direction, she reaches up to pull the night-goggles and rad-hood off of her head. “I hope we’re through playing now, Lieutenant.”

Her hair, blonde, shoulder-length, glistens despite its mussed condition and the inadequacy of the room’s light-source. The freckles sprayed across her tiny nose give the curious impression of being meticulously arranged—Citiflesh.

“I’m with the Council Special Forces, Lieutenant. I guess I should have identified myself after our first little dance, but people rarely trust something they can’t see. Besides,” E waves at the sagging green couch to es left. “I thought we could make ourselves comfortable first.”

MacAfferty is massaging his shoulder. “You’ve been modified, haven’t you?”

The fem ignores the question. E puts the lazz down on a nearby table-top, and comes toward him. “Here, let me have a look at that.”

MacAfferty instinctively takes a step back. The Citizen beams a dazzling smile in his direction. “Trust me. I can help.”

He watches the fem lift his arm and reach under, applying pressure with es fingertips. MacAfferty feels it all the way through his shoulders and down the length of
his other arm. He considers trying to get the better of the ‘special forces agent’ for a third
time, but what e’s doing to him just feels too good.

“It’s a tantric technique.” The fem changes es grip and the feeling changes
directions, running down MacAfferty’s spine to his tailbone.

“Special Forces,” says MacAfferty through gritted teeth. “I find that hard to
believe. Whatever’s been done to your body only breaks about two dozen laws.”

“There.” E gently lets MacAfferty’s arm settle back to his side, then steps away.
MacAfferty gives the limb a test. The effort makes him wince, but he finds the arm’s
mobility is mostly restored.

When he looks back up at his attacker and nurse, he sees the badge e’s got
proffered in his direction. He looks at the official seal, and reads the name: Beverly Toe.

“What can I say?” Special Agent Toe puts the badge back into the folds of es rad-
suit. “The Council is jittery—taking a few risks these days.”

“Special Agent Toe,” MacAfferty pronounces the name with a healthy dose of
skepticism. “Alright. Let’s assume you are what you say you are. What’s the Council’s
interest in me?”

“It’s not the Council—that is—” Special Agent Toe waves at the couch again.
“Let’s have a seat and I’ll explain. As much as I can, anyway.” E walks over to it, and
drops onto the cushion at one end. E looks up at MacAfferty, flashing that smile at him
once again.

After a moment, MacAfferty shrugs, and then walks over to take a seat beside em.
The weight of him, collapsing at one end of the couch, pops the little blonde menace at
the other briefly up into the air. Toe laughs in a way that MacAfferty has difficulty
reconciling with the phantom that just took him apart—twice. He looks em over—black
rad-suit, no visible wounds. “It wasn’t you tonight, was it? About a half-hour ago?”

“What?”

“Never mind. You were saying, Agent Toe?”

Toe squints es green eyes. “Alright. First of all I want you to call me Bev. Can I
call you Daniel?”

“Dan.”
“Dan. Right. Well, Dan, it’s not really the Council that’s interested in you. It’s me.”

“Sorry. You might as well go then. I’m happily married.”

Es little teeth glisten, es nose crinkles as e laughs again. “Seriously, though. I want to know about what you’re working on. I want to know what you’ve got.”

It’s MacAfferty’s turn to smile, and he does so, coldly. “I’m actually on vacation. What I’m working on is a little downtime in Manaimo, and what I’ve got is a very sore right arm.”

Toe nods, her hair bobbing around her head. “Alright. I’ll give a bit first. I can’t tell you why, exactly, but a little more than two months ago I was assigned to check out Doctor David Metzenbergen. It took a while, but I found out what I needed to.” E lapses into silence, staring at MacAfferty. “Aren’t you going to ask what it was?”

MacAfferty’s busy thinking about the mysterious recurrence of that two month gap. His smile dissipates. “I guess you’d tell me if you wanted to.”

The laugh of this fem is beginning to irritate him.

“You know,” Agent Toe says, “you’re not at all disappointing in person. Not a bit like that blowhard Metzenbergen. What a windbag!” Es blonde locks bob. “Your record in Lumsden—that illegal spare parts ring you took on—”

“Agent Toe, I’m on vacation.”

“What was it? Fifteen people you had to—”

“Maybe we could talk shop another time.”

“You find the memory unpleasant?”

“None of your business. Now, if you’re quite through, it’s been a long day—”

“Alright.” The way e holds es hands up reminds him of Tito in Sihota’s. “The point is that I wrapped up my investigation, and then Citizen Metzenbergen gets shot. I read the report on this Delano Jones thing—good work, by the way. Congratulations.”

When MacAfferty doesn’t acknowledge the complement, Agent Toe continues. “But I noticed you didn’t sign off on it.” E pauses again, waiting for him to interject. E doesn’t. “So,” e goes on, “I came looking for you, only to find you were on ‘vacation’. Well, like I said, I read your record—I put two and two together, and, well, here we are. Together at last.”
“And it’s been a pleasure.” MacAfferty stands. “I’ll just see you to the door now, and we can say goodnight.”

“What are you going to do if you find this Lynyrd deviant?”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, well.” E pulls es hood up over es blonde scalp, and adjusts es night-goggles over es eyes. “There’s some weird stuff going on, Lieutenant MacAfferty. Stuff you don’t know about. Lot’s of people are concerned—like I said, the Council’s gotten jittery.” E stands and walks to the door. “But I bet you and I are the only ones with the experience to know how weird things can really get.” E pulls a card from a pocket in es rad-suit and places it on the table. “I just wanted you to know you’re not necessarily alone. Don’t hesitate to call if you need to.” E slips out, closing the door behind em.

* * *

Eight days before, 12:30 AM

The Buddha stands at the front of the stage with a glass of wine held up in front of him. In the background, two chimps, a gorilla, and a fourth sort of monkey rise from behind their instruments to join em in es toast. The Buddha has just finished congratulating the audience on “setting aside their conceptual selves and waking up from history.”

Metzenbergen turns to Beverly, whose flute of blue is held out toward him. E picks his own goblet of red up off the parapet e’s been leaning against. In concert with the crowd below, they repeat the Buddha’s final words.

“Restored in the Lifeform, at one in the Lifeform, forever returning, renewed in the Lifeform.”

The room briefly erupts in the sound of raining crystal as hundreds of glasses meet. Metz watches the monkeys resume their seats as the Buddha retreats from the stage. E wonders idly who would have made the toast if he had chosen the Buddha costume when he had the chance. Confucius? Karl Marx?
Not long before, Beverly and David had been meandering through the swirl of characters on the ballroom floor. Though they'd been at it for a while, they made next to no progress in their quest to find either Ormande or Nooten. It seemed they could never get very far without someone holding them up, trying to get the Babe-Bev away from Metzenbergen. When the sixth guest, dressed as a satyr, first accused Bev of "shyness unbecoming to her character," then insisted e "spread those wings and fly away" with em, David made up his mind to get out of the mix entirely.

David had directed Bev's eye up to the landing halfway down the curving stairway that descended from the hall's entrance. He'd put an arm under the scintillating white of the Babe-wings, around es waist, and drawn her over to the foot of the steps. Despite a clear view of their objective, it had taken a while to get there—Bev, unwilling to let anything interrupt their conversation, kept stopping or wandering off-course. Chang, the third Khan of the Dragon Empire, swept by, splashing some of David's wine to the floor. Bev just said "Never mind." A wolf shouted at them to grab the rabbit e was following, but Bev just ignored em, encouraging David to go on.

Finally, though, they'd gotten up the red carpeted steps, and stationed themselves by the landing's carved stone railing. It was from there that they'd watched the Buddha give his toast.

Putting his glass down on the railing's wide banister, David surveys the crowd below. E takes in very little—the feeling of Beverly's stare boring into the side of es head is just too distracting. E turns toward the fresh-born to comment on their excellent vantage point, but is dissuaded by es expectant gaze. Bev's waiting for em to finish the conversation that had gotten started below.

A reveller disguised as Nicole Brodsky had been the second to request a spin around the dance-floor with Bev's Babe-angel impersonation. It's possible that e was actually dressed as the twentieth-century comic-book character, Wonder Woman. Metzenbergen, however, was likely the only one present who had any idea what a 'comic-book' was, so e rather doubted it. Brodsky, on the other hand, had certainly known. There'd been a small but special corner of her prodigious brain reserved for her vast knowledge on the subject. And every time Metz had ever seen her, Brodsky had been dressed as her hero, silver bracelets, golden lasso, and all.
After refusing the dance, Bev had, of course, asked about Te Anau—what was it like after the Wall had closed? The simplest answer was the usual litany: starvation, disease, cannibalism, betrayal and murder. In most ways it was just like every other place in the world at that time, minus the threat of nuclear doom raining down at any minute.

The ship Altavera and he had arrived in, the people they arrived with, in 2056, were last to come or go from Te Anau for just over forty-five years. The way the Walls operate make them impossible to get through from only one side. The portal machinery has to be operating both within, and without the impenetrable barrier.

David slouches up against the stone rail, leaning his weight onto es hands. “The way Ditto set up the Walls was one of the beauties of the whole arrangement. Sure, his headquarters, the Protectorate of Te Anau, was cocooned inside the ultimate protective rampart, but it was still vulnerable. To get in and out, to get water, or air, you had to leave some equipment outside. A belt gets cut, and presto, suddenly the wall that protects you is transformed into the walls of your coffin.”

The realization among the populace that the resources of Te Anau would only keep a handful alive indefinitely had been slow in coming to most. Altavera had understood this even before she’d left the Moon. That was one of the reasons she’d turned that second ship into dust on Vertigo Bay’s launch-pad. That’s why the chaos in Te Anau had only lasted a few years.

“So,” Bev’s voice comes from over David’s shoulder. “Ditto buried the outside machinery in the Moon, behind a Wall of its own.”

Metzenbergen straightens to look at the winged form beside em. “That’s right. Altavera sent the code for our ship before it was all blown up.” The occupants of the second life-boat had somehow made it out to the ship after the Wall was gone. David remembers seeing them, suitless and scrambling over the dead surface. Poor pixers—only got nuked for their troubles. Poor Ensign Doe, bolted to the wall, squirming—Altavera just wasn’t going to allow any ‘unsupervised’ escapes.

E shakes the vision away. “When we touched down in Te Anau, we were stuck. Really stuck.” Unlike the nano-containment generators on the Moon, Ditto had decided to protect the ones in Te Anau by planting them squarely inside the Wall itself. “Zack
Nooten was dead, frozen in the bowels of the Moon with most of his notes, and the machinery on Earth was untouchable. We were trapped. Until Brodsky figured it all out.”

Metzenbergen remembers Nicole sitting there with her little computer pad, staring through the shimmer at the web of machinery embedded in the Wall. Sometimes she’d pace instead, twirling that golden loop above her head. She’d mumble to herself the whole time. He remembers she started calling the thing Steve Trevor, after Wonder Woman’s army boyfriend. He remembers her saying that there was no way Hera could keep them separated forever. She told Metzenbergen once that it helped her to concentrate, thinking of the issue where Steve had been locked into a block of ice by Mr. Freeze. If she only had a copy, she said, she’d get them out in a flash. She never got one, but in the end it had been Nicole Brodsky, not the straight-laced Judd, Dietz, the born-again bore, who’d finally figured out how the Wall worked.

Metzenbergen reaches up to touch Bev’s icy-pale Babe-cheek. From around the freshborn’s shoulders the wings extend around to take David into a half-embrace.

“Is this the only other setting your holo-projector has?”

“Certainly not, Dr Hamm. Babe Solomon is a coat of many colours.”

“Maybe it’s time you showed me something different.” Es fingertips run down the length of Bev’s jaw.

“Are you accusing me of failing to keep up with the fashion?”

Metzenbergen says nothing.

“I am the fashion, dear, I don’t have to keep up.” Bev laughs. “Besides, I give nothing away for free. Tell me, from cannibalism to the Constitution—how did that happen?”

Metzenbergen sighs. E picks up his drink. “We had thirty-five years of living with ourselves and what we’d done to survive the first ten. And the Walls admit certain kinds of light—we still received communications—” Metz swallows. For thirty-five years, they’d heard the distant tales of woe and devastation, they’d listened to the nightmare of the outside as it faded toward oblivion. “What would you have done? Beltane had been a slave, just like me. We had to have hope. We made a plan. When Brodsky re-discovered the technology, we searched for someone who could build the portal equipment outside.
We promised to share the technology with whoever would share our Constitution.” E finishes es wine.

“And the rest?”

“The rest? The rest lived as they wanted to.” David puts es glass back down on the edge of the parapet. “Apparently they died the way they wanted to, also.”

As he pulls his hand away to wipe a drop of ruby liquid from the corner of es mouth, the wine glass topples from the railing.

Bev’s hand flashes out, but too late. “Oh,” e says. The crystal spins away, and the sound of it shattering floats up a moment later. “Your glass. It’s fallen.”

“So it has.” Metzenbergen leans out next to Beverly, looking down at the faces looking up at them. “No one was hurt, though. Thank the Lifeform.”

Beverly waves the long tapered Babe-fingers at the crowd below. E shrugs es winged shoulders, saying the words “I’m sorry,” but, amid the all the ballroom’s other sounds, only David can hear. Suddenly, Bev points.

“Look, David! Over there. No, not there—closer to the terrace doors.”

David finds the place. Around the mullioned windows that separate the ballroom from the resort’s gardens, Shakespeare is taking in the wafting breeze. Alongside of him, while her hair is being stroked by Ronald MacDonald, Sarah Sexxx, the virtual entity, chats with the Cannibal King. Next, there’s a potted palm, and then His Highness, William Gates III. Emperor Gates is sharing a laugh with Zack Nooten.

“I see him.”

“Now all we have to do is find—”

“She’s down there. See him? Second table over—at the far end of the dance floor.”

“Which one?”

“Long, scraggly beard, matching hair. Egg blue T-shirt.”

“The one with his belly hanging out? That’s Greg Ormandle?”

“Yes. That’s what he was wearing, I guess, when he came out of the Mojave Wastes.”

Metzenbergen’s memory of him comes from somewhat later though. Ditto had been welcoming his employee Dr. Ormandle back from his five-year-long expedition. David had served them both lunch.
Bev stares. "I don’t understand. Nooten’s about half his size. Cleanly shaven—positively hairless by comparison. With the one piece body-stocking he looks maybe as dandyish as you do, Dr Hamm, but that thing at the table has more in common with the monkeys on stage than either of you."

"If you look closely though, it’s Nooten that has the tail."

"Does Ormundle have one too? I can’t tell, he’s sitting down."

David looks at her and smiles. "No, he doesn’t."

A crease mars the smoothness of Bev’s overly-sculpted Babe-face. "What am I missing?"

"You’re missing the opportunity to fulfill your promise."

"What?"

Metzenbergen reaches out and passes his hand through Beverly’s folded Babewings.

"Oh," says Bev and sinks es fingertips through es gown where es breasts should be. The white of es robe bruises into a royal sort of purple as it tightens into a sextupling of bodice.

Metzenbergen shakes es head.

"Not that one?" The wrist at es chest gives another twist. "There’s one other, I think."

The ebullient white locks contract as a hint of strawberry bleeds into them. The burgeoning sextuplet smooths into the ordinariness of a single pair, and the taught purple blouse heals into a deep forest green, receding up es flanks, exposing the rock in es belly-button. A band of black, low-slung at es waist where it starts, stops just at the top of es thighs. Boots, spike-heeled and laced up the back, climb up es calves and embrace es knees.

"Is that alright?"

Metzenbergen can’t help himself. E reaches out to play with the holographic diamond in Bev’s Babe-navel. E nods. "Those were the—" e begins, but finds e has to stop to clear es throat. This is the Babe e never knew—the Babe that existed when he was a teen-ager, when meeting such people was nothing but an idiotic fantasy. Es gesture
travels from Ormandle over to Nooten. "Those were the days before protocols. Body-sculpting was still legal."

"Then what they look like has nothing to do with anything?"

"Yes. Remember, too, those are Citizens down there. The real things were actually more similar in build. In height, at least. And bone-size."

"So what, David? Two out of every five people have that much in common."

"So, now maybe you finally understand why what I say really adds nothing to history."

"No fair." Full red lips pout. Green fire ignites in Bev's Babe-eyes.

"Alright. You've earned it, I guess." Es hand, having discovered the illusion, drops from Bev's flat belly. "There were dozens of things that made me suspicious. I was suspicious enough that some of it was probably my imagination—" David once again recalls seeing Ormandle for the first time. "—but not all." E remembers holding the lunch-tray out to one side while he placed a bowl of lobster ravioli with white truffle sauce in front of Ditto. "Number one, they were all crazy. And I know that being a genius and being crazy don't have to go together. But these maniacs were all both."

E takes Beverly by the hand and pulls em closer. "Number two: none of them ever laughed unless it was at something that was really not at all funny. Suffering was the favourite joke of all of them." E brushes the strawberry wisps at Bev's temple back behind es ear. "Now these two things weren't necessarily uncommon at the time, but there was also a certain gesture." He extends es index finger, pointing es thumb upward like a trigger. E makes a clicking sound with es tongue as e jabs, and the trigger falls. "They all made it."

Metzenbergen remembers coming around the table and putting the second dish down in front of Ormandle. The man's callused fingers bit into es wrist, locking round it after e'd let go of the bowl. "Like this one, Ditto," Ormandle's parched voice creaked. "A real survivor, right? Metzenbergen, right? A survivor's name: Metzenbergen." The finger pointed, the trigger fell with the click of his tongue.

David takes Beverly by the hand and turns em gently away from the view of the ballroom. "Number four, as far as I know, no one ever saw any of their bodies, and I knew people who probably should have. And no one I talked to ever really saw them.
together. Indeed their moments of fame lie conveniently end to end, with practically no overlap.” Es eyes travel the length of Bev’s profile, from the Babe-boots, over es pale thighs, the tiny swell where an umbilical cord has apparently been knotted. E draws the freshborn to the foot of the steps that lead up to the ballroom’s exit.

Beverly says nothing. E sees the way they’re headed, and gives in, understanding that it’s time to go back to the room for a final tryst. E has nothing more to ask.

Metzenbergen takes in the greater and more pointed swell of Bev’s breast, and then the throat, the button nose and the tiny but luxurious swirl of ear. E feels the pressure mounting inside the velvet blue of es breeches.

Metzenbergen doesn’t remember at all what she really looked like, but this is what e sees when e imagines her. Looking through es memories for the likeness of es long dead mother, this is what he always finds—the features of this Babe that inflamed em in pubescence.

“Number five,” e says. “None of them—and among the elite they were alone in this—none of them ever underwent transpiration.”

Beverly and em arrive at the top of the red carpeted stairs, and as David tenderly directs the freshborn out of the ballroom, e looks back toward the mullioned terrace doors. Gates has moved on, but Nooten, talking now with Sarah Ssexx, is still there. David remembers being on the Moon, not serving food any longer, dishing up flesh instead as a transpiration midwife. E remembers Zack Nooten coming across him as he left his room after recovering from a successful template infusion. The doctor’s thumb cocked itself above his extended finger, “I knew it the minute I saw you, didn’t I? A survivor. Metzenbergen: a survivor’s name.” His tongue clicked.

* * *

Fifteen days after, 12:30AM

MacAfferty stands a few feet back, watching Tito lean around the corner in front of them. Tito’s hand comes up, needlessly signalling a halt. MacAfferty crosses his arms, his patience running out.
The route they’re taking is absurdly circuitous, cutting through tenements and doubling back down alleys. Stopping this way at every turn so Tito can pretend he’s Puente, Tito Puente, man of mystery and intrigue.

Tito’s hand waves him forward as his sharkskin slicker follows him round the bend. MacAfferty remains motionless. After a moment or two Tito’s sharp nose and furred jaw reappear.

“What’s up?”

MacAfferty gives his best glare. “Just who, exactly, are you trying to impress?”

“What?”

“The cloak and dagger act. If it’s for my benefit, I wish you’d just give it a rest already.”

“Pretty eager to be judged, are you?”

“If there were any judges out and about—and I haven’t seen any—you’re antics are more likely to bring them running than anything else.”

“What would you know about it?”

“A lot more than you. You seem to think my Citiflesh is a sign of inexperience. Well, it isn’t. In fact, what it really means is experience beyond your wildest comprehension.”

Tito’s rambunctious hair droops over his night-goggles as he looks down at his feet. “I’m just trying to protect you.”

“Trying to make it look like you’re worth whatever you’re getting paid, more like it.”

“Alright, alright, Mister-know-it-all. We’ll do it your way.” He turns and, seeing a fragment of an old exhaust pipe, gives a kick before heading back around the corner.

MacAfferty listens to the metal skitter away, the sound echoing through the silence of the late night Manaimo streets. He shakes his head, then follows Tito.

Striding down the center of the avenue, the rest of their journey takes less than a half-hour. MacAfferty’s guide spends the first minutes of it shouting at every scuttling bit of trash and booting every shard of glass he comes across. When he takes out his lasso and aims it at a scrawny canine cutting back and forth up ahead, MacAfferty drops a big hand
down onto his shoulder. With his fingers digging for the nerve clusters around the joint, MacAfferty suggests to Tito that he resist the urge.

“Just like Citiflesh,” grumbles Tito, rubbing his shoulder. “Always wanting it both ways.” But he desists in his churlish behaviour.

After walking through a part of the subub hollowed and blackened by fire, the two of them pass a couple of lingerers under the glowing sign of the Millennium Bar and Grill. Another left turn, and Tito leads MacAfferty onto Polk Avenue, a short commercial strip in Manaimo’s east end. Tito stops. “I wouldn’t have done it, you know.” He turns toward MacAfferty. “Shot that dog.”

MacAfferty really couldn’t care less. Was the man about to proselytize for the vegetarian lifestyle? Tito turns again, presenting Daniel with his profile, his night-goggles directed up at another sign that says Al’s Café.

“I just wanted to see what you’d do around a lazz. Your pretty cool, mister. Like you just came out of the deep-freeze. Something about you’s not right, but my guy says he wants to see you.”

“So can we go see him already?”

“Yeah. This is the place.” He juts his chin to the right of the café. “Around the side.” He looks back at Daniel. MacAfferty takes the hint and heads toward the narrow walkway that opens at one side of the building.

“Hold it,” Tito says as they file into the walkway. “I got to search you first.” Hands pat up the inside of Daniel’s legs and then around his waist. “Like I thought,” says Tito. He pulls out MacAfferty’s lazz.

MacAfferty hears Tito step away, and turns. He sees, without surprise, the muzzle of his own lazz levelled in his direction.

“Now, just remember,” Tito says, checking the charge on the lazz’s side. “I’ll be right behind you.” The lazz jabs toward a door farther down the walkway’s slender confines. “Move.”

“See that button?” He points to what looks like a doorbell. “Press it three times. Hold it down for a three count each time.” MacAfferty does.

“Tito?” The voice crackles out of the air.

“Yeah, it’s me.”
“Are you alone?”
“No. I got the collector guy here with me.”
“And is everything alright?”
“Aces and roses.”
A series of clicks emerges from around the latch in the door.
“Go on in.”

The number of hooks along the wall in the decontamination chamber indicate a capacity for heavy traffic. During the day, the wall probably bristles with slickers and rad-suits. Not at all what he expects to find in the entrance of a black-market warehouse. MacAfferty hears the clicks of the outer door sealing behind him.

“Keep going,” Tito says, as the hum of the detection units kicks in. “Don’t crowd me.” The light stabs MacAfferty between his kidneys. He travels across the chamber, his eyes glued to the thing that brought him up short to begin with. A few toppled boots and the odd set of rad-leathers are strewn among the mostly empty hooks. A tan one, medium fit, hangs at the centre of them. A plaid scarf dangles in the corner.

He passes the suit, turning nonchalantly, perusing it top to bottom. He sees the bloom of rust on the suit’s wrist, the splatter down its thigh. No punctures though—a hand shot.

He pulls his night-goggles up onto his forehead. It’s a surprise to see the illegal item so prominently displayed, but then again, without its micro-circuitry operating, it takes a pretty close look to tell this suit apart from any other. The green light blinks on. He hears the clicks of the second door unsealing.

“We’re clean,” Tito says.

MacAfferty opens the door and sees immediately why there’s so much room in the decon chamber. Counters and stove-tops are spread out below racks festooned with pots and pans—the kitchen of Al’s Café, sanitized and put to bed.

“We gotta go downstairs,” says Tito. “On the left, over there.”

MacAfferty heads over and finds himself staring down some steps, into a poorly lit basement. He hesitates. Suzy, her delicate features and tattooed head, flashes through his mind. Close on the image’s heels comes one of their son, for some reason as the newborn he was six years ago.
Daniel could back out now—make a call—a dozen Nanaimo judges would sweep down on the place in half-an-hour. But maybe there’s nothing down there—another collection of talking toasters and contraband batteries. He’d look like a fool.

He begins the descent. Coming off the final step, he finds himself looking at laundry machines, sinks, and old cooking equipment. It’s all crowded into a low-ceilinged room with the thick, metal slabs of fridge doors lining one side. Light spills from another doorway opposite to where MacAfferty is standing. A figure stands just inside the portal. Backlit, the character’s features are difficult to make out, but MacAfferty sees the wad of bandage that covers the man’s hand—it’s Tan-Rad-Suit.

“You’ve searched him, Tito?” It’s the voice that was broadcast at them outside.

“Yeah,” says Tito. “Got his lazz.”

“Excellent.”

“He didn’t seem to have anything else, though. Not even any money.”

“I didn’t trust your boy here,” says MacAfferty. “In fact, I don’t trust one spammed thing about any of this set up.”

“I see,” says Tan-Rad-Suit. “Well, let me reassure you, nobody’s interested in robbing you here.”

“Better safe than sorry, I always say.”

“See the merchandise first, talk money later, is that it?”

“That’s right.”

Tan-Rad-Suit ponders for a moment. “That seems fair enough.” He turns. “Come along, then.”

By the time MacAfferty and Tito get across the basement, Tan-Rad-Suit is already well-down the corridor that lies on the doorway’s other side. It slopes down, its roof even lower than the rest of the cellar. The hallway’s length suggests that it will carry them well out of the limits of Al’s Café, well out of the building in which the café resides.

The small “Whoa” that Tito utters at the corridor’s entrance makes MacAfferty hesitate again. Clearly, Tan-Rad-Suit’s accomplice had no idea this tunnel existed. Why reveal it to him now? It could only be because MacAfferty’s there. Tan-Rad-Suit wanted him down there.
Searching for delaying tactics, MacAfferty plays his trump. "Why were you following me anyway?"

Tan-Rad-Suit turns. "Following you?"

"No games," says MacAfferty.

Tan-Rad-Suit spreads his arms in a shrug, and begins ambling backward while giving his answer. "The stuff I have is very expensive, as well as very illegal. I wanted to be sure you were what you seemed."

The answer is too predictable. He examines the doorway into the tunnel.

"Move it," says Tito, jabbing MacAfferty with the lazz.

MacAfferty ignores him. "And so now you know." He directs the remark at the man down the hall.

"Yes. I found you on the permanent record, entry forty-four-nine-twenty-dash-vee-jay-six. Harlan Ell—demoted for possession of contraband eight months ago."

MacAfferty’s decoy file—his cover’s still good. Maybe. Then why does this door look so completely spring-loaded?

Tito jabs him again. "I’ll shoot you, eff-pixer. I swear I will."

Tan-Rad-Suit stops. "Tito, let the man be. He’s a customer, not a hostage." He spreads his arms again. "Let me assure you Mister Ell, that nobody’s interested in shooting anyone around here. You know very well," he holds up his bandaged hand, "that if I’d wanted you dead, it probably would have been done by now." He cradles the wounded limb. "Perhaps you believe I require revenge for the loss of my fingertip. Why bring you all the way here for such a trivial thing? A thing that could be replaced in an hour if I felt like going to the hospital. Indeed, if I intended anything other than a little bit of mutually satisfying business, why would I bring you here, to my sanctum sanctorum, at all?"

It’s the same logic that went through MacAfferty’s head as he followed Tito’s serpentine through the subub. He derives no comfort from the similarity. "You do seem pretty keen on taking me into the heart of your deal, here." He squints at the man down the hall, but his features remain consistently, frustratingly out of view. "Why not bring your stuff upstairs to show me?"
"Two reasons: first, my ‘stuff,’ as you call it, would take all night to get up there; second, I rarely get the chance to show it to anyone who knows anything about it—call it the pride of my expertise. Besides, Mister Ell, who would you tell? At this point, you’re as likely a candidate for the body-bins as me."

"What if I was to come back and rob you?"

Tan-Rad-Suit’s laughter comes in a high-pitched shriek that nearly causes MacAfferty to wince. It is joined, after a moment, by a snorting chuckle from Tito.

"Please, Mister Ell, let’s be serious. Anymore questions? If you’d like to call the whole thing off, well, I will agree, though not without some sadness. Despite my security presence,” he laughs a little more, "you really are free to go."

MacAfferty makes his decision. He starts down the hall, at this point caring only to get close enough to get his hands on the man. He walks quickly, cutting the twenty-five meter distance down by a few before Tan-Rad-Suit turns to continue his own walk down the corridor. MacAfferty shouts out to him, trying to slow his target down.

"And how about me? When do I get to know who it is I’m dealing with?"

"I thought you already did." Tan-Rad-Suit turns again, retreating backward. Less than twenty meters away, near the tunnel’s opposite end, he veers to one side. A new door slides open beside him. Fifteen—close enough to see the smile widening on Tan-Rad-Suit’s face, indeed, close enough now to make out the aquiline nose, the birthmark on his cheekbone.

"I’m Lynyrd. ‘The Wink’ they call me."

Ten meters away, MacAfferty sees Lynyrd’s left eye slowly close and open again. At eight meters MacAfferty slows, recognizing the pungent odour that’s wafting up the hall, seeping through his rad-suit’s nose-filters. There’s nothing dangerous in it, and if there were the nose-filters would protect him—it’s just that, for MacAfferty, the smell of rotting meat has a variety of bad associations.

When another light goes on, spilling out from the open door into the corridor, MacAfferty, realizes he’s been had. The distribution of shadow over Tan-Rad-Suit’s body changes by adjustments rather than all at once.

He wheels about. Over Tito’s head, tucked into the gloom above the door, he sees the hologram projector. Tito has been lagging a bit, and when MacAfferty comes
charging up the hall at him, he instinctively pulls the trigger on MacAfferty’s lazz. When nothing happens, he pulls it again, looking down confusedly at the inert weapon.

MacAfferty’s fist lifts Tito into the air, snapping his head back as it collides with his chin. MacAfferty ignores the lazz that flips away, the one he’d sabotaged, knowing it would be taken away from him. He scrambles over the unconscious Tito, pulling the man’s lazz from his rad-suit as he goes. He runs for the exit, leading with the lazz.

He sees it when it comes, but there’s no time to stop. He runs straight into the wall of greenish energy that’s washing in his direction. When he emerges from its other side, his momentum carries him, skidding on his face, almost to the end of the corridor. He struggles to rise, but his legs shoot out in all the wrong directions. His muscles are a mass of uncontrollable twitching. His lazz goes off, melting a section of the wall. He tries to let it go, but it just goes off again. A boot comes down on his wrist.

“I think we’ll just relieve you of that, Detective MacAfferty.” It’s Lynyrd’s voice. Through MacAfferty’s blinking, rolling eyes, he sees the man stoop and then gets a glimpse of the hand, real flesh this time, that pries the gun from his useless fingers. As Lynyrd flips him over MacAfferty manages a strangled growl.

“Now, now,” says Lynyrd. “Don’t be that way. It’s me who should really be upset. I told you nothing but the truth. You, on the other hand, well, it turns out you are pretty much one big lie, isn’t that so, Lieutenant MacAfferty?” He pulls a syringe from a small canister at his belt. MacAfferty gurgles some more.

A thread of crystal sprays from the syringe’s tip as Lynyrd holds it up to check the dosage. “I told you I had no intention of killing you, and I don’t.” He stoops again to administer the shot into MacAfferty’s throat. “At least not soon.” He pats MacAfferty’s cheek as he smiles benignly into his face. “As I said, all I’m interested in is a bit of mutually satisfying business. But you had to go and spoil my little surprise.” He stands. “For that, of course, you deserve a little punishment.” His laughter shrieks as he pulls two long, shining needles from his belt. He bends them, testing their strength and flexibility as if they were épées. MacAfferty feels a bite in his hip. “These won’t hurt much at first, but later, when you wake up, I think you’ll agree that they are really quite excruciating.” There’s a second bite at the top of MacAfferty’s other leg. Lynyrd straightens, then exits MacAfferty’s field of vision, heading back down the corridor as the hiccupping shriek
echoes throughout the shaft. “Maybe then you’ll appreciate my surprise.” MacAfferty
hears the sound of something being dragged.

* * * * *

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Every time Metzenbergen tried to open his eyes, the incandescence of the light above
him would slowly, surely force them closed again. He’d squeeze his eyelids together, ejecting
the tears collected in their corners so they streamed down the side of his head, over his
temples, and into his ears. And then he’d open them again, letting the light burn into his
retinas all over again while they rolled and searched.

His hands, which were pinned out of his eyesight, were similarly engaged—clutching
and grabbing, fingernails pointlessly digging. Most of the time his mind was entirely
crowded with just one thought, but every so often a second idea pushed back at the wall of
the first. Every so often, like a bubble rising in the ocean, the hope that he might see, or touch
something that might save him would surface, then vanish beneath another curling wave of
fear.

He really had no notion of how long he’d been strapped to this table, stuck under the
unblinking glare of the light. Time was a concept entirely too abstract for him now. But he
did carry the memory of being wheeled in.

“Please,” he’d begged at the underside of the head above him. “Please, don’t let them
do this to me.” The squeak of the wheels below him was as regular as the turning of the
world, returning again and again with no hesitation, nor any need of respite.

“Please, just loosen the straps.” The nurse pushing the gurney strode on. From below,
the triangle of chin weaved back and forth like the head of a cobra.

“For God’s sake, please—just loosen one. I’ll do the rest.”

The chin tilted down, but the eyes in the upside-down face stared blankly, as if there
were nothing to see. They resumed their focus on the course straight ahead.

“For the love of God—give me a chance!”
A torso loomed from below, leaning against the passing wall. The surgeon’s mask was pulled down from twisting lips. “You should gag him.” And then he was gone, vanishing overhead, ignored by the relentless squeak from below.

The world erupted in the clatter of doors at his feet, and the squeak was silenced as if what made it had withered abruptly beneath the harshness of the light.

The clutch of his hands once again found the end of a strap. He squeezed it for a while and then let it go, remembering how in some other age pulling on it had merely tightened the grip on his wrist, making it harder for the blood to reach his fingertips. His hands continued their scrabbling.

At his feet, a nurse hovered into sight. His neck strained to bring his head up and get a better look. The muscles there refused all knowledge of the leather that held his skull in one place. The refraction of light in the watery film swimming over his eyes cast a halo over her head.

“Please,” he croaked from a throat frayed through bouts of shouting.

She wandered, checking I.V.’s and monitors. She leaned down and stroked his head. “it won’t be long now.”

His eyes squeezed shut and when they opened again, she was gone. “Please.” His voice had ceased to make any sound at all.

He was exhausted, but the churn of his internal organs, the ache of his immobile limbs refused him any sleep. He listened to the raggedness of his own breathing, trying to block out the steadiness of the beeps and buzzes emitted by the machines around him.

When the doctors finally came, his body was already so replete with fear, it failed to even twitch. They looked into his face from their upside-down world above him. “So it is you Metz,” said the one in the middle. The masked face turns. “I always thought this slave served poorly.” David winced at the high pitched laugh, feeling in it the foreshadowing of a stab.

Please. The word was shaped by David’s mouth. He directed it at the doctors on either side of Dr. Hamm, but it was Francis Hamm who answered. “Yes, Metz. I’m here to help you. I will help you to learn to serve and help others. But you must understand, to do this you must help me too.” With two gloved hands, he wipes the tears from the sides of David’s head. “In the other room is a woman who didn’t understand this. I’m sure you can guess what happened to her.”
Metzenbergen's eyes close against the burning of the light.

"That's right," says Dr. Hamm. "But that won't happen to you, will it, Metz?"

Because you want to help me don't you?"

Please.

"Yes, I know you do. And do you know how?"

Please, no.

"To do your part, all you have to do is survive."

The doctor to the right was looking over a chart. "His stats look reasonable."

Dr. Hamm, though, only had eyes for David. "We all want to survive, Metz. But some of us just don't want it badly enough. But you do, don't you, Metz?"

Please.

The doctor on the right spoke again, a little more loudly, "Cytosine / adenine ratios, ribosomal activities in the endoplasmic—"

"That will be all," said Dr. Hamm. "You can both go now."

"Are you sure you want—"

"Get out."

A moment passes, and the sounds of doors opening and closing, of beeping machinery, of his own exhausted heartbeat, all fade to some place far distant from David's thoughts. He watches a finger hook up under the mask and pull it aside. A different mask cups over the nose and lips and the world seems filled with the roar of the Doctor's heaving lungs.

Through his tears, Metz saw the halo fall, ringing the gleaming tip of the scalpel Dr. Hamm held up. "I won't lie to you Metz." A little laugh whistled from behind the doctor's mask. "This will be very bad." And another heaving breath. "Some pass out quickly from the pain. But I should warn you, succumbing to shock is the quickest way to die." The laugh comes now like nails on slate. "Sorry, I'm always just a little nervous when we begin."

After that, the knife started in, and David really couldn't tell where all the shrieking came from.
Fifteen days after, 5:25 AM

"—cause of allll my pride-a.
These teeeears I gotta hide-a!
Needles and pins-a!
Neeeedles aannd pins-a."

The voice screeches the song’s finale, failing entirely to match the notes of the warbling synth that accompanies it. Then the laughter comes again, the ludicrous cackling shriek. The sound unsettles the flies crawling on the back of MacAfferty’s hands.

Daniel’s not sure exactly how long he’s been conscious. He doesn’t believe it can have been all that long, really. But the pumping, liquid pain that seems to have replaced the blood in his veins makes it difficult to count very much of anything at all.

He’s grateful to be alive, yes, but he’s even more grateful that his mouth is closed—it means the flies can’t get in that way. Instead, they buzz in his ears. They climb up his cheeks and flit about, fighting for a spot at the welling oases of his eyes. This skirmish is minor, though, compared to the one that’s taking place beneath Daniel’s skin.

The arena of his insides is fully engaged by a contest of body and mind. Twin fires burn at either side of his pelvis. With each heartbeat, the sear shoots down his legs, then rebounds from the soles of his feet, up his spine, and into the confines of his skull. His mind cringes away. But then, as the inferno burns itself out, thought creeps forward again, collecting the scraps, trying to weld them together into some meaningful shape. But there’s just too little. And the arrival of the next volcanic flare blows it all apart again. Yet that fire, too, will die, and curiosity can’t help but crawl out from the cool and the dark when it does, to make use of the sparks left behind.

Between moments of pain-blurred vision, and around the black bodies of drinking insects, MacAfferty has made out what he can. He recognizes the rough stonework in front of him as a wall in the tunnel where Lynyrd had trapped him. A bluish light radiates from behind, and at the bottom of the blue rectangle it casts onto the wall, he can see the silhouetted outlines of himself and the chair he’s sitting in. His feet are propped up on

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footrests, and his arms are posed on the arms of the chair. Switches lie just beyond his fingertips—it must be motorized.

The seat is pulled back just far enough for him to see that he’s stationed halfway inside a doorway. Hence the quadrangle of blue on the wall opposite. The view up the hall is cut off. He can’t tell if the entrance at the far end is still open. He’d like to lean forward to look. He’d like to do a whole variety of things, but he can’t. He can’t move. He is a statue chiseled from stone and hidden away in the obscurest of alcoves.

It’s bad. Worse than bad. As if pulsing agony and buzzing bugs in his aural canal are not enough, Lynyrd has added a cruelly unhumorous auditory joke:

“—get down on my knees and pray-eeay
That they’d go awayee-ee.
But still they begin-a:
Needles and pins-a—”

The discordance of Lynyrd’s singing voice is such that it cannot have been anything but purposeful. The song comes again and again from over his shoulder, book-ended each time by the horrible laugh.

At first, it had just seemed ridiculous, the cacophonous and regular return of the chorus: Needles and pins-a! Neeeeedles anndd-a Pins. As if MacAfferty might need to be reminded of the source of his pain. After a while, though, maybe more than just a while, it had started to tear at his eardrums. MacAfferty can almost imagine them bleeding. He can easily imagine the flies nibbling at the hanging tatters of their flesh.

And then there’s the stink. The stink of the urine that’s pooled beneath his rad-suit is potent certainly, but the other one—immobile, he feels packed in the odour like crystal in wads of cotton. It’s thick the way only the smell of something dead can be thick. With every breath, it curls ever tighter in his gut. It’s the thousand insect legs that crawl on his bare skin. Sometimes, when he finds the power to focus, when curiosity ebbs back, he wonders what it emanates from. Though really, what he wonders is who it emanates from.

MacAfferty concentrates. A while ago, maybe a long while ago, he managed a twitch of his pinkie. The moment had buoyed his spirit almost to the top of the muck in
which he feels submerged. But he has not been able to repeat it. Pain boils up from his core once again and he forgets. When he tries to open his eyes, one of them sticks. He feels the jump of his spirit—he blinked!

Ignoring the next excruciating surge, he shuts the open eye, rapturously exploring the dark. The flies lift, and though they settle again, MacAfferty revels in his newfound power to deny them their watering hole.

Then, while his retinas luxuriate in the lightlessness, a second sense receives its reprieve. The tuneless howl that approximates song is cut off in mid-lyric.

Lynyrd’s speaking voice interjects, “I hope you have enjoyed the musical part of the program—the rendition of Needles and Pins, recorded scant days ago, by yours truly.” MacAfferty’s eyelids flick open. “My calculations indicate that at this time, my captive audience should be shrugging off the effects of our choice for drug of the day, so we’ll pause for a moment now, while our public prepares for our next offering.”

Before closing to stem the feast at their corners, MacAfferty’s eyes exercise their new freedom to rove. There’s little more to see in the expanded periphery though—only that he indeed rests within the rectangle of a door jamb. When he opens his eyes again, it’s to watch the tips of his fingers twitch to life.

The recording of Lynyrd’s voice cuts in again. “In these early moments of burgeoning freedom, the audience may want to employ the switches on their chair’s armrest to mobilize themselves. As encouragement to do so, we offer this reprise of the truly memorable Needles and—”

MacAfferty’s arm slithers infinitesimally ahead on the arm of the chair, colliding with the little vertical lever in front of it. The chair kicks abruptly forward. The rests that support MacAfferty’s feet smash into the wall opposite. The chair leans, nearly toppling MacAfferty’s body out onto the floor before righting itself.

“Excellent. The fact that you’re hearing this indicates that you’ve succeeded in taking your first itsy-bitsy steps. Let me take this moment, Lieutenant MacAfferty—Dan—let me take this moment to tell you how proud I am of you. In a few moments you will have fulfilled all of my highest expectations.”

MacAfferty’s wrist begins to unfreeze. He focuses. The chair jolts back and to one side as he manages to hook his middle finger around the lever.
“You should know, Dan, that when I said I was following you to find out if you were what you seemed, what you seemed to be was a homicide detective working alone on the case. I had reasons to believe you might not be. Or, even worse, that you might not be alone. There was that annoying Beverly Toe creature, for instance—we couldn’t have her swooping in—rescuing you any time before this morning.”

The side of the chair crashes into the wall beside the open door.

“But you didn’t disappoint me, Dan. After all we’ve shared, I didn’t imagine you would.”

The doorway zips past as MacAfferty overshoots his target. A body crumpled on the floor flashes into sight and then is gone.

“I’ve been studying you, Daniel MacAfferty. I’ve stood outside your house near Dofino. Your married is doing a wonderful job on that porch, by the way.”

MacAfferty’s body suffers a relapse. He freezes at the thought of Lynyrd in any kind of proximity to Suzy.

“And Bobby, that son of yours—when I patted him on the head outside the Jantsens’, I couldn’t help reminiscing. I remembered a variety of special occasions. That kind of flesh always made for the best sorts of entrées.”

The surge of energy picks MacAfferty straight up off the seat. He screams, falling forward off the balls of his feet, his forehead cracking into the ground.

“Here’s a particularly good recipe: Dig a pit, half a meter deep and across, and about ten centimetres longer than the meat you plan to cook. Build a fire in the pit using plenty of wood. While you wait for the fire to burn down, skin and dress the meat.”

He pushes himself up onto his side, and then over. His hand crawls down to his hip, fingertips searching for the head of the needle. He pulls, screams, then pulls some more. The pin, twenty centimeters of it, comes out clean and shiny.

“To skin the meat, cut off the head and arms; snip of any external genitals and carve out the anus. Make an incision on either side of the spine, and up the center of the torso.”

The second needle comes out in the same way, with the same slow rip and shred of agony.
“Pull out the guts. Season and stuff it with vegetables or fruit if you’ve got them. Onions and garlic are a good way to go. Toss it in the hole and bury it. Four hours—dig it up and serve.”

Blood streams from above MacAfferty’s eye, mingling with the tears rolling down his cheeks. He drags himself around the edge of the door jamb then props himself up against it to survey the room.

“Our time together, I think, is growing short, Dan.”

It sits in an armchair across from the doorway, grey skin ballooning outward from its torso. Elsewhere, along one bicep and on the inside of one thigh, the build up of gas has exploded the flesh.

“Don’t get me wrong, I expect we’ll meet again, but the circumstances will likely be far less predictable.”

A shin-bone and several phalanges are visible where the maggots have chewed them clean. Between its legs, a stump is the only evidence of the corpse’s masculinity. But by far the worst is the jaw that moves with every word, jarring the worms from their nests in its emptied eye sockets.

“I hope you’re pleased with your discovery of this fine cache of technology from the Mexican States.” Muscles slide over the dead face in what MacAfferty recognizes as an effort to grin. “And that you’re enjoying the chance to see it in action.”

The walls are laden with ordinance—a nightmare of muzzles and blades, missiles, mines and grenades, instruments of pain, and unrecognizable devices of arcane form. And all of it is bathed in blue light. Light that doesn’t spread so much as end in a wall a few feet inside the room. It’s like looking at into an aquarium, except the partition is not glass—not anything material at all.

“Anyway, as we come to the end of our program, I would like to leave you with this final offering: a recitation from a lost work of the great English bard—”

As he listens to the sound of Lynyrd clearing his voice, it occurs to MacAfferty that the field of blue energy is familiar. He ignores the thought for the moment, prioritizing.

“For God’s sake, let us sit upon the ground

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And tell sad stories about the death of kings:
How some have been deposed—"

He shakes his head in a futile effort to unsettle the flies. The second body, like the seated one, lies inside the blue energy aquarium. It is the one that MacAfferty glimpsed in passing. It lies prone, with its feet pointed toward him.

"Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed—"

MacAfferty rolls over, onto his hands and knees. It is a new world of hurt he travels into with each movement, but he crawls, hand over hand, feet and legs spasmodically following. He traverses the blue barrier. The metal smell of a lightning storm mingles in his nostrils with the odour of the dead.

"All murdered: for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps death his court—"

He grabs the body to turn it over. Logic dictates that it should be Tito’s, but he knows already that it's not.

"Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp:
Allowing him a breath, a little scene—"

Aquiline nose, birthmark on the cheekbone—the face is Lynyrd’s. ‘The Wink’ lies stiff with death on the floor in front of him, though his voice continues yapping from the rotting head nearby. MacAfferty totters to his feet.

"To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit—"

He staggers over to the armchair and raises his hand, thinking to silence it—knock the head free of its perch and shut it up. His hand drops back to his side.
"As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable; and humour'd thus
Comes at the last, and with a little pin
Bores through this castle wall, and farewell king!"

The quiet that follows is complete, save for the buzzing of the flies. MacAfferty lets it settle over him for a moment, pulling himself together. He waves the insects away from his face and decides to do a little police-work.

He goes back to the body on the floor. He bends to search for a cause of death, scanning over the torso and arms. His eyes fasten on the body's neck.

"Eff-pix," the curse hisses out between his dry lips. "Eff-pixing fix of pixing fixer!"

He reaches out and pinches the nub of bone between his fingers and pulls. A yellowish liquid squirts from the hole as if he's just uncorked a bottle. As he straightens, he wipes the goo from the white of the object, and holds it up for a better look. A pyramid of ivory—like a tooth. An abnormally large canine incisor. He realizes the blue is exactly what he thought it was. Familiar because he's seen it enveloping patients in the transpiration theatre.

Lynyrd, he thinks, has fled. Not just the scene, but the very flesh he once inhabited.

MacAfferty strides over to the decaying mess in the armchair. It's there. In the neck as well. He has to dig for it a bit, but the tooth-like thing comes out eventually, taking its place beside its identical companion in his palm.

The pain that lingers in his joints is still severe, but MacAfferty has no trouble ignoring it. He grabs the corpse's arm, his fingers sinking in to the viscous flesh. He pulls it from its seat and starts to drag it from the room. A slug-trail of putrefaction smears out behind MacAfferty and his burden, down the length of the hall and into the basement. The corpse's head gets stuck repeatedly on the steps on the way up, but MacAfferty jerks it free each time. As he drags it across the kitchen floor, it gets stuck again. MacAfferty jerks and the arm slithers free, leaving him with a handful of worm infested flesh. He flicks it away, then grabs the other arm and pulls it into the empty café, grateful that the place is closed.
He searches beside the front counter until he finds the wand. He pulls the arm closer and passes the wand over it. When the screen drops down from the air, he finds himself reading the financial history and status of Dalbert Ensten.

He remembers. The girlfriend talking about es uncle. “Es Uncle Dal. Eff-pix!”

The wand, the dead arm both drop to the ground. MacAfferty steps round the edge of the counter and heads over to the public vid-phone in the corner. He waves the chip in his wrist over the scanner.

A tinny voice speaks out from the machine, “Who would you like to call, Lieutenant MacAfferty?”

“Connect me to Judge Nguyen, Manaimo Central Judges League.”

Nguyen’s face appears in the tiny screen. “Hi, Dan—Lifeform preserve! You look like spam! What—”

“No time, Aké. Get a few judges down to Al’s Café, east end— I’m not sure what street—”

“I know the place. What—”

“Murder. Two dead. Get an all points out on Tito Puente, too. Male, mid-thirties, medium build, long black curly hair and thick side-burns.” He’ll be dead when you find him, MacAfferty thinks, killed by a dog bite. He doesn’t say it though, hoping it’s not true.

“Clothes?”

“Last seen wearing a sharkskin slicker and a black rad-suit.” Spam it, he’s dead anyway, even if his body’s up and walking.

“Right.”

“I’d have a look around for your guy Kotoba, too. He might be number three.” Or four.

“I’m on it.”

The screen blanks out.

“Charge: three credits, Lieutenant MacAfferty. Would you like to place another call?”

MacAfferty considers.
“Yes.” He undoes the top fasteners on his rad-suit, and reaches inside it to pull out the card. “Connect me to the Council Agency. Code four-four-three-aitch-aitch-seven. Beverly Toe.”

MacAfferty waits, tapping along the edges of the vid-phone.

The small freckled face appears. “Dan, where—

“Agent Toe. Something’s happened. I think—look, it’s very important that you just trust me on this. I think you should know that David Metzenbergen probably isn’t—”

“Yes,” e says, and MacAfferty notices the haggard look in e face, the dejection in e voice. “I know. But it’s too late. Around two o’clock this morning everything went straight to spam. You’d better come down to the Agency post in Albermi. I’ll explain. But they beat us, Dan. We’re too eff-pixing late.”

End of Part III
PART IV

Six weeks after

Stare at the ceiling, look at the screen, stare at the floor, back to the screen—it’s been a long month. The similarities may be few, nonetheless this room reminds me of my last compappartment on Earth. The walls, while not stained by the grease of too much human living, are still far too close.

At least on Earth there had been an outdoors to go to. Here, the corridor outside leads only to a second white room, identical, aside from its contents, to this one. There are no exits in either—even if there was another door, it would only open onto the tons of stone under which these rooms are buried.

Where the air comes from down here, I don’t know, but there’s food and drink to last a while stored in the other room. In here, there’s just me and the vid-pad I’m writing on. There’s no Total-Vision to kill my boredom. No neuro-net to transport my mind into some world of fiction—no lazz-pistol in my hand, no window-frame to peek round. I am not Cerberus Kayne, nor Randy Mann, nor Dusty Dale. I can be, it seems, only who I am.

But who, dear Reader (yes, I think it’s time we talked), who the spam is that?

You may think, since I have suddenly decided to address you so directly, that I am the author of this book. Certainly, I remember when I reached this point in my reading of it (oh, so very long ago), that was the first thought that occurred to me. Let me assure you that this is not the case. While I have indeed provided most of this story’s facts, and even played a role in events that it describes, I am not its author. How could I be when you must be reading it long before the facts it contains take place, long before I even started making notes on them, just one month ago, in the year 2246?

At this point, dear Reader, I must bring up the puzzling corollary (perhaps you will have noticed it) that emerges from my inquiry. The question of identity, after all, is a kind of two way street. When I truthfully assure you that, whoever I am, I am not
the author of this book, it follows that my ‘dear Reader’ can’t be the reader of this book—in other words, that ‘you’ are not you. As potentially fascinating as such a riddle might be, because my interests here lie mainly with the truth, I will simply explain: When I write ‘dear Reader,’ I am not addressing the readership of this book, but rather the single reader of the notes I am presently scribbling. In short, I am addressing the real author of this story—the individual who will take my words and get them ‘printed’ in a readable form between two covers. Clear as mud? Patience, please.

Who am I, then?

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago (two-hundred-and-sixty years ago, more or less), there was a child who lived in a home of no distinction, in a cookie-cutter neighbourhood, with a mother and a father, a sister and a brother, and a list of material objects too pointless to describe. Obviously, he lived as most other children did. He played games and watched TV, went to school and summer camps, liked his sweets and not his vegetables. He got into trouble, but no more than most children do, and similarly, made his parents proud in the way most children will. There were things that set him apart from his classmates—good looks, the way he loved to keep his things in order—but, of course, in any larger crowd even these things would have easily blended in.

If there was something that might have truly set this child apart, it existed beneath the skin, seen by no one. And certainly this child, at least, believed there was. Ironically, this belief was nearly as common as fingers and toes: this child believed he was unique since, after all, he was sure that he was better than everybody else. Such is the nature of the human mind, whose core function is self-preservation—truth is often sacrificed, if untruth will help rationalize the paramount importance of one’s own DNA.

Was this child the genius, the superlative talent he told himself he was? Some have since said yes, but at the time nothing about him confirmed any of these beliefs. His grades were good, but not great. He played soccer well, but hockey only adequately. He played no instruments, talked only one language, and his drawings were not particularly admired by anyone aside from his parents.
Who am I? I am, of course, that child. But I don’t suppose that’s really much help as an answer. After all, the description could fit any one of millions born around the turn of the millennium.

Imagine, dear Reader, that child were you, for instance. I’m sure you can see it—going through the motions: trying to find worth in idiotic classes; putting up with an idiotic brother’s tendency to bully, a sister’s idiotic need to primp; laughing with your ‘friends’, playing idiotic video games, watching idiotic wrestlers pound each other idiotically. In fact, you may well have no need to ‘imagine’. The likelihood that you’ve lived a similar scenario is very high—you are reading this, after all, and so must have both time and money to spare, and are not struggling among the disease-ridden and nutritionally-challenged majority of the world.

Perhaps you disagree. “Such misanthropy,” you may say, “was never so common and would be unlikely in any era,” (though, if you did, I would accuse you of being disingenuous, or at least naïve). If so, you would be asserting that the child we’re speaking of did indeed stand apart from the crowd, for the fact is, secretly this child despised all of it, the games, the school, the parents, siblings, ‘friends’—all of it.

The end of the twentieth century was the age of miracles. The proof was everywhere and everywhere ignored. Hearts were moved from place to place, resurrection was a daily occurrence, limbs re-grown, atoms split, light controlled, all space pried open and waiting to contain our destiny. Clearly, nothing was beyond the power of human ingenuity. How depressing then, for any child, to peer about and see avarice elevated into philosophy, and consumption exalted as a religion. Civilization was in the process of de-evolving—somehow expecting these animal instincts to refine human nature.

At a tender age these were the facts that I confronted. And if I was unique among the herd (and it seems self-evident I was), I’d say it was in how concretely I confronted them. Three different paths were open to me. First, I could ignore the problem, blame my parents, society, human nature, or some construct named ‘God’—go through life feeling it was all inevitable anyway. Second, I could work to change my society, devote myself to a cause, feed the hungry, clothe the poor, strike out
against injustice, and struggle against ignorance. Either powerlessness, on the one hand or faith in my fellow humans on the other.

I chose middle road. If my fellow human beings were not, in themselves worth saving, then their worth could only be in serving that which was worthwhile: me. I would reduce my fellows to nothing more than an adjunct to myself. Why choose slavery, or futile humanism when I could choose apotheosis? Humanity would gain meaning as my puppets, or I’d destroy them willy-nilly.

Who am I?

I am that I am. No other answer really signifies to me anymore. One might say, after all, that I am Delano Jones, but am I? I remember Dr. Hamm (or was it Nooten? Or Uncle Dal?) holding Jones down while I pushed the small, white barb into his thigh—and then? Was I him? I spoke with his tongue, walked with his feet—

One might say that I am Denzel Holmes, or Golda Shem, or Harvey Bass, or any of the countless others whose flesh I’ve worn. Am I really David Metzenbergen? Certainly es married thought I was.

The first name I was given was Derek Straw. The first I took was Ditto Straub. That re-christening took place in private when, as a child, I chose that middle road. It took some years, however, before I could really start forcing people to use it. And, just decades later, as 2056 rolled around, that choice was reaching its fruition. My apotheosis was practically complete, or so I thought. That was just before I made my first visit to this small space, with its two white rooms, the corridor between, and the tons of stone above.

I loved living on the Moon. From my quarters at the bottom of Vertigo Bay, I’d go up daily to look at the cloud-striped beach-ball in the sky. I’d stretch my hand out before my eyes so that the whole globe seemed balanced in my palm. The inhabitants of that world were just now waking up to the fact that they had fallen under the shadow of my thumb.

After admiring the ball of Earth, my favourite toy, I’d turn my eye to the swirl of sparkles that hung listlessly in the dark beyond. Among all those jewels I’d find the one with the ruby tinge—Mars. I was wearing perhaps my fifteenth body, was seventy-odd years old, but I still felt like a boy. I would be alive forever, after all—
what is three-score and ten compared with eternity? That red rock was the centre-piece of the diadem that stretched through space above me. Once I made it mine I felt this prince would at last be crowned as King.

By now, of course, you understand that my plans were prevented. The palace coup was well underway. If you imagine, however, that what I’m referring to it was Altavera, or the buffoons that ran XL Power, you are mistaken. I knew of their plotting from the moment it began. I had done little to dispel the anxieties of Earth’s corporate and private empires concerning my growing arsenal, but Mars really was my goal. My missiles had only the red planet as their target. Nuclear fire would melt the ice-caps, send carbon dioxide by the ton into its thin atmosphere. Planetary warming would prepare the beds for the seeds I’d send up after.

Dangerous as Altavera was, I was prepared enough for him (the Mongolian giant he was back then—direct descendent of Ghengis, or so he’d say, and who would argue?). As it turned out, however, I was not prepared for everything.

Thirty days before I sold the Walls to the Ottomans, I descended from the surface with the Milky Way still wrapped around my skull. I checked on the progress of the nano-technologists and their construction of my arsenal. Everything was fine. I called the Khan of the Dragon Empire and asked him to open his markets to Straub steel and heli-carriers. A collective consciousness of considerable wisdom, the Khan sensed which way the wind was blowing, and happily agreed to do so, asking for nothing in exchange.

Babe had drifted moonward a few weeks before. She’d come in pursuit of what was her sole occupation in those days—complaining endlessly of my neglect. At dinnertime, she spoiled the meal with another of her famous tantrums. She shrieked her love for me, and yelped at my ingratitude. She had outgrown (in so many ways) her usefulness long before. I decided that when next she returned to Earth, she would, unfortunately, burn up re-entering the atmosphere. She would streak across the sky in a fitting, flaming death. Of course, I never got the chance to put that plan into action.

Already warmed by wine and the glow of my imminent triumph, I grew warmer still with maudlin memory. I went down with her to her rooms and let her perform a variety of her special tricks on me. Babe was a bitch, yes, but only such a
bitch could have been such a lover. I returned to my own rooms some time later, so satisfied with my day that I sent my personal slaves to bed, telling them I would undress myself.

It was Altavera’s squad who searched my rooms that night before I entered. He nodded his ‘all clear’ sign as he followed the other sentries out. I went in, leaving my praetorians at the door. Ablutions and then bed with an old-time book was my ritual, but I never got the chance to read a word.

As I pulled aside my coverlet, the substance of the fabric began to fade, along with the bed beneath, and the room around. I barely had the time to blink before it was over, and I was standing naked, staring at the same white walls that surround me now. The door to the corridor was sealed, however, and the room, a seamless cube, seemed even more a prison than it does now.

Teleportation. The fact, perhaps, should have sent my mind reeling, but I’ve seen too many lives snuffed out by stunned disbelief. What I thought instead was how the Khan had perhaps been a little too gracious in acceding to my demands. ‘He’ was the only one I thought remotely capable of such a feat.

The roof and floor and walls of my cubicle were bare, save for what appeared to be a robe hanging in one corner. A voice spoke.

“Please do not be alarmed. We mean you no harm.”

I took the robe down with one hand, and with the other gave the hook behind it a yank or two. The robe itself had a sash with which I might strangle somebody, but it was too unlikely I’d ever get the chance. I wondered if I should trust the robe enough to wear it.

The Dragon Empire had been experimenting with such stuff. Still, getting a beam of light to hop a few millimeters was a far cry from snatching flesh and blood from its space in time. The Khan, I thought, was probably not responsible for this abduction. Too bad. With the Khan, at least, I knew of a thousand different positions from which I could have bargained. With some others, though, the United House of Abraham, for instance, bargaining would be no option.

The voice returned, repeating its original message, and adding a “promise to return you to your home intact and very soon.”
I put the robe on, and a door slid open.

Should I describe them? It’s a bit pointless, as what I saw probably had little to do with what they actually were. They looked like poorly sculpted children’s toys. Each one of them a different shade of pale putty, loosely shaped into the form of men. Smooth and rounded in every feature; lanky-limbed and long fingered, mouthless, earless, genderless though apparently naked. Their eyes were huge and black from rim to rim.

There were three of them, a mint green, a pink, and a sky-blue. When the door to my cell slid open, the green one stood at the far end of the hall beckoning me forward. The other two were stationed in the second room, where four bucket chairs awaited to accommodate us all.

At first, the cliché of their appearance disposed me to disbelieve they were what they said they were. These caricatures could not be the real thing. It had to be some kind of ploy by one of my industrial opponents. It also seemed to me, however, that to give the scene its proper air of ‘authenticity’, my garish enemies would have felt obliged to dress it up. Tentacles, slime, pulsations, blinking machines, tubes, lights, twisting tools, claws, hooks—these would all have been here in place of white, empty walls, four chairs and three rubberized dolls. Gradually, over the next few hours, I became convinced—that these creatures were not of my world.

Transcribing our entire conversation would be frankly boring. You would have had to be there, as the saying goes. Besides there was little in the way of dialogue. I asked a question here and there (I tried thinking them at first, and was relieved that while the source of their words was unclear, my own thoughts were not being ‘read’), but mostly I just sat and listened. My interlocutors moved hardly at all during the whole experience. This made it very difficult to know where to look—there were no clues as to who was speaking. I thought it best to emulate them as much as possible, sitting still, my gaze fastening eventually on Blue.

The conversation fell into a few basic categories:

Where were they from?

Their ‘life-shell’ (a space-craft) was hung in space somewhere in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. They’d been there for nearly a hundred of Earth’s
years (patience bristled from their immobile shapes). Despite their similar appearance, they actually represented two different ‘organisms’ (a word I’ve come to understand as an approximation of what the Council calls the ‘Lifeform’). Green and Pink represented an ‘organism’ from a place some thirty-thousand light-years distant. They ‘of course’ had never been there. Blue was more of a local, born on its home-planet a mere six thousand light-years away (hick, I thought, and shifted my eyes toward its never-blinking stare). Despite their different origins, though, all three had come to Earth together from yet another place. Nearly half an Earth-millennia it had taken them to travel the paltry four-hundred light-years between where their ‘life-shell’ was launched, and where the four of us were then seated.

Where were we seated (they really did not appear to sit so much as float against the cushions of their chairs)?

The rooms and their connecting corridor had been ‘injected’ into the opposite side of the Moon from Vertigo Bay.

What did they want (bubble-heads on string-necks)?

They were all a part of a federation of ‘organisms’ that had been spreading out from the centre of the galaxy for more millennia than anyone really could count (a universe of balloon animals—as I suspected, God’s a clown). And here our ‘talk’ started to get interesting: they were at pains to communicate to me how what they were presently doing was extremely unusual (it was Blue, in fact, who’s spidery hands were the first to give a fidget). Usually the task of their type of mission was merely to wait for a particular ‘organism’ to escape their planetary bonds—to welcome them into the galactic ‘federation’ as they began their expansion into space. Indeed, as far as anyone could tell, it was be the first time such precipitous contact had ever been made (Minty Green soon followed Blue’s example, its forefingers angling upward from its sapling thighs).

“We have decided,” said their collective voice, “to present ourselves to you in order to request that you cease in your pursuit of terraforming Mars.”

“Why?”

“The fourth planet from this sun has an ‘organism’ of its own living in its ice-caps. Its sanctity must be preserved.”
I did my best to look surprised. I was surprised, I suppose. I didn’t know there was life on Mars. Not that I cared. Mostly I was just glad for the chance to display any kind of expression. Here, I thought, was an opportunity to commiserate, perhaps make allies. "Life? I didn’t know."

While they needlessly explained how my nuclear storm would devastate the ‘organism’s’ environment, I was calculating. Stiff-necked, the muscles in my back and buttocks aching, I considered what I’d learned so far—just three more pieces of information, I thought, and I’d be in a position to make a plan. The first, I thought, would be best to approach a bit obliquely. "It was you who prevented humanity’s previous missions to Mars, wasn’t it?"

The question set the stick-like fingers of all three fluttering like strips of plastic affixed to a fan.

"Yes. We did not know what else to do. There was no time to contact the ‘federation.’ The deed was ‘sanctioned’ after the fact."

Good. The second thing I’d wanted to know had been delivered gratis. They could communicate with their leaders, but not instantly, perhaps not even very quickly. I rewarded myself with the slightest shift in posture. Now, back to problem number one. "Why? Surely a probe, even a manned probe, posed little threat to Mars’ ice-caps."

I expected them to rebuff the question. Why, after all, should they tell me what their motives were? They had behaved in a most accommodating fashion so far, though (aside from abducting me). The fan’s bluster through their digits was turned up a notch.

It turned out that humanity had defied the normal process of development for planetary ‘organisms’.

"We hoped to delay your ‘peoples’’ exodus." The fan was abruptly shut off—six hands fell in unison back onto pipe-cleaner knees. "Given more time we thought you would achieve the necessary level of development to expand non-epidemically." Was it only the motionlessness of their heads that gave me the impression of such emptiness? "It is the ‘federation’s’ experience that the ability to escape the confines of the single planetary existence results in a permanent pursuit of peace and
cooperation—a shift from ‘peoples’ into ‘organism’’” The obsidian glint in their eyes seemed more like the shine from tinted glass than the dampness of tissue. “In some cases primitive competitive behaviours lead to an ‘organism’s’ destruction prior to surpassing gravitational limits, but, until now, the latter has always led to a cessation of these destructive behaviours.”

“You don’t say.”

“Yes. The effect is caused by two concomitant realizations:

“First, the units of the tool-manipulating species understand immediately that diaspora cannot occur in the absence of the supporting planetary ‘organism’. This inspires humility among the tool-manipulating units, a disintegration, that is, of the concept of ‘self’.” I felt if I could get close enough, I might actually see through those eyes, into their skulls. “The unit’s need for belonging is realigned, causing an affirmation of oneness with the unit’s planetary ‘organism’.

“Second, the tool-manipulators realize that in all of space, where their destiny lies, there is an infinite abundance of everything aside from life. This causes a great shift in their understanding of value. It fosters a new respect for the unique and incalculable worth inherent in the ‘organism’s’ diversity. This new appreciation, again, inspires a sense of oneness with the greatness of their ‘organism’.

“Your organism, however, begins its diaspora in the absence of such unity.” My legs were growing numb; a spasm had started in my back—I rearranged myself in the chair. “A growing number of ‘federation’ eyes are presently turning toward this system in astonishment. Aboard our own life-shell, we are at a loss as to how to behave. The idea that the primitive tribal chief could rise to rule a world is quite incomprehensible to all of us. That this chief could thereafter bring its planetary ‘organism’ into the stars as a kind of slave is something the ‘federation’ is having great difficulty in believing.”


Now I knew why they’d called this contact “extremely unusual”. On to the last piece of information I needed. From what I’d heard I could deduct the answer, but I risked the question anyway. “My plans for Mars are unintentionally destructive. Have you come here then, to threaten me into changing them?”
When their feet started to shuffle in unison with their hands, it was all I could do to keep from laughing. If they'd ever had any tough negotiating skills, through the millennia, they'd apparently atrophied to a considerable degree.

"Negative, negative. Such words have no place in our language."

"But some of those earlier missions were manned. These ‘units’ must be dead now—killed by you."

"Negative. They live happily within the ‘federation.’ Abducting them was traumatic enough—murder was not an option."

"Of course."

"You must take the time to think upon what you’ve learned. You are interested in prospering, yes? You are interested in enlargement for your ‘organism,’ for your ‘self’, yes? You will take this opportunity for true greatness."

"I understand." And I did, but my decision had been made long ago. "I apologize for not recognizing—the situation, as you say, is unusual." I stood, my legs creaky, my brain spinning with the sudden shift of my pooled blood. "Such decisions, of course, cannot be made suddenly. There are others with whom I must consult."

"But you are chieftain of your ‘people’ are you not?"

Simpletons. Another good sign. "It is not so straightforward, I assure you."

"Our presence must be kept secret. Credit for the great change you will bring about in your ‘people’s’ relationship to their ‘organism’—this is reason enough to do so, yes?"

"Oh, yes. No need to worry. I will take every precaution—your secret will remain intact. It’s more a matter of deciding how to proceed. In this regard, there are one or two others with whom I must confer."

The agitation in their limbs subsided. "We understand." They rose from their chairs.

Blue stretched out the thin stick of his arm. Dangling from a cord wound around two of his spindly fingers, was a small, black, seamless cube.

"Take it."
Without thinking too hard about where the thing had materialized from, I put out my hand. Blue dropped the cube into my palm. A single red button that protruded from its side.

"Depress the switch in thirty of your days, or when you are ready, whichever comes first. It will summon all of us back to this place."

I opened the loop of cord and was about to put it over my head, thinking to wear it as a necklace, when the voice interrupted.

"For the present, please enclose the sender in your folding digits. For the cube to transport with you, it must be enclosed by flesh."

I was about to pop the thing into my mouth when I realized there was a fourth thing which might be helpful to me. "For the ones I must convince about your existence, my word may not be enough. Is it possible to bring another when we next meet?"

"It is accomplished through flesh-to-flesh contact. The transporter is not built to understand flesh so well—it will treat this as one unit."

I placed the cube on my tongue and closed my mouth.

My surroundings dissolved and I found myself, naked once again, in my rooms on Vertigo Bay.

I summoned Dr. Nooten, and began to dress. Gathering my clothes, I reviewed my experience. I paced, battling disbelief and despair all over again, before coming back to the answers that I had ferreted out from my unwitting alien hosts. I halted in my tracks, and stepped into my undergarments. Certainly, there were options. I sat on the edge of my bed to pull on my socks. It was then that everything was irrevocably changed. Even after all I had just experienced, even after all my two hundred and seventy years, the next few minutes are the only ones that I would change if I could.

As I bent to dip my raised foot into the mouth of my stocking, the flash of déjà vu burst behind my retinas. With the sock hanging from the ball of my foot, I dropped my leg and sat up.

I had experienced this situation before. The sensation was ludicrous, yet powerful enough that it gave me pause. I had long ago learned the dangers of ignoring certain moments of intuition, so I began to rack my brains for the cause of this one.
stood up and crossed the room thinking that my worn copy of the *I Ching* was the likeliest place to find a clue.

It was the feeling of the book’s stiff spine laying across the palm of my hand that brought my déja vu’s source bubbling into my consciousness.

Recall for me now, dear Reader, the child we spoke of earlier. Accept, for the moment, that this child and his sense of disillusion was not all that atypical in his time.

Where would you have turned for solace? Apparently, much as I did, you might have turned to the world of letters.

What might you have found? Hope—the never-ending capacity of the human spirit to rise above? Redemption—suffering as the essential catalyst for good? Purpose—love can, and will, finally, triumph?

Perhaps you would have chosen different books than I did.

Philosophy, literature, histories and herstories—I read these too, but my truest joy (and remember, my interest here is truth, unlike Beverly Toe when she rolled out a similar claim) was science fiction. Rarely very well-written, it’s true, but sci-fi authors, no matter how challenged in their intellect, always took on the new—their efforts were aimed consistently at giving the future shape. It was in these writings that I came to recognize the gloomy irony I mentioned earlier: I lived in the age of miracles—with a bit of will and imagination the future was ours to shape, yet society insisted on forever looking backward.

My real origins lay in the future—I would form a future for humanity, a future that would shape itself around me. Imagine my horror, then, to realize that this story, the one which I had lived, was a story that I had actually read in the distant past of my youth. As I held the spine of the *I Ching* in my palm, the bow of its opened pages drooping over the edges of my hand, I remembered a different book. I remembered particularly, this moment in the story, very near its end, when the aliens had revealed themselves to the villain of the piece. Other aspects of the plot soon followed, but only in the vaguest way—a detective story, the Walls, transpiration, the slavery of the weak-kneed protagonist—
Putting the I Ching back down, I remembered the sci-fi story’s insistent question: ‘Who am I?’

I wandered, trying to remember the name of the book, its author—I couldn’t. I tried to dismiss the whole thing from my thoughts. What bearing could a science fiction novel from my childhood have on anything at all? I stood and pulled my breeches up my legs. Dr. Nooten would be here any moment. My fingers froze among the buttons of my fly. I remembered the book’s protagonist insisting that the story’s many mad scientists were the all the same man.

Zack Nooten, Francis Hamm, Greg Ormande—of course they were the same man. Along with Bob Heimer-Roppen, Marly Kerry, and others since.

The coincidental timing of Ormande’s disappearance and the publication of the then unknown Doctor Hamm’s groundbreaking work, ‘The Pharmacological Isolation of Human Consciousness,’ was no coincidence at all.

My employee, Greg Ormande, disappeared when I discovered an assassination plot designed to stop his research. His experiments, at the time, were leading him out of the field of pharmacology and into psychobiology anyway. It was simplicity to replace the real, and inconsequential psychobiologist, Francis Hamm, with a Greg Ormande re-engineered to look exactly like him.

The subsequent substitutions, however, were of a different sort. It wasn’t long after Hamm was replaced by Ormande, that he invented transpiration. In its original form, though, transpiration was quite a different affair than that which Citizens undergo when they ‘give up the flesh.’ The use of template blanks was still years away when Hamm created the room-sized prototype of the device that Lynyrd ‘the Wink’ so recently used to escape his body, or that Dalbert Ensten used to occupy Lynyrd, and so on, back to Greg Ormande himself.

It took a great deal of persuasion before Dr. Hamm convinced me to keep the original device a secret. The vampiric quality of the device, he pointed out, would raise the moral hackles of the masses. It could prove commercially useless, if not an outright liability. Its potential as a tool of industrial espionage, on the other hand, was practically limitless.
He won me over by saying, given a few more years, he could develop a version that was both more esthetically and ethically palatable. This version would rely on vat-grown templates, anatomically perfect, and company owned, rather than on bodies which were used, and over which the rights of property were less defined. This was, without doubt, the most profitable decision of my entire career.

Doctors Ormandie, Hamm, Nooten, Heimer-Roppen, etc. were as human as it is possible to be, both in reality, and eff-pix-it, in the book that had just begun its haunting of my mind.

It took the announcement of Nooten’s arrival to bring me back to the matter at hand. As he entered, I was standing before the mirror in my rooms at Vertigo Bay, smoothing back my hair, and brushing the wrinkles down the front of my shirt. “You won’t want to believe what I’m going to tell you, Zack. In fact, why don’t I just give you this.” I passed him the cube. “Look it over. Tell me when you’re ready for the story.”

With a look of guarded curiosity, he clicked an ocular magnifier into the socket at his temple. He held the black cube up, turning it end over end, its black sides reflecting shards of white in the light of my rooms. Slowly, with each revolution, the expression on his face was altered. The guardedness of it was the first to fade, leaving nothing but the naked voracity of his natural inquisitiveness. Soon, however, as his prodigious mind extrapolated from the evidence at hand, a kind of mist seeped over his features—his cheeks began to pale, and his eyes dulled. His hand, as gently as a feather, floated down into his lap. He unplugged the ocular viewer from his head. “Tell me.”

The mist behind his eyes billowed into the thickest sort of cloud as I told him what I’d experienced on the far side of the Moon. Half-heartedly, he postulated I’d been taken in by someone’s clever ploy. I suggested he come with me and see for himself.

“No.” His gaze fell to the cube in his lap. “I don’t suppose it’s really necessary.” It was a shock to see him so ready to give in. I waited, wondering if his thoughts would turn to the same questions I’d brought up among Blue and its companions, but the facts had set him adrift in a miasma of displaced imaginings. I
provided some more details, and the fog began to burn off. After a while, Nooten was even spitting forth a bit of his awful cackle as I pressed home the fact of their age-old innocence. His spirits lifted, and his eyes narrowed when I mentioned that their transporter ‘was not built to understand flesh so well.’

He held the cube up for a second look, spinning it like a globe pinched between his thumb and forefinger. “There’s something I’ve been working on.” He looked back at me. “We’d need time.”

“How much?”

“More than they’re offering. Lots more.”

“I’ve thought about that. Anything else?”

He tossed the cube into the air. “Let me get this thing into the lab,” he caught it deftly as it fell, “and then we’ll see.” He slipped the device into the pocket of his shirt, and left.

Three weeks later, I stood in the centre of my quarters, with the little ebony curio clamped between my two palms, and pressed the button. The doors on either end of the hall between the two rooms were already open on my arrival. I donned the robe as I had before, and walked down the short corridor, arriving just as Pink, Blue, and Green were coalescing into existence.

We took our seats, resuming our immobile poses. The meeting was short and sweet.

“It wasn’t easy,” I said. “There were a few sticking points, but most of my people will do as I ask.”

“Most?”

“All, I mean. It’s just that by canceling my terraforming plans, I’ve made a few people extremely unhappy.”

“It was one of these units you were going to bring to this meeting, yes?”

“It proved to be unnecessary.”

“But you will not be launching anything toward Mars?”

“No. Of that I can assure you. I’ve spoken about a new idea concerning the destiny of our species and its organism. It was not immediately popular.”
I stood. "It is customary among my people to finalize agreements with a ritual of touching limbs." I put out my hand. After a moment, Green put its own analogue of my arm forward. I snatched it, giving its elongated palm a shake and a squeeze. The microscopic scanning needle Dr. Nooten had embedded in my palm snuck out undetected. "Thank you."

"It is all for the best, and proper, as you shall see," said their cooperative voice, and I was returned, once again, to Vertigo Bay, where Nooten was waiting for me. I spat the cube onto a tray while he removed the cellular scanner from my palm. He told me the tracer in my ear had worked. He'd got the coordinates of the meeting rooms. It was where they'd said it was, on the other side of the Moon, just below the surface. Good.

Seven days before, I had explained to a fine young soldier, who was new to my Praetorian, how I'd got wind of an attempt to be made on my life. I explained to him how his wife and child were being held hostage on Earth, and how, if he did as I said, they would be set free and made rich. He acquiesced quite nobly, and Nooten did the re-constructive surgery to make him look exactly like me.

Seven days after I met with the aliens, Nooten had completed the necessary examination of the data amassed by the microscopic scanner. He reported that his idea had a good chance of working, all we needed was time—a century or so. I made my call to the Ottomans. I called a variety of others, the Khan, the chair of XL Power, to tell them what I had told the Ottomans. Nooten and I switched bodies with a pair of slaves, and waited near the lifeboat bays for the beginning of the end. I knew I could count on humanity’s baser instincts. I knew I could count on Altavera.

The aliens got their wish, or so they thought. Mars remained pristine. Our primitive culture, in keeping with the long-established galactic tradition, collapsed on itself. The aberration of humanity would appear to have been merely temporary, as a new, peaceful culture grew up in the place of Straub’s global empire. The tribal chief and his witch doctor had been consumed in the fire of their own pride. Or had they?

Surviving Te Anau was not easy, but the power to switch bodies at will was a considerable advantage. We’d left the alien cube behind—its absence from the belly of Vertigo Bay might have been detected, after which, it would have been a kind of
homing-beacon for finding us. Nooten pursued his research by working from detailed schematics he’d drawn up before we initiated the war. Meanwhile, I had the uninspiring experience of re-living my youth.

I spent days and years pretending to be friends with people whom I held in utter contempt—pretending to be someone I never was, someone I thought I’d left behind. Whenever possible I found myself retreating, once again, to the world of books. The pursuit, however, gave me no solace this time. What had once been a healthy fascination, was now a festering obsession, picked at and worried over, suppurating everywhere.

The book I hoped to find had long since vanished, and its exact title escaped me completely. I pored over a mountain of trashy fiction, but never found it. In Te Anau’s libraries, on the bookshelves of abandoned homes, through the fragments of surviving databases—millions of pages, billions of references—printed, scrolling by—nothing. The book’s author must have been inconsequential—I can’t be sure I ever got the name just right either, though. And there was a lot of stuff disappearing in those years, including stuff you’d expect would have endured. I asked everyone I could, constantly twisting some casual conversation in the direction of literature, “There’s this story—maybe you could tell me who wrote it. It went something like this—” It never rang a single bell.

Of course, over the years, though title and author were gone, most of the plot came back to me—characters, situations, even snippets of dialogue. I remembered the grade school teacher. I remembered the clumsy assassination attempt, the tent, the slave/ex-student that saves the master from the murderer in the front row. I remembered the slovenly goddess of fashion, her wings, the industrial flagship of her flesh. The story had been written about me. The names I remembered were never the real ones, and the places were never quite right either, but—the eff-pixing doplhands, the goddamn I Ching—the story was my life, written before I’d even lived it.

Was I mad? I didn’t think so. Imagining things? I cherished this last possibility for as long as I could. There was, after all, the story’s denouement still to come—events that would not occur for two centuries.
Dear Reader, do you begin to see why the truth is important to me here? To understand the significance of this question: ‘Who am I?’

If, after all, identity is created on a page or in a mind, what, finally, is the difference? Nuance—one of words, another of thoughts, each still a fiction by virtue of such limited building blocks.

And what, then, of who I’ve known? Arthurs, Kates, Pashas and Stephens? Or the ones I’ve named? The Metzes, Macs and Beverlys? I speak them into reality, and though I may imagine they have lives apart, the thoughts by which I speak of them are entirely of me.

Of me—you see, dear Reader? Not of you at all. (This is how I’d imagined my middle road: striking off on its own—not the first, but the first to head, not left or right, but straight up.) Previously, your access to truth, mine, yours, or whatever, was of no consequence to me—had it been, how could I have told it? Can I be sure I’m telling it now? Much has fallen between the cracks. On top of that, there are things I’ve had to write which I could not really know. Still, if I admit they’re false, isn’t that the truth?

Most of what I know of Metzenbergen was told to me by him. The permanent record has been a source for many facts and confirmations. Of myself, Ditto Straub, and history, of the Council and of Miller and of Beltane, I know from being there. As suburban staff at Heidi-Gwai, the Doctor watched Special Agent Toe at work, recording every word. I stood outside the home of Daniel MacAfferty, the detective himself told me (Metzenbergen) of his arrest of Joe and Simon, and I, of course, am Delano Jones, too—true, all of it. But I cannot say exactly who it was that finally solved the crime. These events were to be orchestrated by the Doctor.

Hamm/Ormande/Nooten/Eisenstein/Heimer-Roppen/Lynyrd ‘the Wink’ and I set up three potential individuals to make the final discovery: Beverly Toe, Daniel MacAfferty, or Judge Aké Nguyen. In reality, it may have been the agent or the judge who ended up drugged and feeding flies in the basement of Al’s Café. In fact, the plan really depended on the Council and just how soon they’d send the convalescing Metzenbergen into space. If the Doctor felt the need to wait a little longer, Agent Toe might have been tipped to come and spring the still unconscious detective. Or,
perhaps, vice versa. Personally, I think that either would have been a more satisfying finish—one that made more literary sense, given the story’s emphasis on the Toe character. But that’s not what I remember reading. And, the truth is, I kind of hope it was that insufferable black samarkan that got the carpet swept out from under him, but it hardly matters.

Dear Reader, this last month is the bitterest fruit of a long, bitter harvest, but it’s also the last such fruit that I shall have to stomach. Aside from not writing this at all, there’s nothing I would have liked better than to have lied to you throughout. To mislead and deceive, write a pleasing fairy-tale, or a hackneyed story of stupid love and its pathetic complications. But consider this: the book I remembered even told the truth about what it could not tell the truth about. Was its author a kind of prophet? No? Then how? The answer was in the story’s ending, the one I’m living right now.

Now, in the year 2246, having read the story so long ago, I’m obliged to write it. I don’t know how these pages will traverse time, but they clearly will. And if that novel told the truth, so must I—otherwise how will it be transcribed by my ‘dear Reader’? Now, on the edge of my triumph, should I risk it all, and change the past with a paltry lie?

Who am I?

‘Unique among the herd,’ I thought I was the one that chose that middle road from among the three. And now it seems that although I chose one, all three chose me. I’m no David Metzenbergen, blaming ‘God’ for my situation—no Delano Jones, blaming society—but now I’ve donned the former’s skin, and to steal that, I first became the latter. But that’s not the worst—there’s one other thing I remember about that eff-pixing book I read. I remember disliking it—written by some misguided tree-hugger, it was a fear-mongering, hysterical piece of trash. That I bear any responsibility for such a cowardly piece of work is bad, but worse again is that in being forced to write it, I’ve included myself among those who ‘work to change society, feed the hungry, clothe the poor, etc.’ I’ve been forced, dear Reader, dear Self-of-the-Long-Ago, to ‘warn’ you about me. Can I do it? Should I deny myself? From where I stand, the past seems immutable, but is it?
The web was huge and I was caught—my own will, so deeply entangled, was rendered suspect. Any action I took, I knew, could not help but be a reaction to what I believed about that book. Either I fulfilled the requirements of the script, or diverged purely for the sake of denying it. In Te Anau, though my memory of the text kept stitching itself together, I clung to each loose end, assuring myself it was all imagination. The unravelled future would put to rest all doubt, one way or the other, but that wretched science fiction book meant that mine would be the puppet’s role however it played out. I could do nothing but let Nooten take the lead, and follow like a slave.

It took all sixty years we were stuck behind the Walls of Te Anau, and the same again once the Re-Construction had begun, before the Doctor perfected his method of using the aliens’ cube against them. After that, it was just a matter of getting back to the Moon, and using it. Just a matter of waiting. The Council would get around to it eventually. (Take over a body here, a body there, spread a little discontent among the younger generation. Keep in touch with the offspring of the loyal few—the bastard sons and daughters, the grandchildren of Straub or Solomon.) Eighty more years, 2238, two decades before the Council Constitution’s re-negotiation, and the winds of change were finally blowing. Time to put the final touches on the plan:

Why Metzenbergen? (Of course, I knew already. It was obvious, and even if it wasn’t, the book had told me.)

“Because,” said the Doctor. “There’s only him and Altavera left. They’ll send one of them up to help them figure out where the eff-pixing thing came from. It won’t be Altavera. No one trusts her—far too dangerous.”

How? (And I knew this too.)

“We can’t just occupy em now,” said Ormandle. “Hidey-eyes, brain-scans—we’ll have to do it just before they send em. It won’t be easy—the pixer’s become a recluse on top of the rest. It’s a good thing Re-Negotiation’s twenty years away. Add another six-to-ten to get Vertigo Bay back open—that gives us twenty-five years to watch for our opening.”
And it took eighteen of them for opportunity to have into sight (even though I had no need to see, I'd remembered fifty years before).

"In Sigma Rejuve's security section," said Nooten. "There's three of them—ready to be played like violins. I tell you—violins!"

But I'm getting ahead of myself—back to 2238:

So you get me up there, how will you get me back?

"Same as before," said Hamm. "The next twenty-five years will tell."

And after ten:

"There's a judge," said Lynyrd, "in Manaimo who looks smart enough, and honest. Nguyen. We'll leave her a trail of illegal porn. Got to find someone else, though, just in case."

And after twenty-one:

"There's a new Detective," said Ensten, "in Albemi's violent crime division. Smart, honest—has something to prove. We'll give him a trail of black-market tech. I've still got some of that stuff we sold the Mexes in '40. But three's the lucky number, let's find one more back-up."

And after twenty-five were gone, we waited another three:

"There's a Council Agent," said Heimer-Oppen, "sniffing round Metzenbergen. They must have found it—it'll be a go any day now. This one, though, is a bit scary. Let's hope we get the chance to go with one of the other two. A lazz-hole in Metzie will bring 'em round, though, if we need em."

(And all this I knew. Not names, but the wife, the son, Heidi-Gwai—the three: the judge, the detective, and the agent. It did not matter which—the Doctor's song and dance would still play out.)

And the brainscan?

"We'll start now," said Hamm, "we'll hypnotically implant some memories. I'll teach you a bit of brain anatomy. Surgery with a lazz I never recommend, but in this case survival of the patient is the very last thing we want."

What about the transpirition device?

"As Metz, you could swallow it," said Ormandle. "No, that's right, you'll be wounded. And even if you weren't, why risk the questions? We'll leave it on the
security guy’s corpse, but we’ll disguise it. We’ll disguise it as a—what?” (As a dog’s tooth, I thought, but I said nothing.) “As a dog’s tooth!” exclaimed the Doctor. “We’ll give you the memory of fighting dogs. It will be vivid, our most important implanted memory. Yes—you’ll be bitten—nearly killed!” His cackle shrieked. His forefinger pointed, and his tongue clicked as his thumb dropped. “Rescued by a Bemo-driver! Yes, that’s got the right dramatic flair. Best to kill one anyway, use his chip to get in the park.”

And so the script was woven. All that remained was to draw all its threads taught and tie them off.

I cut Alfonso Gargaglione’s arm off before the man had actually died. Shock from the hole I’d put in his pelvis was already so deeply imbedded in his eyes, he hardly noticed. With my foot pushing down on the centre of his chest, I lazed his shoulder apart, cutting slowly to keep the wound cauterized. He blinked slowly, repeatedly, and asked for a third time what I thought I was doing. There were a few convulsions at the end, his limbs randomly twitching, then, after pumping a last litre of blood out of his groin, his heart gave up the struggle.

I dipped some rags from the Bemo’s trunk into a curbside puddle, and cleaned the arm up. To get the thing to stick up alongside my shoulder, it took most of the roll of tape I had in my pocket. Once I got it to hang without getting in the way, I enveloped myself in the green slicker I’d bought earlier that day—two sizes too big, hiding the arm, hiding my rad-suit, which I’d gouged to pieces after I bought the slicker.

Looking the way I did, it hadn’t been too hard to get kicked out of that bar. If something about that part of my implanted memories made them curious, it was covered. As to the rest, well, the only person who could’ve pointed out any discrepancy had just died. For the fix-of-it I gave a shout in the darkness, “Dogs of the rich! Dogs in dog’s clothing!” then got into the cab of the Bemo, and drove to Alberni IP. About a kilometer away, with the shimmer of the Wall filling the vehicle’s windshield, I stopped and listened to the chatter of the dispatchers. I waited until I heard a request for a Bemo at the Nano-Research Institute, inside the IP. It
crackled over the comm at about eight in the morning—just hours shy of exactly nine weeks since I’d gotten my call from the Moon.

In all the time I’ve been alive, I’ve never had to wear a face so ugly, for so long, as that of Delano Jones. I’ve never seen so many women look disgusted, even after they got their money. His weak, wasted body smelled of fish at the best of times, of rot after climbing stairs. His lifestyle, to which our plan refused alteration, would certainly have driven me to murder, even if I hadn’t had murder planned already.

Perfect in one way, I suppose—perfectly awful in every other.

The only pleasure in my Delano-days would come from treating my co-workers as contemptuously as I could. Telling Joe what he’d done wrong, what protocol he’d broken, and what would happen when I turned him in. Looking over his shoulder, giving him advice at cards, letting it slip when his hands were good.

Watching Joe’s stunted hate blossom under my direction was as close to rewarding as things ever got.

I’d hoped the call from Vertigo Bay would come within two years—it was late by three.

The lunar reconstruction crews had finally gotten round to de-icing my private rooms. They’d found it, exactly as they were meant to—the opening to my ‘secret lab,’ where the cube was ‘hidden,’ wasn’t hidden very well at all.

It was easy after that. As night-security at Sigma, I kept an eye on the schedules for the transpiration theatres. I noticed Metzie’s obligations for the near future being rearranged during two intervals. Going over the hours of es drab days on the permanent record, I overheard em explaining that the first one was for a trip to Heidi-Gwai. The second, e never said much about, only mumbling something regarding ‘Council business’ once—e didn’t seem all that excited to be re-visiting es old home on Vertigo Bay. In between the two absences, e was supposed to be midwife to a handful of transpirations. On his very first day back from holiday, in fact, he’d be infusing Mustapha Donsacker into a new template—R17.

In our very occasional meets, Hamm/Nooten/etc. and Delano would share the Collected Tales of Joe. Wearing the latest of his bodies, in pubs all across Manaimo,
the Doctor had been commiserating with my co-worker. Lending a ‘sympathetic’ ear as Joe whined about his life, his job, and especially me.

“You maybe should lay off for a while, Ditto.”

“Oh yeah?”

“He might decide to kill you even before we get the chance to suggest it.”

All those different bodies, and somehow that shrick he laughed with still stayed with him. It must have been on purpose.

Not long after the call came, Dalbert Ensten, Joseph Regent’s long-time acquaintance and drinking buddy, interrupted Joe during one of his typical rants.

“You know, Joe, you talk about this guy a lot.”

“Yeah. He’z th’ eff-pigzenetz of all eff-pigzers. Th’ other day——”

“A lot, Joe. You talk about him a lot.”

“Whad’z yer poind?”

“Well, is it all just talk, or what?”

“Anh?”

“I mean, Joe, I get that the guy’s an eff-pixer, already, that he’s driving you gonzo-bonzo. You’ve said and said and said everything there is to say on that particular score.”

“I’z borin you? Iz thad——”

“Take it easy, Joe—it’s not that. It’s just, well, maybe it’s time you really did something, instead of just talking.”

“Whad ya god in mind, Dal?”

Quite a lot was the real answer, but the Doctor eased into it slowly, talking about a guy he knew, Lynyrd, and some wild technology he had. He mentioned that the nudity of the templates represented some interesting possibilities—

Like a violin, the Doctor played him. Joe was nothing but a six-cred fiddle, but the Doctor got him jigging like he was a six-piece band.

The only real gamble we had to take was in me getting by Wall Security. Twenty-five years worth of plans came and went, not one of them perfect. In the end, circumstance wound up playing in our favour—Wall Security, slack to begin with,
showed no signs of getting anything but slacker. In the absence of perfection, I’ve always said, simplicity’s the best solution.

So there I was, nine weeks after I’d gotten the call from Vertigo Bay, flashing a severed arm up in front of an IDeye. It took a few moments before the fleshbom cop on duty even looked up. “Alfonso Gargar—Grag—”

“Gargaglione. Right.”

He looked at his screen, then back at me. “Don’t look much like your picture, Alfonso.”

“Been on a diet. Working great, no?”

“I’ll say. Who’re ya pickin’ up?”

“Nimitz. At the N-R Institute.”

“Jeez. That was quick—call just went out five minutes ago.”

“Good at my job, what can I say?”

He waved me by.

Ten past eight, and with a little time to kill, I drove halfway to my destination then pulled over—popped the hood to tinker for a while. Breaking a lazz out of vehicle lock-down really isn’t difficult if you’ve had a little practice. Alfonso’s weapon was an antique, a JDL 12. Heavy, totally useless in some situations—any lazz would do for cooking flesh at close quarters, though.

I pulled up to Sigma just before nine o’clock. Stepping in, I took note of the couple on the couch. Ezzy, the receptionist, asked me what I was doing there since I wasn’t scheduled to work. I generally ignored the receptionists, and saw no reason to change my habits just thirty seconds before I killed one. I strode past the desk and tapped in my code beside the entrance to security. The door opened on a puzzled Karr, already up and coming my way. “Delano? What’s—” She died before she hit the floor, the top half of her tumbling from her still standing legs. If I’d felt I had the time, I might have yelled ‘Timber!’ but I was already putting a bolt through Ezzy as I passed the desk again on my way back toward the entrance.

“Hello, Mustafa.” I nodded. “Morris.” I only knew their names from my research in the permanent record, but it was lovely to see their eyes widen with the thought of being singled out by death.
“Wh-what do you want?” It was Morris.

I crouched. “Just sit up straight, please. And put your hands together. Perfect.” I shot them both in quick succession. The splatter burst upward, over the back of the couch, decorating the wall with still living tissues. I was about to speak its name aloud, ’The Art of Citizenship,’ but then I remembered that I was mad, demented by sorrow—I wasn’t supposed to be having that kind of fun. I moved on to the stairs with purpose.

Having the right retinas isn’t enough to get access to Sigma’s more sensitive areas. Voice patterns, pre-authorizations, pheromone signatures, and a few other things are generally required. Unless, of course, your retinas happen to be employed by Sigma’s security section, and someone, say Zimon Trunk for instance, had ‘reminded’ you of the security override codes. The doors to the pre-ops rooms all faded to gel as I punched in my numbers, the computer’s weak protest giving way, each time, to welcome.

The first thing I did as I entered the theatre was say hi to Metzie. I just couldn’t help myself. I was giddy—on the threshold of re-capturing control of my destiny. He, of course did nothing, just sat paralyzed as the blue of transpiration’s ion field washed down all over him. I winged my ex-slave, then shot the staff in no particular order, saving a decapitation for last. She was beautiful that one, and when her headless body hit the floor, I wished, for just a moment, I could have saved her for something different. I watched the pool of her spreading beneath her, then looked around for Metzenbergen. I heard him, but had to drop down onto my knees to actually see him. He was under an empty gurney, one arm stretched up, pulling on a sheet tucked into the bed above. I stood, and entered the ion field to do my little pantomime with the template. I spoke with the scintillae of blue pouring down all around, “Zeta? I’ve come for you, my love.” Kneeling between the template’s thighs, I undid the groin-zipper of my rad-suit, then clicked on my eye-jammer.

After shooting the template, I got down off the gurney, and, respectful of ’my love,’ pulled the sheet back up over the thing. That done, I turned and waded through the sea of sparkling ions. “Don’t be shy, Metz.” I crouched down beside the lump of him beneath the sheet he’d tried to hide under. “I know you’re there, your blood is
spreading like a bloom across all this nice fabric.” I jerked the sheet away. David’s eyes, wide open, seemingly bleached with fear, stared in my direction.

“Wh-what do you want?”

I laughed. “After two hundred years, Metzie, I’d think you could manage something a bit more original.” I waited. I waited for—

Nothing. Hands pressed to the hole in his side, David’s stare was nothing but that of a dumb animal.

“Do you think you’re about to die, Metzie? Why? we both know you’re a real survivor. Metzenbergen—it’s a survivor’s name.” I clicked my tongue as I dropped the hammer of my thumb alongside my pointing finger.

Still nothing. “Let’s play a little game. I won’t kill you, at least not right away, if you can spell a word for me—Confederation. How ‘bout it, Metzie? Confederation. A ‘C,’ an ‘O,’ and an ‘N.’”

I thought I saw an eyebrow twitch. “Or, try this instead—duration. And, tell you what, there’s bonus points if you can remember the name of ‘duration’s’ hexagrammatic symbol.”

His lips part.

I lift the lazz. “You’d better try a little harder Metz. We all want to survive, right? But some of us just don’t want it badly enough. You do want to survive, don’t you, Metz?”

“Who—”

“Trust your instincts, Metz. Who do you think I am?”

His mouth opens, but he can’t say it. His face clenches with pain.

“Say it, Metzie.” I give his side a jab.

It whistles out of him, “Hamm?” and then he tries to take it back, “You can’t—”

I cut him off with another poke. “You’re right on that one, I’m not Hamm. I’ll give you another clue: I know you want to have your freedom, Metzie, but Babe wants to have you.”

His eyes narrow. “Impossible.”
“But it’s not, Metz. Really, in your heart of hearts, you always knew, didn’t you?”

“No. I don’t—”

“You knew you hadn’t really killed me.”

“I did. I shot you, and then cut that fat bitch to pieces.”

“No, you really didn’t, David.”

His hands leapt from his wound and caught my lapels. I’m sure I had never seen him move quite so fast. Still, in his weakened state, and despite the puniness of Delano’s body, Metz was no match for me. After dragging him hither and yon, crashing into machines and gurneys, tripping on corpses, I finally broke free and left him fetal on the ground. He spoke, his breath heaving on waves of pain, “Full of shit—whoever you are—transpiration drugs can’t—shoot me already—”

“No.” I sat down beside him, leaning my back against a whirr of machine-life. “I have something different in mind for you today, my Metzie, my dear property.” I pulled out the gleaming white pyramid from my pocket, and held it up to watch the azure glints run up and down its length. “But really, David. It’s a survivor’s name—Metzenbergen.” In a second pocket were seven wires, indistinguishable to a naked eye from the many hundreds that surrounded us. I unrolled them, and started stringing them between David and I, joining us, chakra to chakra. David reached back, and after a few meagre flails got one detached, but that was the end of his struggles. “You do want to survive don’t you, Metz?” His grunt, to his credit, sounded very much like a curse. I balanced my miniature transpiration device point down on my thigh.

“Because the data banks have been prepared for transpiration this morning, and I think, after I push you out of your body, much of you may be captured in data-storage. Hamm promised me he’d let the Council know.” I raised a fist. “It’s a small world, Mr. Metzenbergen. It’s very likely we’ll meet again one day.” I pounded the needle home.

When I woke up, moments later, I had a hole in my side and was wearing a doctor’s smock, lying at the feet of Delano Jones, the man who just shot me. Despite the considerable amounts of pain involved, I took enormous pleasure in what I did next. I took Delano’s hand, the one that held the lazz, into my own. Then, lifting it up,
I placed the muzzle under his chin, aimed very carefully, and shot off the back of his head.

It was days later, reclining in my bed in Alberni Infirmary’s recovery ward, that Altavera informed me he—(sorry, dear Reader) informed me that e would be joining me on my trip to the Moon. What a relief it was. MacAfferty had been by earlier, clearly already on the trail, and that was good, but Altavera’s struck me as that much better. This, I did not remember from that book that pre-told my life (even though I have included the fact in these notes). I took it as a signal that matters were indeed falling back into my hands.

Forty-eight hours later, David Metzenbergen was discharged from the Infirmary. Five days later, his obligations for the next week long ago re-scheduled, he boarded a shuttle for the Moon. Altavera stood defiantly, as always, by his side.

Around David’s neck a string of oddly shaped beads were hung, one that Altavera didn’t recognize. When e asked es married about it, David shrugged, saying e’d strung it together from things e’d found at Heidi-Gwai. The misshapen lumps did indeed look like they might have come from the forest floor. Altavera, who’d never really been interested in such stuff, but knew es married always was, thought no more about it.

David complained of pain shortly after the flight began. Despite Altavera’s disgusted assurances that it could be nothing but psychosomatic, David began taking sedatives that left him unconscious for the majority of the seventy hour flight.

Meanwhile on Earth, of course, Dalbert Ensten was tagging along in Daniel MacAfferty’s footsteps, stringing him along, and taking advantage of the fleshborn Tito Puente. Ten days before, he’d spent a good part of an evening murdering a man named Sako Kotoba, acquaintance of Judge Aké Nguyen.

No one aboard the moon-shuttle had made anything like an effort to be polite to Altavera. When the arrival of es married and em at Vertigo Bay was greeted with similar disrespect, Altavera began to get angry. Metzenbergen and em were separated and the day of accelerated decontamination transpired in total silence. The explanation for this sudden call to Vertigo Bay was obviously not forthcoming. The Council, it seemed, was engaged in some ham-fisted attempt to surprise them with
something, shock them into admitting something. What had they found? A message from that other life-boat? The one Altavera had nuked upon departure from the base two centuries ago? Who could possibly care about that now?

At least they would not have to wait much longer to find out. When they were brought together again it was in a room with two guards and a Councilor, Citizen Keel. The Citizen bowed. “Welcome, Citizens, to Vertigo Bay.”

“I would thank you,” said Altavera, “but welcome is not at all what we’ve been made to feel.”

Councilor Keel bowed again. “My apologies. Vertigo Bay is a very busy place. Too busy, sometimes, to remember the courtesies.”

“Diligence is the habit of all Citizens, and therefore no excuse for disrespect.”

“You are of course correct, Citizen Cruz.” Keel felt the need to bow a third time. “Be sure this situation will be rectified.”

“I accept your welcome then.” Altavera returned the bow. Metzenbergen joined em after a moment.

“You must both be exhausted.” Keel and Altavera both looked at David, who was weaving slightly where he stood. “It is with regret, therefore, that I must ask for you to persevere in your diligence for just a little while longer.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” mumbled Metz. “It’s just the sedatives I took.”

They would be shown to their rooms later. First, there was something the Councilor wanted them to see.

“It is hoped,” said Keel, “you might use your personal experience of Vertigo Bay’s history to help in clearing up a small mystery that has arisen.”

This pleased Altavera, who wanted to get to the bottom of this affair as soon as possible. Still, e could not resist, “After two hundred years in the ice, whatever this is about can’t wait another day? You’d think we were visiting the scene of a crime.”

“Please follow me,” said Citizen Keel, then turned to leave the room.

Metzenbergen, Altavera, fell in behind em, and one of the two guards brought up the rear.

As they waited for the doors of the nearest lev to slide open, Keel explained that they were going to the bottom floors. Altavera felt some relief at the thought.
Private quarters were all that occupied Vertigo Bay’s lowest levels. Clearly whatever they were about to show them could have nothing to with the destruction of that second life-boat. They boarded the lev, and Keel asked the computer for the bottom floor.

As the doors slid shut, a booted foot jutted through the narrowing seam. The panels rebounded back open, revealing a Citizen fem carrying a crate of miscellaneous tools and spare parts.

"Room for one more?" e said, and crowded aboard without waiting for an answer. "Twelfth," e said to the computer, though e was looking at Altavera.

As the lev’s doors closed again, the fem’s eyes turned toward Councilor Keel. "I see we’ve got guests." Her gaze moved from Keel, and fastened onto David Metzenbergen. "Very important guests, at that." The lev began its descent.

The look told Altavera all she needed to know—freshborn. David smiled back at the fem. "How kind of you to say so."

"Level twelve," said the computer. Momentum lurched inside the lev.

"Oh no," said the freshborn, and the crate in es arms tumbled free, scattering its contents everywhere.

In unison, Metzenbergen and the clumsy fem bent to pick up the mess, bumping roughly into one another. They shared an embarrassed, and somehow coy kind of laughter.

Altavera looked away, unable to watch the infantile flirtation. The guard was holding the lev doors open, and Altavera stepped through to get out of the way. E waited in the corridor while David, the freshborn, and Keel returned all the scraps to their place in the crate.

Dropping the final tool onto the heap, the freshborn stood to deliver a dazzling smile in David’s direction, thanking em in ridiculous profusion for es help. Altavera re-entered the lev, crossing paths with the exiting freshborn, and reading the name-tag hung above the es left breast. Another name for the pix-list, e thought: ‘Citizen Lisa Falludi.’

A short time later, navigating the corridors of Vertigo Bay’s deepest level, it quickly became clear exactly where they were going.
“Straub’s personal rooms,” said Altavera as they approached the end of a particular hallway where another guard stood.

“Yes,” said Keel, and e keyed in the entrance command. The four of them entered, leaving the sentry behind as the door closed once again.

The rooms were a combination of unrecognizable shambles, and perfectly preserved portions of long ago memory. The floor was covered with torn and faded strips of what had once been carpet. The shelves of the bookcases along one side of the room were filled with nothing but slag. Splinters and clumps of cotton, here and there, marked the previous existence of tables and chairs. But in one corner a couch and two armchairs still sat, pristine and lovingly gathered by the great portrait of the room’s owner. Nearby was a desk that stood as it always had. Altavera wandered absently over to it as Keel began speaking.

“As you both already know, it was six months ago that we found the dead bodies of Ditto Straub and Babe Solomon. They were exactly where Doctor Metzenbergen said they’d be, in Straub’s administrative centre six levels up.”

By the desk now, Altavera found herself looking down at a yellow-coated lump that sat on one edge of it. Though the writing was faded, e could still make out the words, I Ching. E turned to find both Keel and David staring at em.

“You expected something different,” e said to Keel, “from what my married reported?”

“No. In general the descriptions provided by you and your married have proven exact, and, I must add, extremely helpful. But,” e said, and strode between the couch and the armchair to the portrait of Ditto Straub, rampant. “The Council is curious of what either of you might make of this—” E reached up into a groove in the portrait’s frame. There was a click, and the picture slid aside.

Altavera’s head twitched over to lean at an angle, and I (for, of course, David Metzenbergen was now me) watched em advance to see what lay inside the opening, and then I heard es gasp. Spread on two tables in the middle of a small but well-equipped lab, were the corpses of Doctor Allen Nooten and the real Ditto Straub.

“And in particular this—” said Keel, pointing to a small black cube that sat on an otherwise empty table between the corpses.
I actually saw little of the lab, only taking time to note the presence of the
cube, before returning my eyes to Altavera as she crossed over from the desk. Of
course, I didn’t need to look, I already knew what was in there. Besides, I was too
busy killing the guard with the lazz that Lisa had passed me in the lev.

I wish I could have made the time to look into Altavera’s face, witness the
rarity of amazement in its features, said ‘Goodbye, Al-ta-vera!’ But to have waited for
any of this would have been incredibly stupid. My best praetorian was already
moving before the guard even realized e’d been shot. I took her head off from behind
and then shot her twice more to be on the safe side. The joy, nonetheless, was total.
Emotions of opposite extremes crashed together in my mind, sending waves of purest
life reverberating throughout my viscera. Of all creatures this one had been the most
deserving of my respect. Of all creatures this one was probably the only one who
might have ruined my plans.

I stepped over the corpse of Metzenbergen’s married, cutting Keel in half
almost as an afterthought. Alarms were going off, but before the sentry outside even
got fully into the room, I’d sealed and locked the portrait-door from the inside.

There was no need to hurry now, but still I acted with deliberate speed. I admit
it, after two hundred years of waiting, I was impatient to see the fruits of my labours.

I unlaced the necklace from around my neck, and began assembling Nooten’s
mechanism around the black cube. When this was completed, I gathered together the
bodies of Keel, Altavera, and my ancient self, stripping them of their clothes, and
lashing them together with some cables and tubing from around the lab. From my
shirt I took out the other two things that Lisa, my own great-great grand-child, had
passed me. I rolled the cooling unit up into the vid-pad I planned to write on, and
stuck them both down Altavera’s neck-hole. The lazz, I jambed into Citizen Keel’s
thorax. Finally, I removed my own clothes, took the mound of dead flesh into a loving
embrace, and hit the red button.

Naked and blood-slicked, my dead friends and I faded then reappeared in the
room where I presently sit, writing this. It took three days before the aliens finally
appeared. When they did, their state was so agitated they could not even sit down.

‘Why?’ was the first thing they said.
And I answered, "Because I'm human and you're not." Their fingers were
vibrating. I saw one on Green's hand vanish completely. "I know what's best for
humans. And what's best for humans is best for me. And—guess what?" I waited for
Pink to reform after phasing slightly out of existence. "This is what's best for me."
"But your Council—"

I explained to them who I really was. That the Council was nothing to me and
that neither were they. "You thought you'd been mistaken when you said my species
was the exception to the rule, didn't you?"

"Your Council had accepted the will of the Lifeform."

"Yes. They had."

"Your Council was a ruse?"

"You miss the point. You were mistaken, my species is not exceptional. I am."

Blue's arm was beginning to grow visibly thinner. "You have made a pariah of
your 'organism.' It can be no other way."

"Once again, you miss the point. As easily as I have killed you few today, I
will kill the rest. Indeed, one day your federation will not only accept this organism,
but they will welcome its King as theirs!"

For the next little while, they cajoled and threatened in this meagre way, but I
ignored the rest. I merely sat and watched with pleasure while their poorly molded
shapes disintegrated on the air.

Long before I ran across this triumvirate of coloured freaks, Nooten had been
exploring a new approach to biological warfare. If the essence of a human being can
be moved from one place to another on waves of energy, he reasoned, why not do the
same with the essence of a virus or bacteria? If you could broadband the wave, you
could turn the harmless intestinal bacteria of an entire army into a virulent E. coli.

The experiments were all failures. The essence of a human personality was
largely found in their experience. Experience, while formed from a complicated
interaction of body, mind, context, etc., was in itself practically reducable to data
(highly complicated forms of data, but data nonetheless), hence transpiration was
possible. A bacteria, as it rather predictably turned out, had nothing like 'experience'
to be transferred.
Though never coming close to achieving his goal, Hamm’s lab-work did result in one vaguely interesting spin-off. He developed, at least on vid-screen, a method of directing an energy that could dismantle experience the way some viruses dismantle cells. The idea was useless in terms of warfare though, and had only slight potential as an alternative to assassination. He hadn’t seen any point trying to concretize the theory. At least not until after I’d met Blue, Pink, and Minty Green.

When the aliens inadvertently hinted that their bodies were not flesh, the Doctor instantly recalled the schematics that he’d half-finished. The success of transpiration had already led him to theorize that highly evolved creatures would have escaped the flesh completely. Rather than skin and bone, they’d be form by agglomerations of discrete information—experience, that is, removed from its dependence on solid matter. The information that the cellular scanner had taken from Green’s hand, had proved the point.

What came back was energy readings, and spectroscopic analyses that needed to be ‘read’ like sound recordings, rather than examined like pictures of cellular structures. He built the weapon. It broadcasted information that dismantled information, just like an old-time computer virus—only here the devices that communicated were ‘living’ beings, and there would be no chips, or screen, or keyboard remaining once their data was destroyed. We’d fire it at their ship using the communication device they’d left with me—their little black box. Since it would be passed along with every exchange of their discrete style of information, it would be virulently communicable to all the aliens aboard. More importantly, however, we felt sure it would prevent them from sending any signal to their ‘federation,’ for fear of killing others.

Dear Reader, does it all sound too simple? Well, it wasn’t. It took two hundred years of planning, of being careful, of being patient, tough and wily—two hundred years worth of tiny but deadly skirmishes, of subtle yet crucial manipulations. And still, the three greatest risks were still to come.

It seemed to us quite probable the aliens would have some kind of ‘firewall’ built up against such attacks. We hoped that our Earth-made virus would be stylistically different enough to get past it. It turned out we needn’t have worried.
Such was their blinkered faith in peace, we caught them completely unprepared. The aliens confirmed it for me in the way that they suggested I should expect retaliation:

“Even though all aboard our ship are dying the ship will still return. Even now the story of this atrocity is being engraved on our outer hatch.”

I laughed. Good. By the time the ship got there, and they sent something back, a thousand years will have passed. It will take a mere five hundred for me to whip humanity back into shape.

The second risk, lay in the likeliness aliens might take the opportunity at the last to kill me (wouldn’t you have done it?). I had the lazz—against their fleshless bodies its usefulness was questionable, but it didn’t matter anyway. They never made a move.

The third risk has still to be resolved. I am depending on MacAfferty, or Toe, or the Council to cross the Moon and dig me up. They’ll have to. They’ll need to know what’s going on. Hamm’s still out there. He’ll clue them in, and help them find me.

Then, all I have to do is show them they’ve got no choice but to let me lead them again. Believe or not, dear Reader, that represents no risk at all. It will be clear to all of them that without me and the Doctor, the ‘federation’ will drive them into extinction. It’s beyond clear that I’m the only living person who can win this war for them. How happy I am that Altavera’s dead.

But will they come and get me? What do you think? I think you may think you know, dear Reader, but be honest—how often do your actions actually have anything to do with what you think? Think of Winston Smith—how much did he love his own boot-stomped face at the very end?

And that’s where we’ve arrived, dear Reader, at the very end. It was nearly a month ago I watched Pink, Blue and Green dissolve. Nearly a month since the real story was finished, and this writing had to start. When I began, I despised it—the obligation it represented. I was screaming curses when I pulled the vid-pad out of Altavera’s windpipe. I could not help but kick es corpse. But now, this task too has reached its end, and I find I almost regret it.
How will I fill the rest of my time here? I strain my ears again, hoping to catch
the crunching sound of excavation. I hear nothing, but I know they’ll be here soon.
It’s not urgent, mind you, my supplies will last a while yet. In fact I guess that’s what
I’ll do—I’ll go into the other room and check on them. Fix myself a little snack.

My beloved Altavera’s liver is all gone. Perhaps I’ll try cooking up one of its
small, pert breasts. The cooling unit I stuffed in Altavera’s neck-hole is holding up
well. Before the aliens got here I had plenty of time to set it up. I dragged the three
corpse I’d brought, my married, Keel, and my Ditto-self into the other room, and
drained their blood for drinking.

Just one more thing, dear Reader, before I go. Because I know you’d want to
share in my triumph, I’ll tell what I did to celebrate my victory. After the last of
Minty Green dissipated like a puff of sickly smoke, do you know what I did? I cut the
balls from the corpse of Ditto Straub, and popped them raw into my mouth. I chewed
them slowly, sucking back the juices that threatened to escape from the corners of my
mouth, and swallowed.

The End
Author's Note

Tempted as I am to begin this note with the question, 'who am I?,' I must defer in recognition of diminishing returns. Instead, I will simply introduce myself. I am Niklaus Anthonisen, the author of this book. Though I hope it will now be understood if I use the word 'translator,' as opposed to author. Let me explain.

In 1990, I was traveling in Guatemala. I had gone there in order to begin my career as a writer. In fact what I did was capitalize on what I'd learned at university, beginning a short (decade-long), but stunningly successful career as a drunk, and a drug addict. Certainly, however, I began with the best of intentions.

After a short tour of the country, I found myself in a small, well-touristed village named San Pedro. I had little money, but life there was so cheap I calculated that I could afford two years there if I budgeted appropriately. I decided that this was the ideal situation for the realization of my first novel. The dwelling I rented was a single-roomed, concrete bunker on the outskirts of town. It had a corrugated tin roof, a plywood bed, a table, and a stunning view of Lago Atitlán, the volcanoes that surrounded it, and the iridescent blue of its landlocked water. I then went about making this bunker my home.

I bought a variety of pretty things, all lively with colour, as is most of the craft and artwork of Central America. I still have a few of these things, traditional clothing, and a wall-hanging or two, but that's neither here nor there. The important thing is that among my purchases, I bought a clay statue of a square-headed, square-bodied humanoid shape. The thing stood, block-like and at attention, at about knee-height, and weighed a great deal. The dealer suggested it was a representation of a local deity named Mashimon. I suppose I liked its off-kilter features, half-fierce and half-clownish, but buying it was really more of a whim than anything. I told myself that by inviting the local deity into my home, I would be bringing good luck to my endeavours.

My endeavours, as I said earlier, really never went anywhere, except down to the local cantina to bullshit with other blithe tourists, try to get laid, and succeed in getting stupidly drunk. At first I was fairly earnest about writing, spending a few hours every day hovering over the copious notes and outlines I'd written up even before arriving. I'd take
out the first chapters I'd written, panic at the absence of story that lay ahead, and relapse into re-writing the work I'd been re-writing just the day before. These hours at my desk grew less and less, however, in direct proportion to the increasing time I spent smoking and drinking at the local cantina.

One day, I came to in my bed to the rattle of the wind blowing fiercely through the corrugated tin of my roof, and the sight of my copious doodlings flying from the surface of my desk. Blearily I stood and gave half-hearted chase. Noticing, however, that for each paper I picked up, another promptly blew onto the floor, I looked around the room for a paper-weight. My eyes lit on the knee-high statue of Mashimon. I hoisted him up onto the desk and stuffed the corners of the various sheets underneath his feet. That's where he stayed until I broke him open.

It was not done on purpose. I stumbled into my room one night, drunk, of course, and in the darkness ran heavily into the edge of the table. I heard the crash, and knew immediately that Mashimon had taken a tumble. I remember the sinking feeling I had when I realized what had happened; a uselessly advantaged tourist in a disadvantaged place. I felt the event as a symbol that my luck had finally run out.

I lit a candle to see whether I'd done what I thought. What I found changed my life.

A sheaf of pages had been rolled up and built into the heart of the statue.

I wish I could say something conclusive about their age, about the age of the statue even, but they were both far more inscrutable than that. In general the pages were not damaged, though there was some browned edges. I have since learned that guessing their age from their appearance would have been impossible. It depends on the methods of storage. Well, I have no idea what the weather was like inside the block of Mashimon's body.

This much I do know: 1) they clearly represented at least five different manuscripts, several poems, and many non-sequentially associated single pages; 2) the writing on all of them seemed to have been done by hand; 3) there were several different hands represented, sometimes on the same page, but not often; and 4) while much of the writing was in English, some sections were either in French, Spanish, or Esperanto; one particular section was written in a highly stylized language that seemed to be English, but
included many words, sentences, and even paragraphs that were simply uninterpretable (i.e., flazzthis (verb?), or jocusfigw (noun?).

This last section of text is the one from which I drew the material that makes up the novel, Between the Walls. The paper on which this was written was a shade of blue. One fellow to whom I showed a page felt certain that the ‘hand-writing’ may actually have been machine printed. I was inclined to agree, though for no very good reason, especially since the rest of the found papers clearly were done with pen-and-ink, or pencil. Because of the language mostly, and the appearance of believable technical writing and drawings, but perhaps also in some part because of my state at the time, I came to believe that these words had indeed somehow arrived into my hands from the future. Perhaps now that you have read it, you will sympathize with me when I tell you that this discovery did nothing to reverse my steadily growing drinking habit. I suppose I regret it all now. Especially since, while sleeping it off in the streets of Seattle, WA., four years later, my rucksack was stolen, and along with it all the manuscripts I’d found.

But maybe I shouldn’t regret it. Consider my situation—discovery of the manuscript placed me in exactly the same double-bind as it did the monster I have named Ditto Straub. If I revealed what I’d found, would I not be tilting the first domino in the chain of self-fulfilling, and ultimately destructive prophecy? If I just kept mum, on the other hand, would that be enough to prevent that monster I’ve named Straub from ever becoming?

What would you have done, dear Reader?

Ten years ago, I was certain that not acting, or not participating, was better in every way than acting. Now that I have sobered up, I’m not so sure. I still wish our civilization would step off the treadmill, consolidate its gains, instead of single-mindedly rushing headlong into a place that no one really wants to think about. But now I believe that the question of acting or not acting, of participation, is one that must be made anew with each new circumstance. I hope that this, in some measure, will explain my decision to attempt, despite the risk I feel it may represent, a ‘translation’ of this text. If that is not enough, then let me also point out that perhaps, after all, the book to which ‘Straub’ refers is not this one at all, but the work of whoever has the manuscripts now—it is, perhaps, even as I write, already published and languishing on some shelf beyond my knowledge.
I have changed the names of both the people and places in my translation. It seemed inappropriate to malign particular persons or regions on the basis of an unprovable assumption. Because, as I said, the manuscripts were stolen from me, most of what I've written had to be from memory. I believe, nonetheless that what is represented is an accurate portrayal of what I read. Though I lost the manuscript, I took many notes while deciphering it, and these were preserved in a box in my parents' house. The only other assurance I can offer in this regard, is to say that in the four years I did spend in the company of the manuscript, the story was burnt deeply into my mind. For the sake of narrative coherence, the sequence of the events herein has been somewhat rearranged from the way they appeared in the original. However, the only conscious additions I have made are the sections in italics that begin and end this text.

Niklaus (Claus) Anthonisen.
Vita Auctoris

Niklaus (Claus) Anthonisen is a short series of symbols that inaccurately describe a concept that inaccurately represents something that really is something else (i.e., a writer). The meat which is often referred to by these symbols was birthed in Montreal, Quebec, in 1963, received a B.A. at McGill University, and studied Creative Writing at Malaspina University / College. I, on the other hand, am a fiction created by the same confluence of meat, mind, and matter that is everything and nothing, God and not-God, society and unsociety.