

TO BE OR NOT TO BE...

In another world a mother has put her loss behind her, or, as much behind her as any mother can ever put a daughter's loss, and gone on with her life. In that other world a mother no doubt will go to the opening ceremonies for the base named after her daughter.

Unless, of course, this next story becomes true. In that world a dazed mother, still in something like shock from being reunited with the daughter that she'd long given up for dead, will put on a pink suit to sit on the platform, but in a chair slightly behind that of the daughter herself.

Unfortunately, that story also has its logical correlate: in this world, in America, a mother does not know that she is on the verge of losing her daughter yet again, that some mysterious and utterly unforeseen event, engineered by the Prince of Lies, is about to sweep her daughter away forever, the same daughter that was already snatched twice, not once but twice, from the jaws of death.

RESURRECTION

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For Diane Henriksen

Who overcame something too much like this.

RESURRECTION

CHAPTER ONE

Except for the clammy feel of electrodes pasted to her forehead and the nape of her neck, and the weight of the monitors and boosters slung over her shoulders, Tiffany enjoys the repatterning drills of neuro rehab, a string of video games, especially now that she's advanced to Stage Two. Stage One got old fast, staring at the holo screen while she tried to slide the red arrow inside the green ring or drop the yellow ball into the blue cup. Here in Stage Two a little purple alien pops in and out of a three-dimensional maze while an assortment of monsters tries to eat him. Every now and then he finds rocks to throw, and every hit scores big points. She has been promised various refinements in this scenario if she can get him out of the maze and into the next section of the game world. So far, he's been eaten at the exit every time.

While he runs and finds and throws, the boosters gleam with red numbers or hum to themselves as they fire bursts of electricity into her nervous system; the monitors beep and click, chasing her neural responses down endless mazes and cornering the booster pulses at all the dead-ends left in her brain by the crash, or rather, the ground impaction event, as the Air Force prefers to call it. The purple alien runs straight into the mouth of a green dragon-ish thing as Tiffany's mind skips and shies. A hot, still day over the Mediterranean, a hot still day over the desert. She was on patrol. Not ferrying. Patrol. All at once, at seven o'clock high, screaming out of the sun on a suicide mission over Israel, hostiles. The monitor produces a cascade of beeps and tinny shrieks as her fingers lie still on the console. Crashed, shot down, failed, burning, spiraling, failed.

No matter what anyone tells her, she sees herself as a loser, though how she could have possibly won a dogfight in a half-armed plane she cannot say. She's been told repeatedly that she had no missiles on board and only enough ammunition for a couple of warning shots; she was never supposed to fight, not her, a woman, not her, a mere ferryman, flying a new F-47D to a base behind the lines for the men to take into combat. A perfectly reasonable excuse, this, except that she remembers testing her missile activation codes when she was preparing for takeoff. Remembers testing her cannon, too. Remembers them all checking out just fine. Remembers being a combat pilot, not a ferryman. And then remembers — not defeat, no, not exactly. This part of the story she can never quite explain, not even to herself. She

remembers only lying on the ground dying while seeing the power plant she was trying to guard — not exploding, no, but in a state of having already exploded. The white pillar. Blazing light blinding. Blind .

"Captain." Someone has grabbed her arm, someone is shaking her arm. "Captain, you're here now. You are here now ."

The monitors are shrieking, the voice is sharp but concerned. Tiffany sees a beige face, black eyes, black bangs, swimming in front of hers. A therapist. With a name of some kind. A manicured hand reaches out and shuts the monitor blessedly up. The silence brings Tiffany's mind back.

"Sorry, Hazel."

Hazel Weng-Chang smiles but does not release her patient's arm.

"Come sit down, captain. Come have some juice. Time for a rest."

Free of the monitors Tiffany limps into the lounge, all restful blues and lavenders, plus two walls of windows with a view that any realtor would drool over. Down at the bottom of a steep wooded slope the San Francisco Bay spreads out blue in the sunlight to the golden hills of Marin County; close by to her left lies the Pacific Ocean, and, turning back to the right, toward the City itself, she can see the rusty-orange bridge, gleaming and glinting with windshields as the maglev trains rush back and forth. As she watches, a white and red grain ship slides under and through, headed out to sea, loaded with California's new gold, rice for a rich but always hungry Japan.

Inside the lounge, slumped on one of the blue sofas, the two Jasons are talking about the Forty-Niner game. By the window, wired into his electro-chair sits Pedro, staring at nothing again. Thanks to the chair he can use both arms, as well as breathe, spit, think, and perform a few other basic functions. Chair or no he'll never talk again, but the set of his shoulders tells Tiffany to stay away. They all know each other very well here in the rehab lounge, better than the doctors and the therapists (both physical and neuro) ever will. The two Jasons, one black, one white, look up, study her face for a brief moment, smile, then leave her alone. For that gesture she loves them.

In the corner stands the pale blue juice machine, dispensing three flavors, apple, orange, lemon-lime, but the real juice of course is the mixture of liquid vitamins and drugs that the computer plops into each pre-measured glass. When Tiffany presses her thumb onto the ID panel, the machine mixes up her personal formula, dumps it in, then opens the little door. As she takes the paper cup, the machine clears its mechanical throat.

"Please take a stickette and stir your juice. Please drink slowly. Please dispose of your stickette properly."

The more advanced patients, like Tiffany, have come to hate the scrape and echo of this perpetual message, but plenty of people in therapy here at Veteran's Hospital need to be reminded every single time. Steadying the cup in her good hand, she limps over to an armchair by the other window, to leave Pedro his space, and sits down with a sigh. Automatically she glances at the clock: 1430 hours. In another half hour she can leave and go home. She's one of the lucky ones, Tiffany, an out-patient with a home here in San Francisco. She's one of the very lucky ones. Two months ago she would have looked at the numbers on the clock read-out and found them utterly meaningless. She could name the numbers: one four three oh. She merely could not connect them with an idea as abstract as time. Now they have regained their alchemical power of transforming a moment of time into a point of the virtual space known as a day. Of course, everyone at this rehab center, the Zombie Ward as they call it, is lucky. All of them

have died at least once, have lain dead for at least a few minutes until frantic doctors could pummel their hearts back alive and force their blood to start circulating the drugs that jump-started their brains. Tiffany, in fact, is a twofer, dying once in the desert near the wreckage of her plane and once again on the operating table of the field hospital. Two termination incidents, two resurrection events. It gives her a certain status.

As she drinks her juice, she is thinking about her book. That's what she calls it, "her book," though in fact, the science fiction novel in question, HUNTER'S NIGHT, was written by a man named Albert Allonsby. Over a year ago now she picked it out of a bin of paper-books in the Athens USO officers' lounge and carried it round with her for another month, reading a few pages whenever she got a few minutes. A good book, well-written, set in a vastly important and meaningful war on some other planet in some other era far far away from the tedious peace maintenance campaign that she was stuck fighting, and in it there were a couple of really solid alien races and some finely designed starships that even a pilot like herself could believe in — but she never had the chance to finish the damn thing.

"Only sixty-five lousy pages from the end."

Tiffany often speaks aloud without realizing it these days. Here in the lounge it doesn't matter; on the street, people do turn and stare. White Jason grins at her.

"You thinking about that fucking book again?"

"Well, jeez, I was just gonna find out who the traitor was, the one who blew up the AI unit, y'know?"

Black Jason rolls his eyes skyward, but there's no malice in his gesture, merely the shared comfort of a long-standing joke.

"Maybe they gonna make a movie out of it one day. Then you find out."

"Rather find the damn book. They always change stuff for the movies."

The two Jasons nod in unison. Tiffany hauls herself up, judging with a fine ear the creak in her bad leg, broken in six different places during the ground impac-tion event. She is one of the lucky ones. She bailed out in time—well, nearly in time. Spinning downward. 'White chute popping, so slaw, so late. Black smoke. Failure. Black smoke, desert, white light in a blinding burst. Failure .

"Captain." Hazel Weng-Chang stands in the doorway. "Doctor has a few extra minutes. Want to check out early?"

"Yeah, I do, thanks. Gotta stop at a bookstore on the way home."

Doctor Rosas's office has walls of forest green and restful blue, blank expanses of color, not a picture, clock, bookshelf, knickknack, not one thing that might confuse the eyes and agitate the torn neurons of her patients. Her desk, too, spreads out bare, not one thing on it except for the chart or file that she might need for the appointment at hand. The light filters through diffusion panels near the ceiling. Her gray hair is short, her doctor's smock pale blue and utterly unadorned; she speaks quietly, she moves her hands slowly or not at all. When Tiffany comes in, Rosas smiles but sits tombstone still, leaning back in her chair unmoving until her patient has taken the chair opposite and come to a complete stop herself. Tiffany sees the white shapes on the polished desk and recognizes them instantly as the printout from her last few neuro sessions. Just two months ago they would have been white shapes and nothing more.

"You keep on doing very very well, captain. I'm so glad. Don't worry. You'll get the purple guy out of the maze yet."

Tiffany smiles. Rosas opens a drawer, pulls out a green tennis ball, and tosses it over. Tiffany grabs with her bad hand and manages to make contact, but claw-like her fingers refuse to close. The ball totters on her palm, then falls, rolling across the floor.

"It still kinda leaves a streak behind it, when it's rolling, I mean," Tiffany says.

"Kinda?"

"Well, the afterimage is faint, you know? It used to look solid."

Rosas nods and makes a note on one of the sheets.

"The hand still hurt where they reconnected it?"

"Only when it's cold and damp."

Another nod, another note, a pause while she consults the pieces of paper. Tiffany realizes that she's trying to decipher every gesture the doctor makes as if it were a word, some holy word delivered by a priest.

"Captain," this said very casually. "What nationality are you, again?"

"Californian. Shit. I mean, American."

"So California's not a sovereign nation."

"Course not. That was weird, when I thought there was a Republic, I mean. I could see how I'd forget stuff, lots of stuff, but it was just weird to find out I was remembering something that never happened."

"I hear blame in your voice. You cannot blame yourself for the weird things." The doctor smiles, putting the word weird in invisible quotes. "It's in your wiring. So your memory glitched. Big deal. We've all seen 'California Republic' written on flags thousands of times, haven't we? It has its own logic, when you think about it. A reasonable mistake."

"Yeah, I know, but..."

"But it's hard not to blame yourself. I know that too. And then you blame yourself for the blame. A vicious circle. But we'll get you free of it yet. Remember: almost ten minutes total without oxygen to the brain. Remind yourself of that. Over nine minutes total. Of course you've got problems, but we'll teach you how to wire around them."

A joke, of course, an often-repeated joke at rehab, this business of "wiring around" various problems. Tiffany grins, but even as she shares this moment of good humor, she feels like a liar. Caught in her memory — no, created by the wiring, or so she tells herself — is a mental image, as sharp and clear as any photo, of a tiny booklet covered in forest-green leatherette and stamped with the California seal in gold leaf. Along the edge lies gold lettering, illegible in memory image, yet the entire booklet seems so ominous in the root sense, as well as charged with anxiety (a thing she was always groping for in her shoulder bag or patting her pockets to confirm its presence), that she knows it must be something crucial,

her passport, perhaps, her officer's identification papers, maybe, something that marked her officially and legally a California citizen and a member of its Air Services. She feels nothing for the word American except a faint whisper of connotation: foreigner. That such a concrete picture, so charged with emotion, could emerge out of a glitch, out of an accident and death and chaos, turns her stomach cold simply because it's such an irrelevant detail, such a trivial stupid fiction. If she'd forgotten her own name, say, or what her fiance looked like, she would have been able to accept such lapses more easily, perhaps and maybe only because those are the things most often forgotten by resurrected war casualties in the made-for-TV-movies, or maybe because it's the problem she doesn't have. She isn't sure which.

"Tomorrow's Saturday, but the workout room's going to be open from ten till four," Rosas says. "Gonna come in?"

"Oh yeah, but I promised my mom I'd take Sunday off. My sister's coming up from San Luis Obispo, and who knows when they'll get another chance at train tickets."

"Right. You can't miss that, for sure. Okay, come in tomorrow, skip Sunday, and I'll see you on Monday round bout this time. Any questions you want to ask me?"

There is always a question, but one that Tiffany has yet to get up her nerve to ask. Will I fly again? Will I ever ever be able to fly again, to do the one thing in life, the only thing in life that I wanted to do badly enough to risk my life for ?

"No questions, no. Thanks, Doc. See you Monday."

From her locker in the rehab room Tiffany gets her red and tan Forty-Niner jacket, puts it on, then uses her good hand to slip her bad hand into a side-pocket, because people on the street do tend to stare at it. Then comes the big step, forcing herself to leave. In the Zombie Ward proper all the corridors are painted bluish-gray in a matte finish, and all the lights hidden behind diffusion panels, except for the last hundred yards or so, designed as a transition to the noise and shattered light of the outside world. First the blue-gray turns shiny; chrome strips appear along the moldings; the lights brighten; the walls change to glaring yellow. In the big foyer, the world glitters behind double glass doors. Tiffany hesitates just out of range of the electric eye and takes a deep breath. Going out reminds her of the scuba diving she used to love so much, a plunge, a dropping down, an immersing into a peculiar world of shattered light and immeasurable shadow. When she takes a step forward, the doors slide open with a blare of sun like trumpets. She steps through onto gray walkway. Green spreads out and menaces while white flames rise in pillars and swell. A fanged mouth gleams in the green.

"Let your eyes adjust. It be just your eyes. And the light."

A passing orderly ignores her comment. She reminds herself, no more talking out loud, and begins her walk down to the bus shelter at the bottom of the hill. The green resolves itself into ice plant, tufted with purple flowers, each water-conserving spike somewhat tooth-shaped, and trees, rather typical cypresses, not twisted vampire forms writhing in sun fire. The white and bloated towers become hospital buildings. The view makes sense again. It takes a few seconds, at times, for her recently grown axions, the neurons firing in a new order, to cross-connect and control sensory overload.

Names, which swarmed round her brain like so many tiny flies circling above fruit, have all settled down again, each in its proper place. She glances back, savoring labels, rejoicing in the ability to label. Enclosed lawn. Door. Window. And distantly, in the blueness of the bay, water. And nearer by, her own head. She touches the back of her head. Hand. Takes out the bad hand and looks at it. Palm of her hand, crisscrossed though it be by scars, paper-cut-thin scars, where the surgeons sliced in to reattach

major nerves. Puts the bad hand back in the pocket of the Forty-Niner jacket.

"My hand." Damn. Speaking again.

But no one hears. The bus shelter, an open hut of plexi-panel and chrome, stands empty beside an empty street under the overhead wires for the electric buses. By leaving early, she's beaten the change of shift from the hospital; she'll get a seat on the bus, here near the end of its long run from downtown. It will trundle a few blocks to the ocean, pause, rum, and then head back along Geary Boulevard, but Tiffany will transfer off long before it reaches the concrete and glass jumble that used to be the heart of the City. Across the street the long row of pastel stucco houses, stuck together cheek by jowl, gleam in the warm November sun. House. Window. Door. About half the houses have their windows boarded up, doors nailed shut, roofs peeling and crumbling. The rest, judging from the improvised curtains, flowered bed sheets or the red and yellow stripes that the Brazilians like so much, shelter refugees. On the tiny porches, behind rusting grates, sit stacks of baskets and cardboard boxes, flowing with things, unrecognizable piles of cloth and packets. On a couple of porches toddlers, dressed only in dirty diapers or a little shirt, clutch the safety gates and stare out like prisoners. Tiffany yawns. The sun is too warm, deadly warm. She can remember cold Novembers, when the fog lay thick on the Bay and the hills, or it would rain, sometimes even three days in a row. She remembers her mother picking her up at day-care, and how they would run giggling through the cold rain to their warm house with light glowing in the windows. Her sister would be home before them, because she was old enough to have her own front door key and let herself in after school, but not old enough to pick Tiffany up from day-care. Water. Hand. The palm of her hand, stiff and reluctant to move. She was never left alone to curl her hands round metal bars and stare down empty streets. Her mother, an Army widow, was never forced to work for near-slave wages as these Brazilian mothers are.

Orange and white, the electric bus glides up to the stop. Blue sparks flash as its connector rods tremble, sway then slip from the overhead wires and fall, bouncing and flaring, onto the roof. Tiffany boards, sliding her FastPass into the computerized slot, squeezing out of the stout operator's way as she clatters down the stairs to get the rods back up and power back on. Tiffany spots her favorite seat, a single jammed in across from the back door, where no one can sit directly beside her, and heads for it. As the bus shudders and sparks appear outside the back window, the handful of passengers all mutter to themselves or their companions.

"Jeez, they can put a man on Mars, but they can't build a decent trolley."

Spoken aloud again, but fortunately she's passing a plump old woman, laden with shopping bags, who smiles and nods agreement, just as if Tiffany had in fact been speaking to her. Tiffany smiles in return, hurries to her chosen seat, scrunches down in it, stretching her long legs into the aisle, pulling them back, stretching them out again since the trolley's mostly empty. Being inside a small metal space can be very difficult, and today she feels the walls shrinking...or do they swell?

They move somehow, at any rate, and eat up the space around her. She takes a deep breath and stares across the aisle to the door. And the window. And hospital hill outside the window. Swearing under her breath the operator hurries up the front steps and into her tiny compartment. The computer beeps once, announces that the next stop will be Land's End, and signals the operator to begin. Just as the bus swings out into the street, Tiffany sees a man running, or rather trotting, for the bus. The operator ignores him, the bus pulls away, he stands waving his arms and calling down half-heard imprecations.

Tiffany turns in her seat to keep him in view a moment longer. A little man, slightly stooped, wearing a black suit over a white shirt and a black vest, and a plump black hat of great age, he raises one fist and shakes it in the direction of the fleeing trolley. She cannot see clearly, but she thinks she noticed a long

sidelock of gray hair dangling at either side of a bushy gray beard, and a mass of gray hair sprouting from under his hat. Since she spent nearly two years stationed in Israel, she can guess that he's one of the last of the Orthodox, clinging to a way of dress already old-fashioned when his great-grandfather's generation brought it to the Promised Land. But what, of course, is he doing here in San Francisco, home of all the world's gentiles, refugees from a hundred countries, gathered over hundreds of years, where nothing could be less pure, where the very land itself partakes of two mingled natures, water and earth blending inexorably as the tides rise day by day and chew at the shore, and water and air mix into fog. Somewhere, no doubt, he has found a place selling kosher food, or at least food that he can convince himself to be pure enough to eat. She would shrug the problem away, remind herself that it's none of her business, if his image would only unstick itself from her mind. Yet for a long time, as the bus lumbers beside the sea-wall that once was Ocean Beach, she can see him in her memory, dressed in black and yelling curses upon all things too impatient to wait for one old man, his thin arms waving, his hands curled into fists.

Just at the end of the line, the bus breaks down. In mid-announcement the computer dies, the lights go off, the rods fall with a thump and pronounced lack of sparks onto the roof. The other passengers sigh and mutter remarks, thankful that they're transferring to another bus, rise and gather parcels, clatter off behind the operator, who trots to the rear and begins working the wires again. Tiffany scrunches down farther in her seat and watches the wires twitch and flutter outside the rear window as the operator raises the connecting rods, makes contact, settles them onto the wires. Nothing happens. No hum, no lights, no computerized voice apologizing for the interruption to service. A sudden flash of orange and green uniform, the operator appears in the back doorway.

"Mights well get on off. Nother bus waiting just ahead anyhow."

"Okay. My transfer still good?"

"Oh yeah. No problem."

Tiffany goes out the back door and steps into the long cold sweep of shadow cast by the sea-wall. Out across the Pacific the sun is dropping fast toward the horizon, but thanks to the forty-foot high reinforced concrete wall that runs all the way down San Francisco's western border (continuing on south, as well, to protect Daly City, Pacifica, Half-Moon Bay, those little towns long since swallowed up by Bay City sprawl), no one will ever stand on Ocean Beach and watch it set again. The beach lies under ten feet of water, anyway. Shivering a little she passes the other ex-passengers, walks up the line of buses, neatly arranged in a half-moon of a turnaround, and finds the other Geary bus at the head of the line. Its door, though, is shut, and its operator stands conferring with a little clot of Muni people back by the newly dead bus. Termination incident. Soon a mechanic will arrive, and there will be a resurrection event. Wiring. All in the wiring.

The sea-wall makes Tiffany nervous, it looms so high and cold, splattered with red graffiti, black obscenities, green and purple tags from one gang or another. How they get up so high to scribble and paint amazes her, as does their determination. As she studies the wall, she thinks she might see a couple of cracks in it, down near the bottom where it counts. When she looks at the ground immediately below the cracks, she finds depressions, as if the asphalt were just starting to sink, as if a rift were just starting to develop. She steps to one side, squints: the depressions exist, all right, still shallow but an inexorable sign that the sea is eating away at the base of the wall. No doubt it can be patched or propped to give this boulevard and the public housing on its far side a stay of execution. For how long? She prefers not to think of that.

She walks a little way forward out of the shadow, but the sun hurts her eyes; she paces back, scowling

at the clot of trolley operators, wishing someone would open the door and let her sit down, paces into the sun again and turns to look up the boulevard. The old man in black is heading toward them, trotting along all stoop-shouldered, one arm crooked so he can keep one hand firmly on his hat. A short block away he stops, stares at the bus, does a visible double-take at the clot of operators and the grumbling passengers. She can see him abruptly hunch his thin shoulders, waggle his head, then turn and hurry off, dashing up a side-street and disappearing into the public housing, a sprawl of beige stucco ziggurats, brindled with graffiti.

"Almost like he ripped something off or something." Damn. Did it again.

No one notices. The operators have progressed to waving their hands and swearing over the dead bus; the ex-passengers have migrated closer to listen. Tiffany shifts her weight from one foot to another, breathes slowly and deeply, wonders if she's too warm, decides against taking the jacket off, shifts her weight again. She feels the rage starting, a sliver of glass deep in her mind, pushing and slicing its way toward the surface, forcing the long tendons in her neck to tighten and her jaw to clench. She refuses to give in. It's all in the wiring. She is not truly angry. She turns and strides back along the line of buses, walks fast, whips around and strides down the street on the outside of the line, where no one can see her fighting the rage. All in the wiring. Not their fault. All in the...

Suddenly she realizes that her bad hand is clenching. The rage vanishes into a whoop of delight that she turns into a cough. For a long moment she stand in the middle of the empty street and smiles, merely grins at the sunlight, at the sky, the asphalt, the beige ziggurats, the dead bus. The hand aches, the fingers straighten; she ignores the ache, clenches her fist again. Hurts, a stab of fire along the nerves, a tingling. She laughs and strides back to the sidewalk, where the operator is opening the doors of the bus at the head of the line. The clot of passengers are staring at her. She gives them all a brilliant, impartial smile and takes her place at the end of the line. Door. Window. Behind her, wall. In her pocket, hand. Clenched fist. Palm of the hand. Pain. Who cares?

She finds her favorite seat, scrunches down into it, and makes an effort to stop smiling, to assume the polite mask of indrawn attention that people wear, sitting on buses. The hand tingles, then subsides into an ache.

She remembers the last cup of juice that she drank at the hospital, realizes that in the random way they have, the drugs have finally blasted through the blocked connections or knit up the raveled sleeve of neural tissue or whatever it is, exactly, that they do do. Months ago Dr. Rosas explained the drugs, drew little pictures, brought better pictures up on screen from video files, spent a patient hour repeating her explanations, but although Tiffany heard the words, although they even at that moment made a kind of sense, especially associated with the pictures, she cannot remember the information now. Only the words, protein sheath, dangle in her mind, disconnected yet profoundly meaningful. She will ask again on Monday, she decides. If, of course, she can remember.

Even though other passengers pile on at every stop, even though people soon crowd in front of her and close to her, the wave of good feeling carries Tiffany all the way through the trolley ride, sweeps her off the bus at Sixth Avenue and in a warm mental foams floats her down the cross-street, one long block, to the bookstore just around the corner on Clement. As she lingers in front of the bins of cheap used paper-books, though, the wave recedes. This bookstore has existed longer than she has; her mother shopped for story-books here when she herself was a little girl. That, Tiffany knows. But in her memories from before the war, the store stands right on the corner, not several doors down. It looks much the same as this store does now; the memory-store is merely a corner store, not a flush-to-the-sidewalk store. The discrepancy makes her shake her head hard, She turns and looks back at the broad street, crammed with pedestrians hurrying along between the bus lanes, and at the sidewalks, packed with the

bins and barrows of the various peddlers — a woman selling shao mai here, a man with sausage rolls there, a table of cheap clothes, wooden crates of spatulas and ladles. Overhead the sky is darkening to the velvet blue that means sunset and night, when white lights will stab and shatter the world. She should take her transfer to the stop on Sixth and get the streetcar for home. On the other hand, the bookstore seems to invite her in with its yellow light and a quilt of colors beyond the windows: the shelves inside, all stacked with book cartridges and paper-books, red and blue and yellow. She walks through the door.

In this particular store the science fiction section lies all the way to the back. As she makes her way through the narrow aisles, past heaped and jumbled sensations of bright covers, holograph scenes of far places, the shiny three-dee portraits of authors, the occasional poster talking at her in a tinny voice, and as other customers cross her path or block her way, women burdened with shopping bags and one precious novel to take them to some better place in their minds, children clutching shiny comics to their chests, old men holding news cartridges that need refilling, she begins to breathe a little fast, to feel sweat form and bead on her back and upper lip, but she forces herself to walk slowly, to breathe slowly, to concentrate on keeping her bad hand in its pocket and the good hand from knocking stacks of cartridges to the floor, until she reaches a relatively open space in front of the correct shelves, where she can let the tension ease and round up the pieces of her mind again.

The nearby posters start talking as soon as they sense a warm organic presence in front of them. Although she automatically ignores the babble of tinkling blurbs, Tiffany stares at the pictures for a long time. Starships against dark Galactic skies, aliens holding beautiful artifacts, landscapes never seen, washed by strangely colored seas, stretching out to jagged mountains, dotted with trees that never grew — they all glow with fascinations that swarming Earth and the barren dullness of Mars and Moon will never match. If she cannot find HUNTER'S NIGHT, she decides, she will buy a new book and see how well she can follow it. Since she's always loved reading, every few weeks she buys a new book, takes it home, spends an hour or so making slow sense out of letters that used to form words automatically, trying to make the words once deciphered form into mental pictures and meanings and sounds, the way they always used to before, easily and magically. So far she's always given up after two or three pages or two or three screens. Dr. Rosas suggests that she buy kids' books, but the doings of clothed animals and small children have not yet been able to hold the interest of a woman back from four years of war. If she could only find HUNTER'S NIGHT. She's sure that it would be different, reading again the one book that she can remember reading, and this time she would find out how the damn thing ended.

Since she cannot just remember and match the name she carries in her head with the names she finds on the cartridge labels or the spines of paper-books, she fishes in the cargo pocket of her pants for the slip of paper she always carries. Some weeks ago she printed out Allonsby's name and the book title in big blocky letters with black ink, a template of sorts. She finds the slots allotted to the "A's" on the shelves and goes through them slowly, hesitantly, dreading the disappointment which does indeed come. A-D A-L-L A-L-L-E A-N. She holds the paper up, squints back and forth between her own printing and the long line of names on label and spine. No A-L-L-O's at all. Not one. No Allonsby, no nobody.

"Damn!"

"Help you, Miz?"

Tiffany yelps, spins, sees a young man, slender, black, hands up over his face as he steps back fast. With a gulp for air she catches herself, stands still, gulps again, feels sweat run down the small of her back, lowers her good hand.

"Jesus god I'm sorry. Dint see you come up, dint see you at all, kid."

"You a vet, right?"

"Yeah."

"It's cool. My brother, he's a vet. I understand. Sorry I startled you. You dunt have to feel bad. Really."

She takes a last deep breath, lets it out very slowly, tosses her head once, shoves her bad hand deeper into one jacket pocket and puts her piece of paper away in the other. The boy — he's maybe seventeen — manages a tentative smile. She sees then the name-tag pinned to his shirt: J-O-S-H. Josh. An employee.

"You looking for something?" he says. "Be glad to help you find it."

"Yeah, actually. A book called HUNTER'S NIGHT. By Albert Allonsby."

Josh frowns, considering, unsnaps a transmit from his belt, frowns at the tiny keyboard, then one letter at a time with a careful forefinger types in the name of the book. A beep: he turns the unit so that she can see the thin stripe of screen, flashing "unknown."

"Sure you got that right?" Josh says. "Hey, lemme try the author. Can't be a lot of dudes with a name like that."

He types again; again the screen flashes. Unknown.

"Come on up to the counter, and we go ask the boss. She maybe look it up in BOOKS IN PRINT or something."

The boss, a gray-haired white woman in jeans and a T-shirt that says "What's the good word?" does just that, talking the author and title into the main ROM comp behind the cluttered counter. While the unit searches, Tiffany studies the piles of dollar postcards and free bookmarks that lie every which way, so jumbled that she loses track of where the edges of one stack end and the next begins. Fortunately, before this contour melt-down can spread and disorganize her entire view, the boss speaks.

"No such book in print, sorry, not for the last ten years anyway."

"Weird. The copy I lost was new. I mean, I'm pretty sure it was new."

"Where'd you buy it?"

"Got it at a USO in Greece."

"Oh!" The boss grins, painted red mouth in a wrinkled face. "Well, you know, I bet it's a Euro edition, then. It was probably never picked up by a publisher over here. Happens all the time, and Albert Allonsby sounds like a Euro name to me. Lessee, there's a couple of import bookstores in town. I probably have a card for one of them lying around here. Or you can try a used bookstore. They get all sorts of odd things."

She rummages through the heaps on the counter and the stacks behind it, finally pounces in triumph and hands over a business card.

"Give these people a call. If anyone's got it, they do."

"Thanks, thanks a lot. Never dawned on me, that it just plain not be a California I mean American book."

Neither the boss nor young Josh notices the slip. They merely nod and smile as Tiffany thanks them again and leaves, slipping the card into the breast pocket of the Forty-Niner jacket where she won't lose it. She'll never call the store, of course; using the vuphone terrifies her for one of those obscure reasons beyond her discussing, even with herself. But she just might go over and drop in one morning, on her way to the hospital, maybe, or on one of her rare afternoons off. Surely she'll be able to work through a mere sixty-five pages of read-ing, and maybe, with those sixty-five under her belt, she'll be able to tackle a completely new book.

Outside, night. Caught off-guard she stops, staring, seeing dark sky, night shadows, stripes of white slashing through dark as trolley after trolley clangs its way through rush hour. Up and down the streets mercury vapor pole lamps radiate solid spheres of light. People rush, people crowd round, people push by. Tiffany feels her mouth opening for a scream, chokes it back, shuts her mouth, feels her bad hand stab with pain as the fingers clench, feels her good hand balling into a fist, shoving into its own pocket. She never should have stopped, should have gone straight home, can't remember which way home lies, can't see her streetcar stop, can see nothing, in fact, but striped light, spherical light, and the faces and shoulders of women dashing home from work, women lugging heavy shopping bags, women dragging kids behind them or carrying kids in backpacks, a perfumed sea of women, dotted with the occasional islands of men and boys. And a boy's face at her elbow: Josh from the store.

"You need help, doncha. Which bus you take?"

She would like to scream at him to leave her alone, would like to lie and swear or state calmly that she's fine, that she needs no help, but the lights shatter into a thousand swords and the faces swirl by on a perfumed tide.

"The D-car. And thanks."

A strong hand on her good elbow steers her through the raging sea of faces, past the exploding lights and the crates of cabbages, the tables spread with bolts of cloth, the kids racing and playing tag out in the street. Josh leads her round the corner and down half a block to the dark and shuttered post office, where some twenty people stand, their backs to the street, reading the news-loop on the bright red digital strip above the door. Chinese ideograms flash on and crawl past, a steady parade.

"Don't look at them words," Josh snaps. "You look at them red words moving and yoube gone ."

"You're right. Your brother, he a zombie like me?"

"Yeah, but we sure glad to have him back anyway. Here's the streetcar stop, and look, here it comes."

"Thanks, Josh. Thanks a lot."

"No problem, miz. No problem at all." The kindnesses of strangers. The phrase echoes in her mind as she climbs the steps, slides her FastPass through the slot, and makes her trembling way down the aisle. I'm dependent on the kindesses of strangers. Where the bell is that line from ? She can't remember, knows she'll never remember, finds a seat and slides in, turning to press her face against the window as the trolley groans and moves, clanging wildly at the women crossing back and forth. The conductor leans out and screams at sudden children, pressing alongside, raising cupped hands to open windows, begging

for a coin or a piece of candy, Brazilian kids, barefoot and shivering, dressed in baggy shorts, thin shirts, those that have shirts at all. At last the streetcar sways across the intersection, stops, clangs, moves again, stops. On the Geary corner, another crowd streams through littered banks of fruit stands, sausage sellers, tables strewn with cheap merchandise. She sees one display clearly, notebooks and calculators, boxes of scribes, kids' school supplies, before the car lurches into the middle of the wide boulevard. On a concrete island two men stand under a deathly glare of mercury vapor light. "Whattha hell? No, can't be." But it is the old man in the black suit, the rabbi, as she finds herself thinking of him, with his flood of gray hair escaping from his pudding-shaped black hat and his beard and his sidelocks, his skinny arms upraised as he argues with a young man, a very flash young man, his blond hair slicked back into moussed forks, wearing a bright red shirt of some shiny cloth, a pair of very tight black pants, and a wide belt, encrusted with buckles and studs. He struts back and forth with his arms folded over his chest and a sneer on his face as the old man waves one bony finger under his nose. The streetcar clangs, glides, clangs again and picks up speed, darting into the silence and safety of residential streets, leaving the old man and the flash dude far behind on their island of light and concrete.

Tiffany slews round in her seat to sit facing forward and lets out her breath in one long sigh. It's been a peculiar trip, getting home, a weird day, but then all her days fall into these disconnected chunks and oddities. It's the wiring. Nine almost ten minutes without oxygen total. Two termination incidents. Two resurrection events. Wired weird wired. Weird. Outside the window Golden Gate Park slips past, trees dark mounds, strange shapes flowers, a distant tower picked out by floodlight, streetcars clanging by in the opposite direction, fast too fast. She looks away, concentrating on the brightly lit car and the passengers nearby, but she has to keep track of where she is, out of the corner of her eye: Lincoln Avenue, by now, free of the park. The streetcar groans as it loops round to Seventh Avenue. Time to count. If she forgets to count the cross-streets, she will lose her place in the complex book of the city. Two blocks, three. Sirens wailing, an ambulance darts past; the flash of lights and a roaring, a fire engine howls nearer and nearer. The streetcar lurches, quivering, to a stop. Her count is broken, and she feels the rage, rising on a sharp slivered tide of exhaustion, pounding in her ears and making her eyes fill with mist.

Deep breaths, clenching fists. Cold window touching the side of the head. Breathe slowly, count your breaths. Count count count, and the streetcar moving again, a sigh of metal wheels on metal tracks, a sigh of breath, releasing the rage. Tiffany sits upright, seeing the lights and the gleaming tracks of the N-car line on Judah Street, where she can start her count again and find a new point on the grid, her place in the story, her stop, her cross-street as she rises, gives the cord a smart pull, and slides her way through the crowded aisle to the back door. The last stage of the journey is the easiest: almost home, trotting in the cool night air down a blessedly dark street, houses, yellow windows, tiny patches of ivy and iceplant out front, or the defeated patches of concrete painted green, and the stairways rising up to doors. Door. A gray door, scabbing paint, beside a small window, covered with rusty iron bars, light gleaming through the window. Key, lock, two steps down. Home.

Inside, soft light on a blue rug, stained but clean, a dark green sofa, sagging into hollows, a coffee-table, chipped along one edge, but there are no pictures, no clock, no heaped magazines or shining comp monitors, no TV set in the wall, though distantly she hears electronic voices mutter. Her family followed doctor's orders when they set up this room. Nothing moves but a gray cat, rising from the sofa to hump its back and stretch one front paw at a time, yawning all pink-mouth and fangs. The smell of chicken and cabbage, rice steam, ginger and garlic, drifts on warm air.

"Hi Meebles. Daddy's home, huh?"

"Tiff?" Mark calls from the kitchen, a hint of worry.

"Yeah, it's me. Am I late?"

"Nah, not very." Relief shimmers in his voice. "You hungry?"

"Sure am. Smells good."

She takes off the Forty-Niner jacket, drops it on the floor, means to pick it up, forgets it and walks down the narrow hall, past the door to their bedroom, which was once the other half of a two-car garage, and into the kitchen, a bright gold pool of light over green linoleum and dark-wood cabinets and walls. Mark stands by the stove. A pillar — that's how she thinks of him — her pillar of strength, her tower, tall and heavy-set, dark skin, dark hair, safe and steady. Her Mark. She lets him enfold her with one massive arm, pull her tight, catch her good hand in one of his huge hands, hers slender and pale against his brown skin. He understands about the wiring and the bad hand and the lacing of scars, Mark who slogged through twelve years in the Marines, Mark who made it through the entire Brazilian war and another year in Israel. The bad hand. She pulls away, grinning.

"Got something to show you."

When she holds up the bad hand and clenches the fingers, he whoops and laughs and does a few quick steps of a war-dance.

"All right! Wish we had champagne."

"Wish I could drink it."

They laugh together. At times they both resent that her neuro drugs keep her from drinking, at those odd moments when she'd really like to join him in a beer during a game on TV or in a bar with friends, but now, seeing the scarred fingers move, neither of them mind the side-effects. While he turns the food out of the wok onto plates she squeezes herself into the chair between the tiny table and the blue-tiled wall. An ancient box TV sits on the opposite counter; a talking head mutters on screen.

"Want that off?"

"No, it's okay. Oh hell, sounds like the Yemen treaty's breaking down."

"Yeah. You surprised?"

She shakes her head no. She has grown up with war flaring and dying back in the Middle East, year after tedious year. News commentators speak images of brush fires and the waves of the sea; Tiffany thinks of it as a case of acne. You can scrub and scrub all you want, and maybe for a week your face looks fine, but one bite of chocolate and you're a goner again. On the TV, tiny images of planes flit inside a box of sky. Mark reaches over and turns it off.

"It was okay," Tiffany says.

He merely shrugs and sets full plates on the table.

"How was your day?"

"Okay." He sits down carefully on the rocky chair. "Put in a lot more applications. Something's bound to open up soon for a vet with my record. That's what they all say, anyhow. Sure as hell hope so. Can't see

myself working a farm. Sure don't want to reup."

They eat in silence. Tiffany finds the food tasteless, but she's used to that by now. The centers of her brain that control taste were hard hit, harder, perhaps, than those controlling any other sense, an odd glitch, difficult for the doctors to explain, since she can smell things clearly. Still, the warmth of the stir-fry comforts her, as does the spicy scent, the bright colors on the plate, neatly arranged — Mark is an excellent cook, or so those who can taste food tell her. She needs the comfort and the warmth because she feels sick and cold at the very thought of his re-enlisting, but aside, of course, from food, the rice and wheat that feed Europe and most of Asia, America's mercenary armies are its biggest export, and their weapons its last true industry. In the cities, jobs for men are few and far between, even for twice-wounded vets with a long list of commendations and medals. She herself will never fly to war again; she has lost all the high economic value her fine-tuned reflexes and steady hands once gave her. They cannot live forever on their combined benefits, hers of course much higher than his. Since he was only an enlisted man, his checks will stop soon. She has a lot of mustering out benefits left, years and years worth.

"Not like I need much of a job," he remarks. "Maybe two thousand a month would do it."

"We could scrape by on less. Wish you'd just marry me, and then we'd get another allotment for a dependent."

"Damned if I'm gonna leech off of your rank."

"Well, if you're gonna keep seeing it that way, you stubborn bastard."

They glare at each other over steaming plates in over-familiar anger. At length Mark sighs and begins shoveling food.

"Sorry," Tiffany says.

"Ah well y'know." A pause. "What's happening tomorrow?"

"The clinic's gonna be open. I've got to go in for physical rehab. Oh yeah. Did my mom call about Sunday?"

"She did, yeah. Amber and the kids are coming in on the morning train. So we'll go over to your mom's place in the afternoon, give the kids a chance to settle down after the trip. We're invited for dinner."

"Well, I'd like to stay, talk to Amber."

"Maybe we can bring a bottle of wine. And something for the kids. Chocolate if we can find some."

"Good idea."

Mark smiles, relieved that he can shore up some small thing against the constant tide of her mother's generosity. Tiffany chases a slice of carrot round her plate, spears it, eats it, remembering how carrots once tasted. The silence hangs over the table like the pool of light from the overhead lamp. Mark leans back and turns on the TV, letting the drone of bad news fill the space between them. A consortium of Korean investors is already negotiating with the president for thirty-three fighter squadrons and two divisions of infantry to guard their Yemenite refineries, one of the last lucrative installations in the Middle East. Pictures flash by, a holo scene of the haggling: serious American women in suits argue over the cost

of lives with serious Korean men in suits.

"Those dudes sure look nervous bout something, don't they?" Mark turns the box off again. "If I had me all that oil, I wouldn't be pinching the yen over the cost of GAMs."

"Makes you wonder, don't it? What they've found out there, past Jupiter, I mean."

"Oh hey, those big moons, they could be drowning in methane, but the Euros, they still gotta get it back here, don't they? And down to the surface. That stuff catches fire real easy."

"I wouldn't want to be flying the shuttles down, no. I suppose they could freeze it somehow. Guess it is frozen, from what you hear on the news. Titan is cold, man. Long way away from the sun."

"Yeah, but gas expands when you warm it up. Bringing it down in tanks or something, all that friction warming them up, it could be real dangerous."

"Yeah, but if they work it all out, those Euro dudes won't be taking anyone's orders anymore, will they? Could change a lot of things, man."

They both nod in the same rhythm, lean back in their chairs, smile, the brief gap bridged again. Mark gets up, takes the plates away, stacking them in the sink, where they will sit until the non-potable wash water gets turned on, round about 2100 hours. Although Tiffany lets him bring her the collection of pill bottles — too many and too slippery for her to manage — from the cupboard in the bathroom, she insists on getting up and fetching herself a glass of drinking water from the tank in the corner. She can set the glass on the little stand under the tap, turn the tap on with her good hand, turn it off again, then pick the glass back up without having to use the semi-bad hand at all. After Mark opens the vials, she shakes one or two of each kind of pill out, red and yellow and green on the table-top, takes them one variety at a time, while Mark checks them off on the printed list from the clinic. Some she takes every day, others go in descending sequences (seven one day, six the next, and so on), others still are occasional, every fourth day, twice a week, whatever Dr. Rosas and the pharmaceutical therapist have decided. She needs three glasses of water to get them all down.

Mark is just putting the bottles and the list away again when the vuphone rings, a harsh claw of noise ripping the kitchen. Both of Tiffany's hands clench tight as Mark rushes for it, hits the console, answering the call and turning off the screen all in one smooth smack of his hand.

"You want to see, I'll go in the living room."

"No, it's okay."

But she leaves anyway, limping into the green and blue refuge of the living room so he can see the person he's trying to talk to like normal people do. As she listens to his end of the call — a series of okays, mostly, though he certainly sounds happy about something — she wonders why she hates watching a vuphone so much. It's the wiring again, or so the doctor says, a glitch like the irrational rage and the memory lapses, a mere misfiring of neurons that makes her detest the sight of a familiar face on a screen, surrounded by a harsh black line to set it off from the various message fields. She can watch the number-called-from blinking on the screen with no problem, just as she can copy off any words or graphics transmitted; it's just the face, seeing the face and knowing that the face can see her, that fills her with a flood of ridiculous anger, a sheerly chemical rage. Yawning and stretching again, Meebles pads over to climb into her lap and sniff at her mouth, checking out just what she's been eating for dinner. Gently she pushes him away.

"Rude critter." But she smiles, stroking his soft back, rubbing his chin.

Meebles has just settled down in her lap when Mark trots in, moving as gracefully as a dancer in spite of his bulk. He has arranged his expression into a careful indifference.

"Okay, what is it, poker face?"

The grin breaks out, a flash of white.

"Got a call-back on a job. The one I liked the best. The warehouse dispatcher one." He holds up an enormous hand flat for silence. "It's just a call-back, not a promise. Another interview, the woman said, but hey, it sure sounds good."

"All right! Wish we had some champagne."

"Wish you could drink it."

And they laugh, so wild, so happy, both of them, that Meebles leaps up and stalks indignantly away.

CHAPTER TWO

When Tiffany arrives, the rehab clinic is just getting started for the day. At the check-in desk the computer is updating files, the comp-op is finishing her coffee, the physical therapist is leaning against the wall and talking about imported shoes with her respiratory counterpart. Tiffany takes her clinic card out of her shirt pocket and holds it out with the good hand.

"I knew you'd be here the minute we opened that door," the comp-op heaves a fake sigh. "No rest for the wicked."

"Tiff, I'll be right with you." The physical therapist's name is Gina. "They're bringing some new guys down from the hospital any minute now, and I want to get them started on the diagnostics."

New guys. More people who have died and come back to life. Tiffany feels her sympathy as an electric shudder, racing down her spine.

"Sure, of course. I'll just go in and start stretching out."

"Good, good. Be right there."

Although the work-out room sports an entire wall of mirrors, Tiffany has grown quite skilled at avoiding looking into them. She knows by heart each of the scars that lace her once-beautiful face. Plastic surgery has reduced their number and smoothed out the pink ridges pushed up by shrapnel shoving into flesh, but military surgery will only do so much cosmetic work, even for an officer, and she can't afford a private clinic for the rest. The scars on her bad leg she has to confront, because she must use the mirrors to check her posture and position throughout the session. Most of the feeling has returned to her shoulders, but her bad leg still seems to belong to someone else. If she forgets to keep watch over it, it drifts, and she ends up standing at an awkward and unbalanced angle. At least she does have both hands back again. Stretching and pointing with an arm that ends in sentient fingers turns out to be a much easier proposition than flapping a dead hand at a wall, so much so that she's humming along with the taped music by the time Gina comes in.

"Ohmigawd, look at those fingers! When?"

"Yesterday on the way home. I had my juice up in neuro, and they just started clenching up."

"That's so wonderful, it's super!" Dancing automatically to the music, Gina comes over. "All that hard work! See, told you it'd pay off."

Rather than hurt Gina's feelings, Tiffany allows herself to be hugged.

"Let's get you a squeezer for that hand. Oh, this is just so tremendous!"

The squeezer turns out to be a tennis ball with a chip tucked inside. Every time that Tiffany clenches her fingers around it, the chip records the amount of pressure she can generate and keeps a running total of the number of times she grips it.

"We'll download it into your file once a day and reset it. Once you get to a certain level, we'll upgrade and give you one that's harder to squish." Gina always uses words like squish. "Let me have your card so I can check this one out to you. I want you to keep it in your pocket all the time. Whenever you've got a moment, squish squish squish! The more you can do the better. But if your hand aches, stop for a while and like rub it. The hand I mean, not the squeezer."

Getting to take the ball home with her, having therapy that she can do by herself, makes Tiffany happier than she's been in a long while. Her good mood, however, lasts only a few minutes. She's just getting into her rhythm on the push'n'pedal bike when Gina reappears in the doorway, stands there watching, merely watching, except she's chewing on the side of her hand as she always does when she's anxious. Tiffany lets the bike slow and stop.

"Uh, yeah?"

"We need a favor from you. I mean, like, only if you feel you can. Y'know? One of the new guys, his morale is down. I mean, way down. Like, running on empty. Can I show you off?"

It takes Tiffany a long moment's struggle with herself before she agrees, nodding a yes rather than speaking it, swinging her bad leg carefully off the bike.

"I mean, if you really really don't mind. I don't want to bring you down, but god, Tiff, you're our big success, you know. And it does the other guys so much good when they see you."

She cannot begrudge Gina her pride in her work, cannot begrudge the possible good, either, that her own recovery, so successful beyond the first diagnosis, might do for this human being who, like her, has seen death only to be wrenched back to some semblance, some altered and limited version, of life. She follows Gina down the pale blue hall to the diagnostic room, painted pink, the corners carefully rounded, the shiny machinery hidden away behind blue screens except for the inevitable cables and connections. The new patient sits in an ordinary powered wheelchair rather than an electrochair — a good sign in itself, as is the tilt of his head, and his defiant scowl. His hands, too, clasp the ends of the chair arms in white-knuckled rage.

"Bob...Major Wong, I mean. This is Captain Owens."

He swivels slightly to glance at her, forces a smile, nods at her answering smile. His face — the dark

bang of hair, the dark eyes, thin mouth, strong jaw — look perfectly normal, untouched, but the back of his head puffs out hairless, bright pink and engraved with the scars of old sutures, as if, perhaps his skull had gotten itself crushed, and the hunks and splinters pounded into the vulnerable brain lying just below.

"Hello, sir," Tiffany says. "If you can't answer don't worry about it. I couldn't talk when I got here."

His head jerks up a little, and he stares full into her face, searches her face, really, as if he were reading a text written on her mouth.

"It's true," Gina said. "She couldn't even say yes and no like you can. Honest cross my heart."

His mouth twitches in a smile.

"Can you stand, sir?"

The noise he makes sounds more like the moo of a cow, cut short, than a no, but Tiffany can understand it. Even if Gina hadn't primed her, she still would have understood — another good sign.

"Neither could I."

Tears fill his eyes, spill helplessly as he jerks one arm, can't make it reach his face, mutters a noise that might be "god almighty," wrenches the arm up somehow almost to his chin. Gina darts forward to help, to wipe the tears away on one of her omnipresent kleenexes. Although Tiffany turns and walks out fast, she knows she's done the right thing. When you cry, it means you care, and when you care, you want to live. Her hand finds the squeezer in her pocket and clenches. Hand. Back of the head. God almighty. Fat lot of good he can do. Ub god. She does not want to remember the back of his head, the reconstituted bone, the pink puff, scraped clean of the ever-so-thin layer of cells that carry whatever coloring a person's skin might have. She makes herself think of other things, repeats words that fill the blank screen of her memory with other pictures. Don't think of a white horse. Her sister would say those words and giggle, sitting on the edge of the top bunk and swinging stockinged feet. White horses. Green fields, fenced. Here now, you are here now, in the work-out room. See the metal arms and levers of the equipment, hear the music rocking out from hidden speakers. Don't look at the mirrors.

After long hours on the push'n'pedal bike, the flat boards and the pull-up bar, after more juice in the rehab lounge and a fastidiously nutritional lunch as well, she puts her new squeezer in the pocket of the Forty-Niner Jacket and slides the semi-bad hand in after it. She has plenty of room to grab the ball and clench her fingers, but she stops at the mirror by the check-in desk and watches herself for a moment.

"That look funny?" Tiffany says to the receptionist. "Seeing my fingers move in there like that?"

"Well, I wouldn't do it in a crowded place or anything, no."

"Okay. That's why I asked."

The receptionist smiles, hands her card back, hesitates.

"Gina tells me you went down to see Major Wong," she says at last.

"Yeah. Sure did."

"Real nice of you. He's a hero, they tell me. Saved all kinds of lives. Guess we'll find out how sooner or

later. A real hero, Doctor says."

Tiffany smiles, nods, turns and leaves as fast as she can manage. A real hero. Not like me. The plant going up, tower of white light. Shoulda stopped them. How? In a half-armed plane? She shakes her head until she trembles and can forget. Outside the world lies wrapped in fog, the sunlight blessedly gone, all bright colors blurred, all sounds muted. In the fog the firestorm in Tiffany's brain dies fast, leaving her confident enough to decide to stop at a bookstore and look for HUNTER'S NIGHT. As she walks downhill she fishes in her pocket, finds the card for the import store and checks the address: too far away. She'll save that one for next week. On the other hand, she does remember a large used bookstore just off her usual streetcar line, just a couple of blocks on the far side of Golden Gate Park. She can even remember the cross-street and the stores that lie on either side of it. Not that she trusts the memory, of course. The wiring may well have betrayed her again, and she braces herself for the shock, the disappointment.

Which come. The bookstore indeed exists, a narrow aisle of a building, and indeed, on one side a delicatessen still displays rows of hanging ducks and trays of pork buns in its window, but on the other side stands a dry cleaner, a dusty faded store smelling of chemicals and old cloth, that must have been there for years and years. The drugstore she's remembering is gone, obviously never existed except as a ghost or hallucination in the wiring. Somehow her torn brain built colored images of that drugstore, added the smell of perfumes and hair sprays, shrimp chips and cheap candy, fleshed out the scene with a crabby clerk and her pimply daughter. Betrayed by the mind's eye. Again. Eye. That will not see. That sees what does not exist. Pluck it out. For a long time Tiffany stands on the sidewalk and stares at the dry cleaner, until the elderly Chinese man behind the counter notices her and looks up, peering through the philodendron leaves that ring the window round.

Tiffany flees into the used bookstore, a gap-toothed cavern in the earth, glowing with phosphorescence, filled with boulders and stalactites. The smell of dusty paper and humid plastic reassures her, soothes the neurons firing in disordered clumps, staunches the flow of adrenaline pouring into her system, until she can focus her eyes in the dim electric light and realize that what she is really seeing is the merchandise. Near the window stands a counter, with a clerk perched on a stool behind the computer. Down the length of the shop run shelves, piled high, sagging, blocked by stacks and cartons of books and paper-books. The clerk looks up, smiles, returns to reading her news cartridge. Tiffany turns sidewise, inches herself down the length of the store between piles of cartons, and finds the science fiction section exactly where she remembered it. For a moment her eyes well tears of relief. She wipes them dry, finds her piece of paper, and begins trying to match titles.

No HUNTER'S NIGHT, but she feels only resigned. She is beginning to consider that her memories of this book might be as illusory as those of the drugstore. Why her mind would bother to create imaginary novels and places she cannot explain, any more than Dr. Rosas can offer any reasons that make sense. For the first time in her year's fight back, she begins to wonder if her doctors really do know all the answers. That comforting catchphrase, the prayer or litany that's kept her going, her lifeline, even, "it's in the wiring" suddenly rings empty and dead.

"Why is it in the wiring? That's what counts."

She's spoken aloud, and the clerk has heard her, or at least, heard sound drifting from the aisle. A young woman caped in uncombed black hair, she slips off her stool and hurries down.

"Can I help you?"

"Well, uh, maybe. I'm looking for a book by a dude named Albert Allonsby. HUNTER'S NIGHT."

"Ess Eff?"

Tiffany thinks for a moment before she can decipher the abbreviation.

"Yeah, that's right."

"I really like that stuff. You do, too, huh? I never woulda thought. . . well, I mean."

"Yeah, why wouldn't I?"

"Well, sorry, I dunt wanna be rude, but you're a vet, right? I mean, you musta done stuff that was real exciting on your own. A lot flashier than just reading books."

"I guess. I was a pilot, and I loved flying. That was flash. But you know something? Sitting around, waiting to fly? That was boring, superboring. We all read a lot, while we were waiting. To pretend we were somewhere else."

"You dint watch TV?"

"The hostiles woulda picked it up, homed missiles on it."

"Oh." Her lips part, and she stares, just for a moment, before she catches herself. "But Allonsby. Wait. I know him. I've even read some of his stuff, but I never knew he wrote novels. I mean, like, I've read short stories of his, just not a whole book."

"Well, I picked it up when I was overseas."

"Oh. I getcha, a Euro edition or something. Say, if you find it, and if you're over this way, let me know, okay? I sure did like his stories."

Her relief at finding out that at least Allonsby himself exists is so strong that Tiffany would do the clerk a lot bigger favor than that if the chance presented itself. As she walks down to the streetcar stop, she pieces together the small fragments that repair another bit of her shattered mind. A real Albert Allonsby writes science fiction stories; he most likely lives in the European States; his novel, HUNTER'S NIGHT, most likely exists as well, simply in a hard-to-find edition that was never imported into America. By concentrating on this syllogism, by repeating it over and over, she can make herself forget the missing drugstore.

At the streetcar stop a crowd stands and mills, women with shopping bags, women with kids in backpacks, women clutching the hands of larger children or hissing orders in their direction. Tiffany walks a few paces away, where she can stay by the curb and build herself a small booth of privacy. When she shoves her hands into her jacket pockets she finds the squeezer and smiles. Hand. Her hand, and working again. She has a prize to take home, a tangible proof of her progress.

"Tiff! Hey, how are you?"

The voice strikes her as utterly unfamiliar: male, but soft; soft, but scratchy. She looks up to find a young man, ever so barely familiar, smiling at her. Tall, with blonde hair greased back, wearing black leather pants, a red silk shirt — very flash, this young man, and, she supposes, handsome in a way, but she dislikes his eyes. They are so pale that she can't tell if they're blue or gray, and they stare, glitter, never

blink, never waver, until her own eyes seem to itch in sympathy. When she does blink a couple of times, then, at last, so does he.

"It's me," he says. "Don't you remember? Nick, oP Nick Harrison. Hey, heard you were, uh, wounded in the war. Sure sorry bout that. Uh, say, do you remember me?"

"No, sure dunt. I'm real sorry." By now Tiffany has grown used to this bleak routine, of running across acquaintances only to find that the wiring has wiped itself clean of their memory. "Nick, honest, it's nothing personal. Okay? I'm afraid I got shot up pretty bad, and there's just a hell of a lot of people I dunt remember."

"Well, sure, I mean, you hear about stuff like that on TV. I understand, yeah."

He tilts his head a little to one side and watches her unblinking while she tries to follow down the memory trail leading back to the part of her history that includes him. Behind her, a streetcar clangs, hissing with brakes as it glides to a stop.

"I better go," Tiffany says, turning.

"No, wait! Hey, can't I buy you a cup of coffee? How long you been home?"

Although she hesitates, taking his offer — no doubt intended kindly — would mean telling the story once again, remembering the story all over again. Black smoke rising. Missiles screaming down. She keeps turning, keeps walking toward the streetcar, but she is seeing the wing of her plane fall away, then a flare of white light and a sound shattering her life and mind.

"Whoops! Young lady, watch out!"

"Oh god! I'm sorry."

She has walked straight into someone climbing down from the streetcar. For a moment she can only stammer and blush as the old man picks up his round black hat, brushes it off, and settles it on his mass of gray hair. Sidelocks and a long beard, a black suit — the rabbi, smiling at her, clasping his hands in front of him, bowing at her.

"Jeez, I am so sorry, mister."

"No problem. At least you had the good sense to run away from the devil, huh? I've been looking all over for you."

The streetcar clangs a warning of imminent departure.

"Let it go. We've got to talk." The rabbi takes her arm and swings her around. "We'll go have a nice cup of coffee in one of these cafes."

All at once she remembers where she last saw Nick, out on the streetcar island, arguing with this same old man. His arms crossed over his chest, Nick stands glowering at them, his pale eyes unblinking, his mouth twisted into the ugliest scowl she's ever seen on a human face. If indeed he is human. What did the old man say? Run away from the devil? Just as if he knew her thoughts, Nick smiles, and draped in that smile he looks nothing but human, and a good-looking guy at that.

"Hey, I take it I'm invited to this coffee klatch?"

"You'll take it whether you're invited or not, won't you?" the rabbi says. "I know you. Tiffany, come along, my dear. Oh, and by the way, my name is Akiba."

Picking up speed the streetcar runs past. Since here on a Saturday it'll be a long time before the next car, Tiffany decides that she might as well go along. If nothing else, she as curious as all hell...hears herself use that image, feels her mind shy away out of some brute instinct, some impulse that seems to come from the deepest level of her mind, as if the neurons and the axions themselves recognize Mr. Nick Harrison, as if her very DNA fears him and his bleached unblinking stare.

Yet the caf6 they find is so ordinary, so normal in every detail that Tiffany feels that sudden insight slip away and fade. Scented with steam and peanut oil, the narrow little place sports pale green walls, hung with pictures of Mexican scenery and calendars of girls holding bottles of beer. Neo-samba music pounds out of the speaker panel hanging over the back door. Behind the counter an old woman is twisting wonton; a young one polishes an espresso machine with a spotless white rag. She turns and smiles, tossing the rag down, as Tiffany and the two men come in. The three of them slip into a bright red poly-foam booth while she brings menus, which the rabbi waves away.

"You got any coffee today?" Tiffany says.

"Sure do. Hawaiian, the dealer told me. Maybe it is. Wasn't gonna ask too many questions."

"Well, as long as it's coffee." The rabbi seems honestly puzzled by this exchange. "Coffee all round, then, with milk for them, but not for me, and I suppose, pastries?"

"Pan dulce or pork buns?" the waitress says. "All we got left."

Nick snickers with a twist of lip.

"Just the sweet bread, miz. Though I dunno." This last to the rabbi. "You can't be keeping kosher if you'd eat here. And with me."

The rabbi ignores him, struggles with a coat pocket, then brings out a wad of dollar bills, which he tosses onto the table. The waitress stares, wrinkling her nose against a smell of mould and damp earth.

"Cash? I dunno bout that. Lot of paperwork for three coffees."

"It's not good?" The rabbi sits up straight and glares. "It's old, yes, but they said it should still be good."

Nick covers his mouth with a paper napkin and chokes back laughter. Tiffany uses her good hand to sweep the wad back to the old man.

"I'll pay," she announces. "Just bring the coffee, okay? and I'll get out my card."

Her turn for the struggle, with her wallet stuck deep in a pants pocket, but at last she frees it from her keys and pulls it out. When she looks up, her prize in hand, the girl is back behind the counter, fiddling with the machine. Her head reflects, a stretched balloon-shape, on the copper cylinder. Nick leans forward and jerks a thumb at the rabbi.

"Where you get those bills? The earth spirits dig them up for you?"

"Of course. A tin box that someone buried during those riots they had in New York. So the spirits can't keep track of currency laws! What do you expect from them, anyway?"

Nick snorts. It is at this point that Tiffany begins to wonder if she's hallucinating the entire scene. The cafe, of course, is real — she's passed it and looked in many times — but these two men might be elaborate constructions of her own mind, as detailed and solid as those memories of the drugstore. Never before has she hallucinated an event in the present moment rather than the past, although, she reflects, for all she knows she has indeed done so and simply never caught herself at it. This hallucination theory pleases her much more than the idea that she might be having a snack with the Devil and Rabbi Akiba, the great Talmudic scholar, or was he a Kabalist? Both, Tiffany thinks. It seems to her that she has two sets of memories, broken shards dating back to her time in Israel, when she felt obliged to learn a little something about the history and great men of the place that she just might die defending. Which was he again? She knows she read it somewhere, can't remember, only sees in her mind words that tell of men in black sitting under trees and discussing holy things. Whether those things were the sobrieties of earthly law or ecstatic visions of the throne of God she no longer knows.

Doubtless it doesn't matter, either, because she wants to believe that this elderly man in black does not exist, no matter what name he might attach to himself. Unfortunately, the waitress returns with three cups of coffee, one black, on a flowered tray and a chipped plate of pan dulce, smelling of cinnamon and oranges. Tiffany cannot make herself believe that she's hallucinating the waitress, especially when the girl takes her debit card in warm fingers, or that the waitress hallucinated the order. Tiffany turns her head away to avoid looking at the row of red numbers that blink on the transmit box hanging from the girl's belt. She does, however, remember to take her card back.

"Three cups spresso, thirty bucks. Plate a pan dulce, three-fifty," the waitress says. "That be all?"

"Thirty?" Reb Akiba snaps. "Tiffany my dear, I can't let you pay for this. I meant this to be my treat."

The waitress seems to be about to speak, then shrugs away a problem that's not hers to solve. She heads back to the counter and picks up her polishing rag again.

"Look," Nick whispers. "Tiffany can use that cash on the street. Plenty of places that'll take it, no questions asked."

"Paying a debt isn't breaking the law, no matter what the tax-collectors here think of paper currency." Akiba flashes him a surprisingly youthful grin. "I know what you were trying to do, creature, but what's that phrase? No dominoes."

"No dice." Scowling, Nick shoves the wad of bills back in Tiffany's direction. "Take it, kid. Won't do him any good."

With a glance in the waitress's direction — she is studiously ignoring them all — Tiffany pockets the bills. At this point it occurs to her that she might indeed be having real coffee with real men while hallucinating or distorting their words.

"Uh, look," she says. "It's hard for me to really understand you guys, okay? It's the wiring. When you been dead a couple of times, you kinda lose parts of your brain."

"Oh, I know, my dear, I know. I've died, too."

"Long time ago now," Nick puts in. "What? Couple thousand years?"

"Something like that. You lose track. It was before the Romans took the Temple, wasn't it?"

"How could you forget that? Jeez."

"Wait a minute," Tiffany says. "I thought Rabbi Akiba lived in the thirteenth century."

"No, my dear, you're confusing the real me with the fictional version in those books by that sephardic weirdo. The ZOHAR. And Moses something."

"De Leon," Nick says. "But I don't get it. How you could lose a piece of big data like the year you died?"

"You do forget those things. Dates, names, details."

"Details? When the temple went down is a detail?"

"It's become one now, yes. Besides, how would you know? You've never even been alive to die."

"Uh, excuse me?" Tiffany breaks in. "I'm not understanding you. I can kinda tell."

"You're understanding us perfectly well, my dear. You simply don't want to believe you are, and I can't say I blame you." Akiba frowns into his coffee cup. "I think I'll let this cool a little."

Automatically Tiffany drinks some of her own coffee, not, of course, that she can taste it. She can, however, feel the heat and register a certain sharp sensation which, she supposes, once would have been bitterness.

"But anyway," Nick says. "We don't have a lot of time. You going to start, old man or should I?"

"I will. You'll only interrupt soon enough." The rabbi picks up a circle of pan duke, blesses it under his breath, and breaks it in two. When he hands half to Tiffany, the suddenly warm bread smells of roses. "Tell me, my dear. Do you find yourself getting confused these days? Are you suffering from bouts of disorienta-tion?"

He sounds so much like a TV commercial that Tiffany nearly laughs. To cover she takes a bite of the bread: still tasteless. Somehow, she realizes, she'd been expecting it would be otherwise after his blessing.

"If I could simply cure you, believe me, I would," the rabbi says with his mouth full. "Can't." He swallows quickly. "No, I wasn't reading your mind. You spoke aloud."

"Damn."

"Don't say that here, please." Nick is grinning. "It gives me ideas."

"Shut up, you. But Tiffany, my question?"

"Well, yeah, I do. It's the brain damage."

"Do you ever feel that you should be somewhere else? Or that you're in the right place, but things are wrong around you?"

"At least once a day. My doctor says..."

Nick is grinning; Reb Akiba is smiling but in a sad sort of way; all at once Tiffany can't remember what she was going to tell them. She is possessed by a sudden idea, that everything Dr. Rosas has told her is not so much wrong as irrelevant.

"I don't suppose you know much about physics?" Reb Akiba goes on. "Quantum physics. The interrelationship of waves and discrete particles. How God created the universe with the letters of the alphabet."

"You're mixing metaphors again, old man." Nick winks at Tiffany. "You gotta watch him, you know. He does it all the time."

"Shut up, wretched creature! Let me start again. Tiffany, you must have read some Moses de Leon. How?"

"I ran across him when I was stationed in Israel. I was there for a real long time, you know. I decided I wanted to learn Hebrew, so I could talk to the Israeli pilots and support people. In their own language, I mean. Like, a lot of people spoke English, but not real well. And so, I took this class, and I made some friends, and one of them belonged to this Kaballistic study group. She didn't tell me much — "

"Not to one of the goyim," Nick mutters.

"That old secret knowledge slur? The lore's all been published in books, English books." Reb Akiba fixes him with a nasty look. "So don't overdramatize, will you? Her friend probably just didn't want to bore the poor girl stiff. Tiffany, you must have read de Leon in English."

"Yeah, I did, just some selections. My friend gave me some books. I mean, when you're just sitting around, waiting to fly, you'll read anything, you know? Just to kinda keep your mind alive. But what's goyim? That's not a Hebrew word, is it?"

"No, dear, it's Yiddish. A dead language now. But—"

"It means," Nick interrupts, "people who aren't Jewish. I mean, it meant that when the language was — "

"Will you shut up?" The rabbi's voice growls like penned thunder. "As long as you keep interrupting we'll get nowhere." He glances Tiffany's way. "He can't help confusing things, you know. It's in his nature."

Much to her surprise, Nick winces and pouts.

"It's not like I want to. It's not fair." He looks at Tiffany with watery eyes. "Part of my punishment. It has a rotten sense of humor, if you ask me."

"It?"

"He means the Godhead. He can't say the name, you know."

"It suits It better, anyway," Nick snaps. "It can't be a he or a she or even a they. It's beyond all that —"

dualities, categories, all that stuff. And jeez, It never lets you forget it, either. It stinks smug, I tell you. So what's It doing with a name, anyway? I mean, look, if It's transcendent It's transcendent, and there's no two ways about it."

When Tiffany laughs at the joke, Nick grins; he would seem charming if only he would blink his eyes.

"You've disrupted the line of thought again," the rabbi says quietly. "Now where were we?"

"Moses de Leon and quantum physics," Tiffany says. "You asked me what I knew about quantum physics, and somehow or other we got into Kaballism."

"Perfectly logical connection," Nick mutters.

The rabbi waggles a hand at him for silence.

"Well, I dunt know much about either," Tiffany says. "I read just a little bit when I was in Israel, about Kaballism, I mean, cause Miriam was into it. I took a lot of science in school, because I was on the Air Services track, but I dunt remember it now."

"What's the diff between Air Force and Air Services?" Nick says.

"None."

"Oh yeah?"

They stare at each other for a long moment. He knows. Oh god, he knows. Suddenly she remembers a detail, no, not a detail: the crux, the all-important thing, the one overwhelming difference. Air Services planes always go fully armed. Lots of women pilots in the Service. Combat pilots. All of us. Failure? Oh no. I shot them down. Oh my god, I shot them down. No way that power plant shoulda gone up like that.

"Come on, Tiff." The Devil is smiling at her. "Level with me. You know — "

Tiffany cannot speak, cannot stop him, cannot save herself.

"Shut up, creature!"

Nick bites his lip hard and falls silent.

"That's better." Reb Akiba gives him a brief, approving smile. "Parallel worlds, Tiffany. What about those? Alternate universes. Ever hear of them?"

"Well, yeah, but they're not real, are they? I mean, it's just one of those ideas math makes you get. Logical necessities? Oh, hell, I used to know the right name. Something like, null-content concepts? No, that's not it, either."

Akiba sighs.

"Let's try the alphabet instead. Twenty-two letters, well, twenty-six here in your country. Right? Yet hundreds of thousands of words. It's all in the way you mix them up, all in the pattern they make. Rabbi, rabbit. If you had an infinite number of letters, wouldn't you have an infinite number of words? Worlds,

words. Not a lot of difference there, either. Well, It, the Transcendent One, created an infinite set of letters. So the words It spoke became infinite. Some times these names shift back and forth, or they split into new words, because It is pure possibility. And because It is It, what It speaks as possible becomes actual. Likewise the quantum equations. They shift, open possibilities, possible events, possible objects. But they can't all be actual — not in the same world. Somewhere they have to be actual, mind, but not all in same world." He pauses, taken with a thought. "I don't suppose there'd be room."

Tiffany stares in complete and utter incomprehension. In her mind she sees a picture of the rabbi carrying a rabbit; nothing more.

"On the other hand," the rabbi goes on, "not all possibilities do become actual. Words, worlds, all created out of the same pieces, the same letters, but some don't make any sense. When you mix up letters randomly, a lot of the combinations you get won't be real words, right? Rabbi, rabbit, but not rabbo or rebbot. And it's the same for worlds. Now, I don't know why. The Transcendent One never spoke those names, I suppose. I never asked It."

"Messy, that's all it was." Nick's voice drips contempt. "Jeez, a lousy mistake, leaving half-realized possibilities lying all over the universe. Sloppy."

"Hah! And I suppose you could have done half as well?"

"I never said that! I just pointed out Its lousy mistake, and It's been hounding me ever since."

"Poor little snakey-wakey."

Nick starts to make a sound very like a hiss, then chokes it back. Reb Akiba laughs. Tiffany begins to feel that everything she's ever believed or thought, the totality that she calls mind, is shrinking, fading, glowing smaller and smaller, turning to a tiny core or kernel, as small as a mustard seed. Do something. Say something. Take control of this talk. Something .

"What mistake?"

"When It didn't know Its own strength." Nick jumps right in. "When the vessels broke and the worlds-to-be all shattered. None of this crap woulda happened, you know, if it wasn't for that."

"I wouldn't call that a mistake," the rabbi snaps. "Neither of us are in any position to judge why It does something."

"Oh bullshit! Of course it was a mistake. There was law, there was order, there was light, waves and waves of wonderful light — and all of a sudden, bang! The vessels shatter! Chaos! All these messy forces! Discrete particles! Messy little souls running around everywhere! Alternate universes! Quanta! Photons!" Nick turns dramatically in the booth toward the aisle.

"Don't spit!" Reb Akiba barks. "We're inside, you know."

"Sorry." Nick collects himself with a cough. "This argument's just so familiar. I keep thinking we're all sitting around under those plane trees again."

Tiffany glances toward the counter to find the two women staring, the stack of wonton skins, the bowl of filling forgotten between them.

"Look, you guys, maybe you could like keep your voices down?"

"Of course, and my dear, you have my apologies." The rabbi glances at the women. "And so do you, dear ladies. I'm afraid that my students here take all these abstract things rather seriously."

The old woman grabs the bowl, slaps the stack on top of it, and heads, with slow dignity, toward the back room. The waitress smiles.

"Padre, you guys be from Berkeley?"

"I've taught there, yes. At the Theological Union."

"Oh, well. That explains it, then." She picks up her rag and goes back to her polishing. "They all nuts, in Berkeley."

Although he makes an effort to hush his voice, Nick is glaring as he leans across the table.

"What makes you think It had a reason?"

"And did I ever say I thought It did? Just the opposite."

"In civilized company the word 'why' generally implies a reason."

"Since when are you civilized company?"

They glare at each other over raised cups of coffee. Tiffany feels pains running from one side of her forehead to the other. She finds the tennis ball in her pocket, wraps the fingers of the bad hand round it, and begins squeezing; oddly enough the exercise helps her headache as well. Reb Akiba turns to her and frowns in thought.

"Let's go back to the way you keep feeling disoriented. Tell me, do you ever feel like you come from someplace else?"

"No."

"What? Not really?"

"I mean, I grew up here. Of course I belong here. It's just that, well, sometimes the city's not right. I mean, things are gone. Other things are there."

"Aha! A close match but not exact, eh?"

"Match for what?"

"The other city. The one you've got mapped in your memories."

Again she feels words slip away and shatter like so much dropped china.

"The hell with this." Nick leans across the table. "She don't even need to understand it. Tiff, you're in the wrong world, that's all. You remember that explosion? The missiles, hitting that fusion power plant? Did you realize that it was a fusion plant? The Israelis are way ahead of everyone else in this world and yours

on that. That's why the Emirate sent the suicide squad in. To take out that particular plant with nuclear warheads. Yeah that's right, forbidden nuclear warheads. And in this world, the one we're sitting in now, they did it. The force, the energy, that got itself released was... was huge, enormous, more'n you, more'n any of us can understand. If you'd really been in this world when that plant went up, there wouldn't have been enough left of you to find. You got to have wondered how you coulda survived that explosion."

"Well, no, I dint, but — I mean, till now — wait a minute. I didn't survive. Fucking thing killed me, man."

"No, that was the impact when you bailed out too late. Almost death by natural causes, by comparison. That explosion woulda taken your corpse apart molecule by molecule. That's what happened to the other pilot. The one with the unarmed plane. The other Tiffany. The other you, sweetheart."

He sits back, panting a little from the effort of speaking clearly. Her words fail. The rabbi's questions, the Devil's talk of other outcomes to the same battle, seem to run together, to swell inside her mind and grow like some greasy bubble, filling all the available space, smashing even the possibility of other thoughts against her skull, cramming and strangling until they die. In her hand the squeezer beeps in protest. She lets it go.

"Don't bully," Reb Akiba says to Nick. "She has to understand, so she can make her decision."

"Decision, hell!" Nick snaps. "She's got to go back, and that's that! Look, girl. You don't belong here. You're out of place. The other Tiffany, the one who lived here, she was supposed to die, yeah, and she did, blown all to hell. Not enough of her left to find. But somehow or other, you got sucked through to take her place, in some kind of backlash after the explosion. That's all wrong."

"Wrong? Hell, it's crazy." The bubble breaks. "Are you talking about two mes?"

"A very large number of yous, but only two are involved in this." The rabbi glares at Nick. "I was trying to build up to the truth gently."

"And getting nowhere, old man. Tiff, you've got to go back. The alternate worlds are trying to snap back together, anyway. It's like, what? Lemme think. Ever seen a bowl of cake batter, something thick like that? You draw a knife through it, it looks like it's gonna separate into two parts, but they ooze and sort of smooch themselves back together. Well, the worlds are kinda like that. All you gotta do is go with the flow."

"Now wait just a minute! If you think I'm gonna end up where I was a year ago — I couldn't even stand up, couldn't even take a piss by myself, you crazy, mister. Dunt care who you are."

"Who said anything about that?" Nick snaps. "I can't turn back Time. No one can, not even Akiba. We're going to take you back to right now. Or what's now there. But you won't change any. You'll be exactly the you you are now."

"That's where he comes in." The rabbi flaps a hand in Nick's direction. "We'll have to have some sort of story to explain your return. You've been missing there for over a year."

"The Prince of Lies, that's me, kid. I'll think of something. I don't know what, yet, but once we're there, back in the stinking desert, I'm sure I'll get inspired." He looks down, eyes lowered in creditable modesty. "It's a gift."

"I'm not going anywhere with you, fella." Tiffany stands up. "I mean, like, get stuffed!"

To a babble of protests she slides free of the booth and heads out, forcing the bad leg to move fast by sheer will. Ahead, the door: oblong of gray light, safety. With the good hand she reaches out, grabs the jamb, and pulls herself through, glances back to see Reb Akiba shoving Nick down into his seat while the waitress trots over, frowning and troubled.

"Her choice." The rabbi's last words drift her way. "Has to be her choice."

With a pull Tiffany swings herself out the door and manages, somehow, to run for the first time in over a year. At the intersection the streetcar clangs and trembles, jerks forward, stops, and opens its door. Blessed safety. She stumbles up the steps, slides her FastPass through the slot, and lurches down the car, falling into her favorite seat by the back door just as the car glides forward. On the sidewalk stand Nick and the rabbi. They wave. The car clangs and turns, picking up speed on the open track. They disappear. Tiffany presses her hands to her eyes and wonders why she isn't crying. The bad leg flames pain, her lungs ache, she has just lived through the most vivid hallucination of her entire recovery, a symptom that stands like a warning buoy marking passage into a whole new ocean of disease. Dr. Rosas warned her that there would be stages, periods of change to be endured like storms. This, she supposes, is the beginning of one of them. Yet, deep in her mind, she feels no fear, not even her usual resolve to endure pain as best she can. A clot of rebel neurons keeps firing, keeps sending a message down lines of traitor brain cells, repeating against all reason and all will: at last, we have answers .

"Not true. Not answers. They weren't real."

All around her passengers turn to stare, accusing eyes of women peering over books held up to painted faces or over shopping bags balanced on laps.

Crammed in beside them children giggle. Tiffany scrunches down in her seat and stares at the slotted view through the doors across from her: green stripe of trees outside, gray strip of insulation on the window, blue stripe of sky, white strip of door. Strip, stripe. She refuses to think of an imaginary rabbi. No white horses. No brown bears, no California bears on flags in other worlds. None of those. Not even her victory. She refuses to — she must — she will sacrifice the knowledge that she won her last dogfight even if in the end they took her down with them. The eye must not see. Only the door. Window. Her hand, clenching on the tennis ball buried in her pocket, warm pocket, rough-napped ball, the pain in cramped tendons as she squeezes the ball over and over, harder and harder. By the time she reaches her streetcar stop, she has managed to forget many things. Not all, no, but many.

At the door she fumbles for her keys, reassures herself that her wallet still lies deep in the cargo pocket, pulls the keys out and allows the bad hand to hold them for a moment, then transfers them back to the good hand and opens the door. As she steps inside she hears from the kitchen voices, Mark and another man, and the electronic roar and mutter of a sport on TV.

"Yo!" she calls out.

The electronic mutter stops, victim to the mute.

"Tiff?" Mark's voice. "We got company."

When Tiffany limps into the kitchen, LoDarryl, one of Mark's old war buddies, slides out from behind the table so she can have her usual chair. Tall, rangy, the elder by some two years, he's much lighter than Mark, almost white-looking, really, except for his tight black hair, which he wears in dreadlocks. He also has a perpetual limp, courtesy of a land mine during the Brazilian War, which left him with an artificial left

foot. There wasn't enough left of the original to reattach. Not

enough of her to find. Tiffany shakes her head hard.

"Mark, you butthole, turn that box off," LoDarryl says. "It's bothering Tiff."

"No, it's not," Tiffany says. "It's okay. Really."

"It's only jai lai." Mark leans back dangerously in his chair and flips the muted TV off. "Sit down, hon. Almost time for your pills."

"Is it that late? Jeez."

"Yeah, it is. I was starting to get worried."

"I'm sorry. I ran into this guy at the streetcar stop. I guess we used to know him. Or I did. Nick, his name is, white dude, blond and flash looking. I can't remember his last name. Ring a bell?"

Mark and LoDarryl share a blank look and a shrug.

"Someone from school, maybe," Tiffany goes on. "And I had coffee with another friend, an old man, a rabbi, actually, is what he is. Then I hit a bookstore, but no HUNTER'S NIGHT."

"Well, one day maybe." LoDarryl pulls a rickety stool over to the table and perches on it. "I just stopped by for a minute. Wanted to talk to this man of yours about this idea of mine."

"Another weird scheme," Mark breaks in, grinning. "From the World Renowned LoDarryl Think-Tank. You know what that means."

LoDarryl makes an obscene gesture in his direction, but he too smiles.

"No, this one's real, Tiff. Honest. I applied for the license and everything. Dump running."

"Oh god! Mark, you're not gonna — "

"I already told him no. Dunt worry."

"Well, hell, you gotta do something, man." LoDarryl leans forward, the smile gone. "It's real good money. Nowhere near as dangerous as Brazil."

"You dunt see me going back to Brazil, neither."

LoDarryl ignores the comment.

"Not dangerous at all so long as I get the license and stick to the legal areas. Lot of good stuff, man, sitting in them old dumps. They threw away all kinds a good stuff, back in the old days. You get a lot of cash for aluminum. Enough to pay your expenses, and then all the rest is gravy."

"To cook all them rats they got out there, huh?" Mark lets his grin fade. "I know you, man. Just how long is it gonna be before the restricted areas start calling to you?"

LoDarryl manages, barely, an injured look.

"Nothing like that, man. All on the up and up."

Yeah sure, Tiffany thinks, oh yeah I just bet .

"Look," LoDarryl goes on. "I may be greedy but I ain't dumb. I ain't gonna .go burn bits off my self with toxics, and I ain't gonna get myself rad poisoning, neither. I dint live through Brazil to die up in Altamont running junk."

"Not on purpose, no." Mark's grin is gone. "You never step in dogshit on purpose, neither."

LoDarryl sighs and looks away.

"Well, hell," he says after a moment. "Man's gotta do something, dunt he? I can't sign up for the Valley and work the agribiz, not with this foot. I ain't real keen on living in a barracks again, anyway, even if they ain't nobody shooting at me this time. What else is there, man? You go to the Army, or you go to the Valley, and if you stay in the city cause you can't do either, well, hell, you gotta do something. I been looking for a job a lot longer'n you have, man. I'm giving up. Gonna make my own damn job."

Unspoken the thought hangs there: like you'll have to, one of these days. Mark merely looks at him for an answer.

"Ah well." LoDarryl gets up, shoving the stool back. "Gonna be running long home. Let Tiff take her pills in peace. Tuesday night, now, you guys coming over? We gonna watch the big game on the big screen. Manny Mike, he got it running again."

"Yeah? Cool. Well, we'll see, buddy. Depends on how late Tiff gets home, how she feels."

While Mark walks LoDarryl to the door, Tiffany watches Meebles hunkering over his plate of dry chow. The little crunching sounds he makes as he eats drive into her head like nails, but she refuses to disturb him. No ox in the manger , she tells herself. No, it was the dog in the manger. Ox trying to eat. Ox. Aleph. No imaginary rabbits. Rabbis .

"Tiff?"

Mark is standing in front of her. She has not heard or seen him come back.

"Sorry. I'm just real tired. Long workout, and now the bad leg hurts. I tried running, just a little, but it was too soon."

"Oh. Well, lemme get you your pills."

"You dunt mind, do you? I mean, I feel so goddamn guilty, you waiting on me like this."

"Better me waiting on you than not having you here at all to wait on. Dunt you worry. It gets to be a drag, I'll tell you."

"Okay. I just..." She lets the words trail away.

"Something bothering you? LoDarryl? Dunt you worry about that. Even if it wasn't for you, I ain't going

off dump-running with LoDarryl and his crazy ideas and his crazier friends. Manny Mike — shit! A genius, yeah, sure, the guy can build anything, fix anything. Cepting his own brain. A real space case, that dude. Jeez, I just hope to god LoDarryl dunt get himself killed. Lot of guys scrounging for the same damn junk."

"That's why he wanted you, ain't it? For a rifleman."

Mark winces sharply.

"Yep. All them medals, he says. Let's put 'em back to work, huh? No way. No fucking way."

Mark gets the bottles, begins arranging on the table in tidy rows of blue pills, red, green, white, and the big clear capsules that she always gets out of the way first. Merely looking at the array makes her throat tighten, her stomach churn.

"You need to eat something first?"

"Maybe so, yeah. Mark, I been thinking. If it wasn't for me you could get your own farm. You been decorated, you made it up to master sergeant, you got the record they're looking for. They'd give you one, somewhere out in the Heartland. You wouldn't end up working the agribiz in the Valley at all. I'm the one who's holding you back. Me and my damn wreck of a body. I could never work a farm with you."

"What!" Mark spins on her in honest rage. "Who you been talking to? Where this come from?"

She can only shake her head in numb misery.

"I dunt wanna hear it. You understand me? I dunt wanna hear it." He grabs her shoulders. "Tiff, I ain't going nowhere without you. I dunt even want to go nowhere without you. Understand me?"

Tears slide, burn in manic relief. He clutches her close, so hard, so tight, that she can barely breathe between his grasp and her own crying.

"Oh jeezuz god," Mark says. "Tiff, Tiff, why you work yourself up into these things! Come on, honey, -come on. Let's go sit on the sofa, okay? And I'll bring you some soup or something in there. Where it's comfortable."

Still sobbing she lets him lead her to the soft cushions and the calm of blue and green walls, lets him sit her down like a child and wipe her face like one, too, while Meebles watches, his ears pricked forward to catch a sound he's never heard before: Tiffany crying.

"Besides," Mark says at last. "What the fuck would I want with some damn farm? All that mud and way the hell out in Hicksville. I'm a city man, honey. Last thing I want is pigs and a bunch of plants."

And that she can believe, and believing, laugh.

CHAPTER THREE

Gray dawn comes in slits round the one window in the bedroom. Tiffany has been dreaming of flying, a precise pilot's dream of taking off in an old F39C and climbing in wide spirals over the eastern Mediterranean. In the dream she radioed a flight plan back to some unnamed base, then headed for Tel

Aviv to keep a dinner date with Mark, on guard at the embassy there (as he indeed was when she first met him), as casually as if she were taking the bus back in the real world, but long before her scanner showed the familiar Israeli coast line, the hostiles appeared, screaming out of the sun at seven o'clock, to fight a dream-battle over open sea. She wakes, drenched in sweat, knowing that she shot them down, knowing that she couldn't possibly have shot them down. She breathes slowly, deeply, concentrates on the throbbing of her bad leg, the ache in the formerly bad hand, watches the room surface from the sea of night, each object dripping darkness as it rises into silver — a lump of clothes on the floor here, a behemoth of a dresser there, the movement of the cat washing himself on the wooden chair, a glint of light in the mirror. For a long time she tries to ignore the pain in the bad leg.

Running was a stupid idea, and why did she run, anyway? For a mercifully long time she cannot remember. When that memory breaks through, when she sees with the inner eye Nick sitting in a bright red booth and the rabbi leaning earnestly across a red table, when she hears with the inner ear fragments of their talk, she is wide-awake beyond all hope of sleep. An infinite set of letters. Poor little snahey-wakey. Beside her Mark snores, gurgles, and flops over onto his stomach with a sigh. Snakes dunt have to blink. They got an extra eyelid or something. She sits up, using both hands to swing the bad leg over the side of the bed. The dawn is brightening, and the lump of clothes on the floor reveals itself as hers. She scoops it up and hobbles into the bathroom. Moving around eases the ache in her leg, eases the pain of shoving forbidden memories away from her mind, too, so much so that she decides to walk down to the store and buy a surprise for Mark. At eight o'clock, which it almost is, the neighborhood catch-all will open, and by nine, the line for everything but actual food will stretch halfway round the block, too long a wait for her to manage. When she opens the door, fog greets her. She grabs the Forty-Niner jacket, shoves the spent news cartridge into one pocket, her string bag into the other, and slips out fast before Meebles can escape to the dangerous outside world. Without a shred of evidence, everyone in San Francisco is convinced that the Brazilians eat dogs and cats when they can catch them. On the sidewalk she pauses, blinking hard, struggling to get the jacket on as the formerly bad hand stiffens in the cool damp. The wind strikes chill, even though off to the south, the fog is already breaking up in long streamers. Through the scattering mist she can see Mt. Davidson, with its crumbling concrete cross rising from the last few trees at its very crest, and on its lower flanks the dazzling-white walled compounds of the rich.

The store stands some six blocks to the west, down the long slope that eventually falls all the way to the ocean. A couple of vets run it, stocking the things they know that the neighborhood, mostly vets like themselves or Mark and Tiffany, both will want and can afford to buy. As Tiffany limps up, Ger Chong is just raising the American flag that hangs over the front window. In the brightening sun, the brand-new Stars and Stripes and Maple Leaves snaps and sways: an ugly design, really, with too many elements all jumbled together, but it's only temporary, until the National Committee comes up with something better.

"News yet?" she says.

"Not the local. That'll be any minute. But we got the overseas cartridges already. And the bread truck's been."

Getting a bottle of milk, a couple of cinnamon rolls, and a loaf of raisin bread into the bag takes Tiffany a while. She has to hang the handles over her left arm, set the bottom of the bag on a pile of boxed noodles to make the top open, then slip the objects in, one at a time, with her good hand. All the while she is aware of Ger not looking, of exerting his will power to keep from insulting her by offering to help. Finally she's done, adds a stick of butter — only half the price of real margarine — and limps to the counter to find two other customers ahead of her. Or rather, one customer, a tall blond dude wearing an Army fatigue jacket over a pair of cammi pants, is buying a pack of gum, while an old man dressed all in black stands beside a bushel basket of apples. Her heart wrenches; she thinks of dropping the bag and running

for the door; too late. Nick turns round with a smile and moves out of her way.

"Fancy meeting you here."

"Oh get stuffed." She flops the bag onto the counter. "And the news, too, Ger."

The devil and the rabbi wait for her on the sidewalk outside while she pays. Although the store does have a second exit near the dairy case, she decides that sneaking out that way would be cowardly. Besides, try as she might to shut them up, her memories are demanding answers. As she walks out the front, Nick reaches for the string bag with a small bow.

"I'll haul it myself, fella. What are you guys doing here?"

"Seeing how you feel this morning, my dear, nothing more." The rabbi raises his hat to her. "You're well, I hope?"

With a shrug she starts walking toward home, but with the weight of the bag to balance, the bad leg slows her down to a hobble. Nick and the rabbi stroll along, one on either side of her, as she makes her painful way up the long slope. She decides that her only safety lies in silence. It seems to her that she can physically feel the rebel neurons firing, the questions forming, racing down the nerves toward her mouth, burning in her mouth. She refuses to speak one word.

"Well yes, of course, there's another Mark," the rabbi says. "A large number of Marks, really, but I'm sure you only mean the one back in the California Republic."

"Damn! Did I say it?"

"What?" The rabbi looks briefly puzzled. "You asked me a question, yes, if that's what you mean."

"Shit! Well, sorry, Reb Akiba. But I dint want. Oh hell." Rebel eyes burn with tears. She wipes them on the sleeve of the Forty-Niner jacket.

"You believe us, don't you?" Nick laughs, crowing victory. "Half the battle, right there! You believe us."

"Dunt! Just a what if. Just a what if question, just taking your damn theory for argument's sake. That's all."

"Yeah, sure. You're bullshitting and you know it."

"Will you shut up?" Reb Akiba intervenes. "But, Tiffany my dear, that Mark is indeed alive and well. He mourned you, of course, and rather bitterly. I don't suppose he's over you, yet, though he does seem more his old self these days."

"Now you shut up," Nick says. "When Tiff comes back, he'll be the happiest man alive. Not like he forgot her or anything."

"And this Mark here?" Despite all her intentions, she cannot take refuge in silence, cannot let this conversation go on without her. "If I leave?"

Neither man says anything. Nick glances absently at the clearing sky; the rabbi frowns at the sidewalk. Giggling and elbowing each other, a group of young girls run by, heading for the store with their parents'

cards clutched tight in their fingers.

"You know, Tiff," Nick says. "Back home you're a hero. California's naming an air base after you."

"You lie."

"Nope." He glances at the rabbi. "Do I?"

"Not this time, no." Reb Akiba admits it reluctantly. "Down in the desert, in that part of Los Angeles that's been cleared away."

"Owens Air Services Base. The president herself's gonna open it. Bout six more weeks now. Sure beats the crummy little citation you got here, doesn't it? What's it say? Thanks for trying you and your lousy unarmed plane? Here's a piece of paper with eagles on it. Cheap gold ink, too. But back home, jeez, just think what would happen if you, hum, if you, lemme see, if you got released by the Emirate. Yeah, that's it! One of the Anti-shah terrorist groups, they've been keeping you a secret hostage, waiting for their chance to trade you in for something big! I knew I'd think of something, and I've got just the group lined up. Kind of on retainer, you could call it. Okay, so, they hand you over to the California Embassy as a good-will gesture, trying to get some of their prisoners back from Israel, and you get back home just in time for the opening of that base. Hero's welcome. Parades, TV interviews, marching bands, flowers. Your fellow officers lining up to salute. Hell, bet you could run for the senate. Be president yourself, someday."

"The prince of lies, that's you, fella," Tiffany snaps. "You said it yourself."

"So I did. But it's the old Cretan paradox. If I say I always lie, well, hell, sometimes I gotta tell the truth. And besides, all I did was say you could maybe be president someday. No guarantees. Just a possibility. It'd be up to you."

"Yeah? Dunt worry bout it. Last thing I wanna be, some stinking pol."

The rabbi is scowling, his lips set in a thin line, as if he's forcing himself to stay silent. In her mind Tiffany is seeing not cheering crowds and the television appearances, but a line of her fellow officers saluting as someone hands her a folded flag and antique rifles fire. The most seductive image of all, however, is a simple green and white railway sign: Owens Air Force Base, next station. In that world, back in the California that Nick persists in calling her home, everyone knows that she's one of the best damn pilots that ever flew.

"Ah get out of here! Get stuffed! None of this crap's true anyway. Who the hell are you guys, talking all this crazy bull?" Her voice shakes in her throat like a living thing. "Leave me alone!"

Hauling her bag she wrenches herself forward and strides off, as fast as she can, so pitifully slow.

"Tiffany, my dear, don't hurt yourself! We won't follow you."

She glances back to see the rabbi grabbing Nick's arm and making good his word with surprising strength, but still she strides on, gasping for breath, dragging the bad leg, until she turns a corner and can no longer see them standing, far behind her. Get thee behind me, Satan. Obmigawd. I aunt believe this. Can't believe this. Can't. And yet, of course, she does believe it, finds her traitor of a mind's eye picturing the green and white sign and, as she pants up the last block to home, the cheering crowds as well. In that world the power plant still stands, in that world a hundred thousand people still live who died

in this one, and all because Captain Tiffany Owens pulled off a miracle, shooting down solo three enemy planes before they could arm and fire a single missile.

When she gets back to the apartment, Mark is awake, half-dressed, shaving, his baritone booming in the tiny bathroom.

"Run to the stars! Stars they be a-fallin! All on that day!" A gasp for breath at verse's end, then the next one. "Oh sinner man, where you gonna run to? Oh sinner man, where you gonna — Hey, Tiff, that you?"

"Sure is. Why the hell you singing a morbid rucking ugly song like that one, anyway?"

Half-bearded in white soap Mark's face appears round the doorjamb.

"You okay?" he says mildly. "Oh hey, you been to the store! Great! Thanks, hon."

"Oh shut up." She slings the bag, dangerously hard, onto the kitchen table. "I been to the store, yeah, and on the way back I met the Devil. Whaddya think of that"

"I think maybe you gone and taken too many pills. Doctor warned me bout this. Want me to call the hospital?"

"No. Just shut up and shave. Just making a joke, man. You and your lousy hymns."

The face retreats, and she hears wash water running. Apparently, though, he believes that indeed, she was merely joking in a bad-tempered way, because when he comes out, wiping his face on a torn towel, he's taken the time to finish shaving.

"Well, that ain't the most cheerful number from my days in the choir, no." He is grinning at her. "Wanna hear 'Let the Sun Shine In?'"

"Ah shut up." But she finds herself smiling in return. "I'm sorry. Kinda tired me out, walking all that way."

"Yeah, I bet. And we got to go to your mom's next. I mean, I'll be real glad to see Amber and the kids. They ain't seen you since you started walking."

"Hey, that's right. That'll be cool, yeah."

Tiffany sits down and takes the bread out of the bag, sets the milk bottle upright and just so while Mark gets out a pair of plates and a couple of mugs. He's brewed up Postum in a glass carafe, dark, steaming, foaming as he swirls it round to pour. Tiffany pats an inch of milk in each mug just ahead of him.

"We need to leave early," she says. "Buy some wine to take with us. Think we can find some chocolate for the kids?"

"On the street, maybe."

"Oh, hey, right. I've got cash. I think." She starts patting her pockets, half-expecting the wad of bills to have vanished like elf-gold. "Yeah, here it is, all right. Smells a little musty, huh?"

"Where you get that"

"From that guy I told you about. Nick whatever his name is. He said he owed it to me. I sure dunt remember loaning it to him, but he said I did. Maybe he was in Basic with me. Jeez, wish I could remember."

Mark nods, believing her lie so easily that the guilt stabs like another pulled muscle. But what is she supposed to tell him? The truth? She cannot bear to repeat that even to herself.

"Better stop in Braziltown, then," Mark says. "Never know what you gonna find for sale there."

Even though the refugees have settled all over the city everyone calls the old Mission district Braziltown.

The neighborhood was Irish way back in the Twentieth Century, then Hispanic, then a mixed bag of Asian cultures, then Roumanian, and now finally Brazilian as waves of refugees broke on the San Francisco docks and flowed down this flat and sunny valley at the city's heart. Even though it suffered perhaps the least of any neighborhood in the Great Quake, it was a barrio for so long that none of the dispossessed rich even thought of settling there. Now, sixteen years later, with the city rebuilt, more or less, Mission Street crawls along through a welter of old wooden buildings, patched and propped, and new poured stucco-crete "temporary" structures, the kind that always, somehow or another, become permanent once the emergency that spawned them ends. The cubes and blocks of stucco-crete have flowered, though, into purples and reds and blues; huge murals cover every windowless wall, graffiti sprawl across doorways and overrun the commercial signs plastered on store fronts. For Tiffany, all these colors, the jumbled blocks of buildings, the crowds oozing their way down the street, men standing on street corners, gossiping and smoking tobacco, women crouched over blankets strewn with contraband, children racing through, shouting and pushing — the entire scene disintegrates into blots and splotches, streaks of movement, glints of light, all pulsing, throbbing, heaving like the chest of some vast and terrified animal, while the pitiless sun pounds down and robs the world of shadow. As the trolley bus lurches and hoots its way down the middle of the street, she slumps down in her seat and clutches the string bag, clanking with wine bottles, to her chest. Mark watches, frowning a little.

"Tiff, if you dunt wanna get off and shop, we dunt have to."

"I wanna get something for the kids. I know you do, too. Besides, I might be better off, outside and off this goddamn bus."

"Well, I dunno bout that."

In two more blocks the decision's made for them. On the corner where Thirtieth Street dead-ends into Mission stands an enormous stucco-crete structure, a heap of cubes, one square tower, thrown together in an old parking lot to replace the big Catholic church on Dolores street that went down in the quake. Over the years the devout have paid artists to cover the bleak flat walls with trompe l'oeil paintings of fluted columns, baroque arches, swags of fruit and flowers, bas relief angels, and scalloped niches complete with faux marble portrayals of various saints, all this decoration earthquake proof, now, frescoed deep into the walls beyond the power of Saint Andrew and his fault to shake it loose. Just past Twenty-ninth the bus stops with a squeal of brakes and a lurch. Out in front of the church, spilling down the street and across the street, a crowd sways in place to music and waits, faces upturned to the pink tower with its painted bells in painted niches. The bus driver can lay on her airhorn all she wants, can lean out the window and scream her lungs out, too: the crowd will not part.

"Hell," Mark says. "Well, might's well get out and shop, then."

Swearing, muttering, scowling at the Brazilians crouched at the back of the bus, the rest of the

passengers are getting up and filing for the doors. The Brazilians — two young men in khaki pants and sweat-stained tank tops, and then, some seats away, a family, father in a white suit, mother in a flowered dress, four daughters in starched ruffled dresses — wait until most are out and off. The family cowers against the blame they're taking for this crowd of their countrymen; the young men swagger down the aisle, waiting, perhaps hoping, for someone to insult them openly. Tiffany would like to say something reassuring to the family, but she knows no Portuguese, an infuriating language, or so the average bilingual San Franciscan thinks of it. It looks so much like Spanish that it seems you should be able to understand what these people are saying, that you should be able to speak to them without effort, but of course, you can't, and they can't reply, either, can only stare with miserable eyes as people shout at them in Espanol or speak Pocho very very slowly as if the Brazilians could — if they really wanted to, if they only wouldn't be so stubborn—understand at last. As Tiffany steps off the bus in the shelter of Mark's broad back, she feels as if she's diving into a sea of Portuguese, the soft waves of voices she cannot decipher lapping her round.

"We're getting cross this street now." Mark has been changed back into a Marine sergeant by the alchemy of danger. "Tiff, come on." He grabs her shoulder with one broad hand. "Move!"

At that moment music breaks out in a blare of brass, thunders with a hundred snare drums, jogs and jigs and syncopates as the crowd yells and sways. By peering through the packed dancers Tiffany can see that up on the church steps stand two huge box speakers. A fat priest wearing a black soutane and a pair of headphones huddles over a quadro off to one side. Swearing, glaring, shoving when he has to, Mark gets them round the back of the bus. The crowd, smelling of sweat and tobacco and rum, presses close, turns solid, one impenetrable body swaying back and forth on the dance-floor of the street, but somehow Mark snakes and wiggles and slides their way across, yelling the few words of Portuguese he picked up during the war, snarling at someone here, smiling thanks at someone else there. At last they reach the far sidewalk, but making it to the bus stop, their transfer point, only two blocks but a universe away, lies beyond even Mark. By sheer Marine arrogance he manages to shove their way to a block of old wooden flats with a sheltered doorway, a tiny porch. He pushes a place clear for Tiffany to stand, two steps up and behind him, safe from the crowd, at a tolerable distance from the samba music bellowing out of the speakers.

"Well hell," Mark screams. "Guess we're going to see what's going on whether we want to or not. Good thing we left home early."

Tiffany nods and rests her hands on his shoulders. The crowd is clapping to the rhythm, rocking back and forth, but no one sings, no one yells, no one even smiles, really. The faces that Tiffany can see are solemn, wide-eyed, expectant but never gleeful. She remembers, suddenly, that religion has something to do with this festival, that most likely the gathering celebrates the special day of one of their saints, beings as alien and innumerable to her as the stars. She looks back to the church, just as the doors swing open from inside. The crowd does yell, one sharp wordless bark as a procession spills down the steps. How the crowd manages to move back and out of the way Tiffany cannot see; she's only aware of a streaming, a sea of discrete particles forming a wave of motion, parting like ebb-tide around rock, flowing down the street and spreading out onto sidewalks blocks and blocks away to leave the middle of Mission Street clear.

While music pounds and pulses, painted wooden statues, each about ten feet high, ride this river down on little boats — litters draped in flowers, swaying and jerking on the shoulders of men dressed in white. Each figure wears real clothes, sewn, no doubt, by the ladies of this parish, according to some mixed iconography of Mexican Catholicism and Brazilian Comdomble. A few Tiffany recognizes: the Virgin Mary in her long blue cloak, spangled with stars, stands on the crescent moon; Jesus sails by, wearing a black top hat, his frock coat open to reveal a crucifix in the midst of the starched white ruffles of his

tuxedo shirt; just behind them comes a tall, white-robed figure, wearing a triple crown and carrying a crook, who most likely represents the current pope. Others she cannot label, but each carries a palm frond in one hand. Before, behind, around each saint dance troupes of women, their loins and breasts wrapped in twists of bright cloth, yellow and orange, blue and purple, their skin glittering with spangles, their heads plumed with dyed feathers or bound round with strings of glass jewels; like birds flitting from branch to branch they twirl and kick and bob along from curb to curb. Too poor to buy their church electric generators or seats on the city council, they give dancing instead, their own flesh the offering to the word made flesh. In and among them snare drummers march in precise cadres; entire mariachi bands, their guitars and trumpets gleaming, ride by in carts pulled by teen-age boys wearing white shirts and garlands of flowers round their necks. Everyone goes barefoot on the hot asphalt, all pitted, pocked, bristling with gravel. By the end of the route, their feet will be bleeding, the pain another offering to their Jesus. Every now and then the procession crawls to a stop. The dancers sway sideways, the drummers march in place, the trumpeters tuck their instruments under one arm and catch their breath. Girls with water bottles and wet towels rush out of the crowd to wipe the faces of the men carrying the saints and give them drinks. One of these intervals leaves a saint floating right in front of Tiffany. A towering woman, slender, with blonde hair but black skin, she carries a sword instead of a palm leaf. Her dress is white, and all around her on the street dance young women, their arms bare, their bodies encased in yards and yards of muslin, bleached bone-white, pleated and starched as stiff as cardboard, lashed down with ribbons at the bodice, tied down at the waist, but billowing out in enormous skirts almost to the ground.

Barefoot, they solemnly jog in place, swaying in a rustle of skirts like the beating wings of giant insects. Tiffany leans down to bellow into Mark's ear.

"Who's this?"

"Santa Barbara," he calls back.

The woman next to him laughs.

"Oancan," she says. "The priests, they call her Santa Barbara, but her name be Oancan. She be one of the orixas."

Tiffany hears this name, pronounced "yan san," as Mr. Yan, and she goggles at the vast image floating above her. Her mind simply cannot reconcile this figure that the priests call a saint with an Asian male name. The huge head, crowned in gold; the full mouth, smiling with a tight and secretive curve of lips; the huge blue eyes that should jar against black skin but that, somehow, fit; the sword, gleaming with salvaged aluminum foil, smoothed out and pressed over cardboard by devout hands — at that moment Tiffany feels that she should know this figure's real name, just as she feels that knowing Pocho she should understand Portuguese. If she only knew the real name, everything would be at long last clear; if she could only speak this name, all her long years of combat, first in Israel, now with her own body, would at last have meaning — she believes it suddenly, fiercely. Further down the route, the music picks up; the speakers on the church steps blare in answer; the parade moves on. As her litter-bearers break into their slow trot, the orixa bobs her head Tiffany's way in silent blessing.

Behind her the parade thins to one last cadre of drummers, young and a little off the beat, one last swirl of dancers, glittering green and turquoise, and then, at the very end, a press of crowd, sucked into the vacuum left by the procession, drawn in inexorably after their saints and gods, dragging with them the worshippers on the sidewalk as they pass. In a few minutes Tiffany can step down from her shelter and reach Mark, who automatically catches her hand.

"Superstitious bull," he remarks. "Pretty flash, though. Makes a great parade. But jeez, they believe it all,

poor bastards. Damn priests sucking them dry. The things I saw in Brazil, Tiff." He shakes his head hard. "Anyway, it be 1300 hours. We're gonna be late if we dunt hurry."

"Damn. I did want to bring the kids something."

Right near the transfer point, however, where three different bus routes meet, lies an unofficial market, a spread of blankets and old sacks, each with a vendor crouched behind it on the sidewalk. A few meters up the narrow hill of Cortland Avenue, an old woman, wrapped in a gathered striped skirt and draped in a once-white blouse, trailing torn lace, sits cross-legged behind a big basket of Mexican chocolate, kilo chunks wrapped in glazed paper, each sealed and stamped with a red and green eagle. While Mark haggles, waving a handful of the rabbi's moldy bills to show he's serious, Tiffany kneels and unwraps one packet to check for worms and rat dirt — you never know with this semi-legal kind of provender, the brand passed for sale in America, yes, in the abstract, but this actual cache of chocolate has no doubt been smuggled across the border without inspection. Even though the smell of crushed almonds and sugar makes her mouth water, she won't be able to taste anything if she succumbs to the temptation of nibbling. Save it for the kids, she tells herself. Amber will doubtless ration this kilo block out for weeks to come. The haggling over, Tiffany slips the block inside her bag with the wine. The old woman counts the bills, rolls them, and slips them into her blouse with a toothless smile.

"Did you like the procession?" she remarks in Espaftol. "I thought the music was very pretty."

"It certainly was, yes." Tiffany struggles with the verbs, which are much more formal in the old woman's mouth than in the Pocho she knows. "I didn't know who all those saints were, though."

"Some of them weren't saints, that's why." The old woman turns suddenly sour. "Those Brazilians! Oh well, they'll learn American ways sooner or later, I suppose."

When the bus finally comes, it disgorges a flood of chattering passengers, all miffed that they've missed the procession, then stays empty except for Mark and Tiffany. Later the church will be sponsoring a carnival of sorts, with music and bingo, a major event here in the barrio. No one's going to leave until the celebrating's all over.

"We better take the long route home," Mark remarks. "Tonight this bus gonna be packed to the roof."

"Uh lord, you're right. Say, Mark? What are those orixa guys anyway, if they ain't saints?"

"Old African gods, come over with the slave trade, or that's what I heard, anyway, when I was in Rio. The captain of my company, he was kinda keen on all this old stuff, folklore, he called it. The church took the orixas right in and made them saints, because the people were gonna pray to them whether they did or not." He grins. "You could say the church baptized them, I guess. They don't miss a trick, them priests."

"Kinda like voodoo, then."

"Yeah, a lot like that. Some of the women, they go into trances, after dancing for hours, I think, something like that, and then the orixas take them over and make them say things, prophecies I guess, I dunno."

"Take them over?"

"Yeah. Lemme think. It's like the orixas, they live in some other world, and they need a body to get into

this world, and so the women let them use theirs. A lot of crap, if you ask me, but old Captain Connors, he went and watched some ceremony, and he came back real impressed." He looks suddenly sad. "But he was a good man. And a good officer. Too damn bad, losing him like we did."

To the same Argentinian land mine that maimed LoDanyl, Tiffany thinks it was, but she cannot quite remember the story and she doesn't want to depress Mark by having him repeat it. As the bus groans its way uphill, she is thinking about Nick and the rabbi. They drank coffee, they ate bread with her. They have bodies, then. Or rather, the figures she saw seemed to have bodies. Maybe they never really ate and drank; it might have been some kind of trick. Or a neurologic hallucination. All at once she doubts the reality of what she saw or seemed to see. But the waitress served them coffee. Could have imagined that, too. How could they be in her world, the devil and a holy man dead for hundreds of years? GerChong sold the devil a pack of gum. Couldn't be. Impossible. Unless they took over someone's body like an orixa, an idea that strikes her as so ridiculous that she laughs aloud. Mark, wrapped in some brooding about the war, does not notice.

Tiffany's mother lives in a condominium up on University Mound, a middle-class village within the city. Although the entire complex stands inside high walls, studded with long blades of broken glass, the security there is a good bit more lax than it would be in one of the fortresses that cater to the rich. Although video cameras record their entry, and the uniformed guard does ask their names and make a show of looking them up on the list of approved visitors, he doesn't bother to call up to the flat, merely waves them through the gates. Just beyond his kiosk stands a shuttle, an electric surrey with a flat bed, wood and wrought iron benches, and a pink and white ruffled roof. In the back stands a Compu-drive unit. When Mark punches in the address, the surrey starts with a hum of batteries and whines off, making its way down the middle of the lanes between white buildings roofed in black solar collection panels. Although the units sport rustic shingled entrance ways, canvas awnings over wooden decks, wooden shutters over the windows, and little picket fences round real lawns, they are at root the same stucco-crete cubes as the projects lining Mission Street.

Tiffany's mother, Mandi, lives in a flat on the top floor of the southern-most building, two cubes piled up with a third cube nestled next to them to break the stark lines. When the shuttle sighs to a stop at its door, Tiffany looks up and sees her niece and nephew leaning dangerously out of a window to wave and yell.

"Aunt Tiff, Aunt Tiff! You can walk! You can walk!"

"Sure can!" she calls back. "I can do lots of stuff now."

By the time that she and Mark have gotten off the shuttle and sent it on its way back to the gate, the kids have come pounding out the front door to surround them with the illusion of an entire pack of children. As is the case with most families these days, with so many men gone off either to war or the corporate farms of the Central Valley, Amber's kids have different fathers, so that Rico, just four, is blonde and blue-eyed like his mother and his aunt, while Maggie, seven and getting close to eight, has raven-dark hair, black eyes, and skin the color of teak veneer. They grab Tiffany for hugs, then dance around her as she makes her slow way across the entrance way and up the stairs. Mark brings up the rear, grinning and carrying the string bag.

"We got new games," Maggie announces. "Gramma got us new games."

"For the comp wall?" Tiffany says.

"You bet-ski," Rico chimes in. "Space dock revels."

"Rebels, you dope. Not revels."

"You bet-ski. And trains on fire."

"Say what!" Tiffany says.

"It's a routing game." Maggie favors her brother with a look of massive contempt. "And if you blow it the trains crash."

"Gotcha."

At the top of the stairs, Amber and Mandi stand together, Amber's honey-colored hair long and wild, Mandi's chemical blonde nipped short, turned under in a tidy wave, but they are both slender women, immaculately dressed in pressed shorts, tucked shirts. In the dim light Mandi does realize her often-expressed wish and seems as young as her daughters — if not, in fact, a little younger than Tiffany with her scars and the permanent dark circles under her eyes from the medication. They smile, hug, pull everyone in to the cool refuge of a white room with tan drapes, tan furniture, and artwork in muted pastels. Mandi has stripped the walls of her collection of painted china plates, probably to spare Tiffany's fractured sight as well as sparing the plates the attentions of the kids. The empty black plastic racks hang like blank staves of music. On the long coffee table in front of the fake fireplace lie plates of food: sensible vegetables, dips, rice cakes.

"Aunt Tiff got something in that bag," Rico announces. "Smells good."

"Chocolate," Tiffany says. "But your mom be the one who gonna ration it out."

"Oh no! She mean!" Maggie is grinning even as she wails. "Ain't you, Mom?"

"As mean as I gotta be, yeah." Amber takes the bag from Mark. "And wine? Wow. You guys do it up right, huh? Thanks!"

"You really shouldn't have." Mandi grins, just a little broadly, and her voice is just a little too light. "You really really should have left all that to me."

Everyone smiles, vaguely, glancing found the room with its tangible evidence that Mandi alone makes more money than a pair of vets bring in together.

"Uh well," Mark says at last. "Wanted to chip in something."

"Of course, dear. And thank you. It was very nice. We could sit down?"

But everyone stands, hovering by the door, waiting for someone else to make the first move toward the sofas, smiling, everyone smiling while Mandi searches her younger daughter's face, studying her every scar, checking the one shoulder that's a little lower, maybe, or estimating how she's doing with that bad hand, until Tiffany feels that she once again is ten years old, running off the soccer field after school to find a mother waiting who will comment on every slop of mud, every grass stain, every bruise, every indication that her daughter cares more for sports than she ever will for her studies. Rico saves her, saves everybody, from the growing silence.

"Well, Mom, please? You gonna cut it up? Gramma, please?"

"What, love?" Mandi wrenches her gaze away, turns a little pink as if she's embarrassed herself more than anyone. "Please what"

"Chocolate. We can smell it, you know."

Everyone laughs, grins, moves, turns this way or that.

"I'll get you some," Amber says. "You said please real nice. Why dunt you show Uncle Mark the new comp wall?"

"Oh yes, he'll like that," Mandi chirps. "Gramma will come turn it on."

Mark and Mandi collect kids and stroll across the living room toward the door leading into Mandi's office, where during the week she reviews disputed claims for the Veteran's Administration. Tiffany trails behind her sister as Amber carries the bag into the tiny kitchen, all beige and black, each treasured appliance so shiny-clean that Tiffany has to blink hard against the fractured light. For a moment she sees faces grinning with silver teeth on every door and control panel.

"You okay?" Amber says.

"Sure." She leans back against the microwave's polarized glass door and watches Amber to avoid the glints and reflections that crowd upon her. "So, how was the trip up?"

"Fine. The kids are getting pretty civilized these days. Only four fights in six hours, and Rico dint even get sick on the curves out of Monterey."

"Cool."

Amber puts the wine bottles into the cooler, sets the chocolate onto the counter, and hands Tiffany the bag.

"You could take that Forty-Niner jacket off. Warm in here."

"Is it? Thanks." Tiffany crams the bag into a pocket, then slips the jacket off, lets it drop automatically onto the floor, mutters, and picks it up again. "How's the university doing? And the aggie lab? Any new projects?"

"No such luck." She wrinkles her nose. "Still the drought-resistant barley. Damn stuff keeps dying on us when we plant it anywhere but the Andes enviro-tank. But I did get a raise. And a new title. Senior geneticist."

"Congratulations. That's great. Look real good on your office door."

"You bet, but we really needed the money. The housing down in San Luis is getting so expensive. Sure wish I could afford to buy a place like this, but it's going to be a while yet."

"Mom dint offer to help?"

"Course she did. But...well, you know."

Automatically they both glance at the door to confirm that Mandi's still absent.

"Yeah, I do know," Tiffany says. "Gets on Mark's nerves, but she really means well. I mean, she only wants to know she's still part of our lives."

"There's more ways of paying off a debt than with money, and I just can't afford it. If you get what I mean."

Tiffany considers. As the older sister, Amber has always carried the greater part of the burden of their mother's relentless generosity and, of course, of the unspoken contracts of gratitude that go with it.

"I do get it, yeah. Just kind of sad."

"Oh, I'd never deny that. Well, I sure hope her giving you stuff dunt cause any, well, friction, I guess, between you two. I sure do like Mark."

"So do I."

They share a laugh. Amber brings down an old plastic plate from the cupboard above the sink, rummages in a drawer, finds a knife. From a distant room comes the sound of beeps, squawks, and simulated trains, punctuated by laughter. They can guess that Mark is being shown the new games.

"I'll let the kids have a little candy now," Amber goes on. "We'll be eating later than usual, Mom says. She found a beef roast for sale somewhere, and she's getting it cooked in the oven over in the dining hall."

"Hell, wish I could taste it! Trust Mom to come up with something like that."

They shake their heads, marveling, as they have for years, at Mandi's ability to find things, whether for sale or barter, all the small details of civilian life that were once mundane but are now exotic, shoved to one side in the production schedules that keep America's profitable armies supplied. Real vinyl rain ponchos, clothes for antique Barbie dolls, metal cookie cutters, freeze-dried coffee, copper pennies for a pair of loafers, a tether-ball set for the Girl Scout camp or metal paper clips for a hospital charity drive, belt buckles, computer cables, aspirin, and those little rubber tips for the feet of garden chairs — if such a thing exists somewhere in the Bay City's vast network of legitimate stores and discount warehouses, or if it's for sale on the street without being in a downright black market, Mandi will, eventually, track it down for a child or a close friend or a good cause, though never, by some quirk of her own, for profit.

"Mom, Rico's cheating again!" Maggie comes barreling into the kitchen. "He is he is he is, and Uncle Mark won't let me hit him."

Amber gives her a fractured chunk of chocolate. When the wail stops, plugged at the source, she hands over the plate of splinters and chips she's hacked from the block.

"Take this into the comp room and share. With Uncle Mark, with Gramma, and with Rico."

"Rico gonna grab his. Don't worry." Maggie licks her fingers, balancing the plate precariously in her other hand as she dances out of the room. "Thanks, Mom."

"What were we saying?" Amber is watching Maggie's progress across the white carpets in the living room.

"Roast beef. Mom finding stuff."

"Oh yeah." Amber pauses, pushing a long wisp of hair back from her forehead with her little finger. "I guess I am tired, today."

"Long ride on the train, especially when you got kids."

They both nod again; Amber licks her own fingers clean.

"There are towels, sweetie." Mandi appears in the doorway. "In that niche by the blender. Yes, just there. Tiff, your Mark is being an absolute martyr, playing with the kids. They certainly toe the line when he's here."

"You can take a man outa the Marines," Amber remarks. "But you can't take the Marines outa the man."

"I suppose so, yes." Mandi's smile wavers, fades. In the bright overhead light she suddenly looks her age as the wrinkles round her eyes fill with shadows. "Tiff, darling, give me that jacket."

"I can hang it up, Mom. No problem."

Mandi's hand stays outstretched.

"I'll just take it into the bedroom for you. I'm going that way to the necessary."

Tiffany gives her the jacket, which she shakes, smooths, folds over her arm.

"I was just going to do some wash for the kids. I can throw this right in, can't I? No use you having to take it to the laundromat and use up your ration on it."

She is smiling, but Tiffany is suddenly aware that the jacket is dirty, that she really should have washed it last week some time, that perhaps she never should have worn a sports-team jacket here to her mother's house.

"Mom, I got some stuff in the pockets."

"Of course you do, dear," Automatically her manicured hand goes fishing through them. "What's this? A card for a bookstore I've never heard of? You really have to tell me what it's like when you go, sounds just great. Couple of notes. Put those in your pants pocket, dear, so you don't lose them. And a tennis ball?"

Tiffany snatches the squeezer back, covers the snatch with a grin.

"Something to show you, Mom. Remember the bad hand?"

Amber and Mandi both watch, wide-eyed, as breathless as children entranced by a trapeze artist, as Tiffany squeezes the ball, tosses it into the air, and catches it again.

"All right!" Amber claps, solemnly.

Mandi's eyes fill with tears, wiped quickly on the corner of Tiffany's jacket, but she keeps smiling, a

natural grin, now, of pride, pure pride. It is at these moments that Tiffany remembers how much she's always loved her mother.

"That's so wonderful. Oh honey, you've done such a good job. I knew you'd put yourself back together, I always knew it, no matter what the doctor said. I'm so happy. It's just..." She sniffs loudly. "Well. Be right back. You girls could even sit down, y'know."

While Mandi trots off to the rear of the flat, the two sisters trail into the living room, stand for a moment at the picture window, looking out and over the white wall, glittering with glass, then down the long Slope of tangled streets and houses to the blue and misty bay in the far distance. The two former points or brand-new islands, Hunter's and Candlestick, rise from the swamps and mudflats of low tide at the edge of the view. From the comp room comes laughter and the sound of electronic music. One of the gamers has reached a new level, most likely.

"Say, Ambi? What's Mom got against Mark, anyway?"

Amber winces, reaches out to straighten the folds of a drape.

"Well, it's something. Dunt lie to me, will you?"

"Never—dunt worry." With a little sigh Amber goes back to studying the view. "Just that he was enlisted personnel, not an officer. Nothing more'n that."

Tiffany lets out her breath in a sharp puff.

"Shoulda guessed that."

The silence again, the things they daren't speak here where they might be overheard at any moment. Across the sky, over the East Bay hills, an airplane writes a line of white.

"Must be a Navy plane, if it's based over there," Tiffany remarks.

"Hum? Oh. Oh yeah, I see it now. You know, something I wanted to ask you. You think you'll ever fly again?"

"I dunt know, but I dunt think so. Not well enough for combat, that's for sure. I mean, ferrying planes into a combat zone. But I dunt think I could even be an instructor. Not the way I am now."

"Oh. That must hurt."

"Yeah. No use pretending it dunt."

"I'm real sorry about that, but Tiff? You're gonna hate me for saying this, but I got to. I'm glad you're not going back. I'm glad nobody's ever going to be shooting at you again."

"Well, hell, I ain't gonna miss that part myself."

The plane disappears into the sun. The vapor trail remains, an arc across the sky. A lonely impulse of delight drove to this rapture in the clouds. Another line of poetry whose source she cannot remember. In this world does that poem even exist? The question strikes her like a blow. If the rabbi and Nick should, by some vast stretch of the reality she's always known, be real themselves in their different and terrible

reality they have spoken of, if this world is not the actual world into which she was born, then any number of things she's been taking for granted may or may not have changed.

"What's wrong?" Amber says, and sharply.

"Oh, uh, muscles in my arm just cramped up. Just a little." She makes a show of rubbing the bad arm with the good hand. "Say, Ambi? Do you remember where this line comes from? It's a poem, I think, a real old poem. A lonely impulse of delight drove to this rapture in the clouds."

"This tumult in the clouds." Mandi trots back, a glass of mineral water in her hand.

"Not rapture?"

"Well, I think it's tumult. We can look it up when the kids are done with the comp. Willy Yeats wrote it, darling, and you always loved it so much. The only poem you ever memorized, and you were what? Thirteen, that's right, and Miss Rodriguez was so pleased. Do you remember Miss Rodriguez?"

"No, fraid not. Long time ago now."

"Such a good teacher. I was amazed at how many poems about airplanes she managed to find. I don't remember how the Yeats starts, I'm afraid, but there's this bit: 'Those that I guard I do not love, those that I fight I do not hate.' Then there's a bit I can't remember. And then 'Nor law nor duty bade me fight, nor public men nor cheering crowds, a lonely impulse of delight' and so on. I think that's how it goes. I can't remember the title, though."

"It sure fits, duntiff My life, I mean. Weird, how a little kid would sort of know. What was in store for me, I mean. Though I dunno about that line about not loving those you guard. I liked Israel a whole lot."

"Yes, you always said so in your letters."

They stand together, watching the vapor trail turn soft and dissolve. In the bay below red and white grain tankers crawl along, heading north toward the channel out and west. Tiffany is so relieved to find the memory confirmed that she could laugh aloud. All at once more returns to her.

"Hey, I remember the title! 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death.'"

Amber and Mandi turn just a little pale, just a little tight around the mouths.

"Uh, well, sorry, I forgot how that would sound to you guys. It's not like I did die. Not permanently, I mean."

"Close enough, dear. Would you two like something to drink? There's mineral water. And cola for the kids. Amber, do you mind them having all these sweets? No? Well, it is Veteran's Day, after all. I'll just go see if they want something to drink. And Mark. Poor dear Mark, trapped in there all this time. I'm sure he'd like a beer. I'll just go get him one."

And she is gone, gliding across white carpets, one hand automatically touching her hair, tucking under a random curl. Just as automatically Tiffany and Amber drift from the window and sit down on the sofa — just in time, Tiffany realizes. The bad leg is aching, and she can feel her back tightening as well. Amber is watching her closely.

"Want something to drink? I'll get up and get it."

"You know, if you wouldn't mind?"

"No problem. Just sit there and rest."

When her sister goes into the kitchen, their mother's voice greets her. As she listens to them chatter about drinks, Tiffany finds herself thinking of another Mandi, another Amber. Do they really exist, there in that other world which also includes Owens Air Services base? Is there a Mandi and an Amber sitting in a flat just like this one in that world, remarking to one another that they wished Tiffany were alive to join them while the children route imaginary trains with no Uncle Mark to watch?

"Over a year, now." Tiffany has spoken aloud again. She looks up to find Amber standing in front of her, holding out a glass of mineral water. "Sorry. I dint mean — "

"It's okay, Tiff." Amber hands over the glass and sits down. "You thinking about, well, the accident again?"

Tiffany has a sip of water. The accident. Neither her mother nor her sister have ever been able to face the truth that the crash was no accident, that the Emirate pilots had every conscious intention of blowing her plane out of the sky. The only accidental factor was her unarmed plane happening to be in their way...but in that other world, even that was no happenstance. If that world exists, her fully armed plane was meant to be there, on deliberate patrol. In that world, in some dusty white city in the Emirate, where it's now the middle of the night, there are mothers and sisters lying awake, perhaps, to mourn the sons and brothers she shot down.

"I mean, like," Amber is still talking, picking over each word. "A year, it's not that long. To get over what you've been through."

"Not me I'm thinking bout. Can I ask you something? What if I'd died in that crash, really died, I mean, like there wasn't enough left to resurrect' How would you feel now? After a year, I mean? Would it still bug you?"

"What? Damn right we'd still miss you." Amber sounds completely taken aback. "I mean, look at Mom, when you remembered the title. She turned white, dint she?"

"But look, you wouldn't be...well, I dunno. You wouldn't be like, crying all the time and stuff, would you? And Mom, either. Especially Mom. I mean, life's gotta go on."

"Of course it does." Amber frowns, thinking. "Everyone loses somebody, sooner or later, everyone, and you can't just stop living."

"Right. I was hoping you'd feel that way."

Tiff, what's wrong? Something is."

"Yeah, but I dunt know how to say it. I was just. Ah hell, forget it. I feel so dumb, all of a sudden. I just. Well, wondered."

Amber stares over the rim of her own glass for a long moment, then finally drinks, looks up with a smile as Mandi comes to join them, perching on a chair nearby. Tiffany feels a sudden need to make amends,

to repair the moment that she blames herself for shattering.

"Mom, how's work treating you? Must be pretty good, if you got a new comp."

"Well, yes, I've been pretty busy, and it looks like old Paula Bronowski's going to retire at last. I mean, my dears, she must be eighty if she's a day."

"And you got a chance at a promotion?"

"Oh." Mandi smiles delicately. "I'm working on it."

"In the bag, then," Amber says, grinning. "In the bag."

For some while they talk of work, of Amber's research and Mandi's role as advocate for those denied veterans' benefits on one pretext or another, yet both of them seem on edge, glancing Tiffany's way, speaking in chopped sentences, as if they realize that this talk of their important jobs, the succoring of widows and orphans here at home or developing new sources of food for a teeming, starving Latin America, leaves Tiffany out, moves her to the edge of their lives, where her only job is recovery at taxpayers' expense. Everyone is grateful when a blare of sound interrupts them: Maggie trotting in, the office door left open behind her.

"I be sick of Space Rebels," she announces. "Sides, this way Uncle Mark gets to play."

"That's nice of you, darling," Mandi murmurs. "Going to sit down with us?"

Grinning Maggie flops onto the couch between her aunt and her mother. Amber reaches out, only half-thinking, to run her fingers through her daughter's hair, to draw her into the circle of women that has always been the real heart, the real center of their lives, that unmoving point on which they may stand and watch the comings and goings of men temporarily loved. With a sigh Tiffany leans back, listening to the honks and beeps, the burst of music and simulated voices, the simulated bombs and laser fire, coming from the other room. Once she ventured out beyond the circle, but the fortunes of war have thrown her back again, for good this time, she supposes. Eventually she will have to figure out what she will do here. Unless of course she chooses to move on to another world entirely.

"Tiff darling?" Mandi's voice, a slash of worry through her thoughts. "Are you all right? You look so pale, dear."

"Do I? Well, sorry. Just a little tired, that's all. Put in a long week at the clinic."

They are all watching her, even young Maggie, slewing round on the couch in imitation of her mother's concern. Mark appears in the door, Rico trailing behind him, clinging to his hand. He must have overheard Mandi's remark, Tiffany supposes.

"You need to go home, hon?"

For her own sake she would say yes, but Rico looks so heart-sick at the thought of losing his uncle's company, the attention of one of the few men he knows well, that she manages a smile.

"Not yet, no. I mean, Mom went and got this dinner, least we can do is eat it, huh?"

"Well, darling, only if you're sure..." Mandi is leaning forward, her eyes searching her daughter's face.

"Tell you what? Think I could lie down for a little while?"

A flurry, a wave breaking, a wave fashioned of concern, of voices, of children's hugs, of standing up and feeling dizzy, the wave sweeping her with Mark's help down the hall to Mandi's own room, where her mother plumps pillows and brings out an afghan — and then, at last, she is alone, the wave spent, lying in the semi-dark behind a closed door, watching mottled shadows from the curtained window fall across the pink and white afghan, across the peaks and valleys formed by her own body. The land of counterpane, another poem, she thinks, one her mother read them when they were small, if indeed this mother did read poems in this world. She must've. She knew the Yeats. Yeats not yeets, Keats not kates. Told us that, too. In other rooms, old flats in those days, with windows that often stuck, and doors that hung all angled to the floor, flats that a widow with two children could afford on her Civil Service salary, small then, before the promotions. But every night, stifling yawns, pausing to rub aching eyes, she would read to them before they went to sleep, read poems and stories of other times, wonder tales, rather than the sad stories that Tiffany can tell herself now.

In another world a mother has put her loss behind her, or, as much behind her as any mother can ever put a daughter's loss, and gone on with her life. In that other world a mother no doubt will go to the opening ceremo-

nies for the base named after her daughter. She will wear a gray suit and sit on a wooden platform near a podium while the Air Services Academy band plays. Right behind her will sit the hero's sister and her two children—her two beautiful children, the newspeople will call them. The mother will receive a folded flag, the bear flag of the California Republic, from the commander of her daughter's squadron and hold that flag decorously upon her lap during the speeches. She will bring the flag home and put it away in the cedar chest with the similar flag that came home from Roumania over her husband's coffin. No doubt she will cry while she does so, sob out loud for old grief remembered, then wash her face and take comfort in the presence of her beloved grandchildren.

Unless, of course, this next story becomes true. In that world a dazed mother, still in something like shock from being reunited with the daughter that she'd long given up for dead, will put on a pink suit to sit on the platform, but in a chair slightly behind that of the daughter herself. The Bear Flag will be flying free in the wind, rather than folded in a lap, as the Air Services Academy band plays. There will still be speeches, but the last of them will be delivered by the daughter, standing straight and proud, since she will be able to lean on the podium. Unfortunately, that story has its logical correlate: in this world, in America, a mother does not know that she is on the verge of losing her daughter yet once again, that some mysterious and utterly unforeseen event, engineered by the Prince of Lies, is about to sweep her daughter away forever, the same daughter that was already snatched twice, not once but twice, from the jaws of death by medical science. In this world, no officer will hand her a folded flag. The Air Force Academy band will not play. She will not have the Stars and Stripes and Maple Leaves to lay into the aforementioned cedar chest with the

politically outdated, unfoliated Stars and Stripes that came home from Roumania.

The daughter lies on a flowered bedspread and decides that none of these stories can possibly be true. Their truth depends for its existence upon another, even more peculiar story, that the devil and Reb Akiba have come to earth to tell the daughter tales in the first place. As much as she enjoys the story of Owens Air Services base and her brilliant performance in her last dogfight, she will have to label it wishful thinking. Or compensation? Not quite that word, but a fancier label, one she heard from the psychotherapist assigned to the resurrected in their first weeks back alive. Compensomthing. Compensatory fantasy. Wishful thinking dressed up to go to dinner. If only she'd been given a fully armed

plane. If only they'd let her fly combat the way she knew she could fly. If only. And Old Nick came to tell her that it was indeed true. But the rabbi! Why would he come to reinforce a lie? Because he wasn't really there. Neither of them.

As the curtains stir in the window and molded shadows drift across the bed, she reminds herself that she, however, is here now, in her mother's room, in the only world in which she can truly believe. She makes herself be aware of her body. Head. Back of the head. Eye. Mouth. Tooth. Hand. Palm of the hand. Nail. Window. Door. House. Sword. Snake. Ox. Camel. Fish. Fish-hook. Water. Field. Tent-peg. Tally mark. And the one I can never remember the name for. Lamed? Yeah, Lamed. Something to do with oxen, dunt it? Dunt matter. The twenty-two letters with which God created the universe. The infinite letters with which It created all the universes .

For a moment Tiffany wonders if she's going to scream. Instead, she falls asleep, with the complete suddenness of a combat veteran who knows what it means to grab sleep whenever she can.

* * *

On Monday morning, when Tiffany reaches the clinic, she finds that she's been scheduled for neuro rehab first thing, as Gina's still working with the new arrivals up in diagnostics. Tired as she is from the weekend, she's just as glad to sit down and play video games, once she gets used to the weight of the monitors and the sticky feel of electrodes. At first the game goes badly, and her mind drifts, thinking of her sister. They would like to spend tomorrow evening together, go out to dinner alone, just the two of them, to talk. Mark has already agreed; he'll go to LoDarryl's for the game on TV. Mandi will no doubt feel hurt. When monitors shriek and complain, registering her lack of concentration, she forces herself to pay attention to the small purple alien and his enemies. He seems easier to order around today, moves faster, ducks quicker, dashes through the maze as if he somehow knows that his little electronic life depends on it. All at once she realizes that she has him at the door without a monster in sight. He slams himself against it, the door pops open, the screen changes. The maze lies behind him. What stretches ahead is a long tunnel, gray and cold and seemingly endless, but all along, on either side, there are doors.

"Captain?"

"Damn!"

"Oh no, I'm sorry." Hazel Weng-Chang stands behind her. "What have I done?"

"Nothing." Tiffany hits the save button hard. When the screen freezes, she whistles under her breath and turns to give Hazel a smile. "Sorry. I just got to the next level."

"Wonderful! Doctor's going to be glad to hear that! Which is, by the way, why I'm here. She's got hospital duty this afternoon. She wants to see you now. Okay?"

"Sure, fine with me."

In her office, Dr. Rosas is sitting behind her desk, cluttered with data disks, a stack of papers, a couple of books. Tiffany realizes that this disorder, left for her to see, is a test of some sort. Most likely Rosas changed the time of their appointment on purpose, too; once such a change would have disoriented her. She smiles, sitting down, glancing at the desk top again. It all makes perfect visual sense.

"You look good this morning, captain," Rosas says. "How was your weekend?"

Here is the moment of truth, the crux, when Tiffany should tell Rosas about her peculiar hallucinations, her vivid mental creations of the Devil and Rabbi Akiba, her strange delusion that these figures have spoken to her of other worlds.

"Well, pretty good, really," she says instead. "Had a great time with my sister on Sunday. But..." she hesitates only briefly. "But I had a lot of pain in the bad leg on Sunday morning. I kinda gave in to temptation and ran about a block, just to find out what it would feel like."

The doctor rolls her eyes to heaven but smiles.

"Well now you know what it feels like. Still hurt?"

"No, it eased up around noon."

"Good. But before you try running again, let's build up some more muscle mass, okay? Gina will let you know when it's time for track and field."

They share a laugh.

"Anything else?"

"Well, I was doing some thinking. Everyone says I keep making all this progress, doing better than they ever thought I could, right?"

"Yeah, that's sure true. Our star pupil."

"But I started thinking about what I'm gonna do next, when I'm not doing therapy anymore. And I know I could still fly, if only I could fly. You know? The data's still there. It's the wiring that's no good." She holds up the formerly bad hand. "And the meat."

"Well, you're making tremendous progress in physical therapy. I wouldn't rule out a complete recovery there, no, I certainly wouldn't."

"But the wiring?"

Rosas sighs, looks down, straightens the edges of the papers.

"I can't promise anything."

"Tell me something — honest, I mean. Think I'll ever be able to fly again?"

"No." Rosas looks up, her eyes sad pools in the shadowed light. "I really don't. I can't see your brain healing enough to take a cybernode, and I can't see your reflexes ever being as fast, as steady, as they used to be. But captain, you've proved me wrong before, you know. I said you'd never get that hand back, didn't I?"

Tiffany smiles and clenches her fingers, but the smile is a sham to ease Rosas's feelings. When the doctor made her pronouncement about the hand, Tiffany knew, in some deep and wordless way, that the doctor was wrong, that if she fought and clawed her way toward health, she would prove the doctor wrong. Now, she feels only grief for her lost skies.

She has, however, one more authority to consult. Much later, as she's leaving the hospital, she remembers that she told Rosas nothing about her hallucinations. There is something she wants to ask them first, before she tells the doctor the truth, before the doctor powers up her comp unit to access ROM graphics and explain these hallucinations away once and for all as symptoms of her condition, as a particularly irksome and detailed glitch in the wiring. She takes it as a given that once the doctor does explain them away, she herself will believe that they don't exist, no matter how compelling it seems that they do exist, no matter how much sense this story of their existence makes of all her shattered memories, her scattered thoughts. She is, first and foremost, a soldier, and Rosas is now, in this peculiar war of recovery she's fighting, her commanding officer to be implicitly obeyed. Until then, however, she will fall back on another military rule, a very ancient one: what commanding officers don't know about, they can't countermand.

In another world the powers that be are building Owens Air Services base out of the ruins of Los Angeles; here, in this non-sovereign California, the same base will exist, but with another name: the two bases, the two names, each a different letter in the long chains that speak the universe. And she, one person, not important enough, really, to be called a letter, some small diacritical mark, maybe, a tiny accent, a rough breathing—she, or so they say, must choose where she will fall in the long discourse of the worlds. So they say.

As she waits for the bus, she keeps looking around her, expecting Nick and Akiba to come walking up the long slope of street. Once the bus arrives, and she boards, she expects to see them sitting in the back, waiting for her. All during the ride round by the ocean, the turn and the long journey east, she finds herself tensing every time the bus stops to take on passengers, finds herself craning her neck to peer around the standees and check out new arrivals. Logically, she supposes, if Nick and Akiba are hallucinations, she should be able to call them up by thinking about them, to invoke them with their names and images from whatever dark place in her mind it is that they live, but no matter how hard she concentrates, they never appear. All at once she realizes that what she's managed to conjure up is a missed bus stop, that the trolley is crossing Arguello a good long ways beyond her transfer point. She starts to rise and reach for the cord, remembers HUNTER'S NIGHT, sits down again. She finds the card of the EuroFaire Bookshop, restored to the breast pocket of the newly washed Forty-Niner jacket, and checks the address: just off Geary on Masonic, only a few blocks farther on.

Since Tiffany hasn't been in this part of town in years, it takes her a while to orient herself after she leaves the bus. She stands at the crest of one hill, looks east along wide gray Geary Boulevard, which runs downhill through a jungle of stucco-crete cubes, cardboard shacks, temporary shelters of all sorts cluttering round the ruins of an old hospital, then hits a valley green with vegetable gardens and small trees sprouting among rubble. She can just pick out a white and orange trolley, trundling across to meet the bus she's just left. Far far at the edge of the view another hillside rises, patched green and gray with housing and weeds, shacks and gardens, in equal measure. She can remember being a small child and standing at this same bus stop, watching electric cars rush by on the now silent streets, looking east toward downtown and seeing, peeking over the rise of that distant hill, the tops of tall gray buildings, gleaming with windows. Now she sees blue sky and an empty crest. In that other world, could there be money to rebuild downtown, civilian money for investing in a city that here in this world the military no longer needs and thus refuses to repair? Probably not, if there in that world she flew to defend a foreign country. She cannot imagine a world in which American troops fight for some reason other than cash. In that world, if it exists, she, the combat pilot, took even greater risks than the other Tiffany, the mere ferryman, did in this one, and not for love nor duty, but for only the chance to fly. In both worlds, equally desperate for fuel, civilian airlines must no longer exist.

With a shrug she pulls out the card again, checks the address, turns and walks down Masonic, leaving the Geary view behind for a welter of shops and offices, eking out a marginal business in the stucco-crete

cubes left from the downtown relocation after the quake. She finds the bookstore on the top floor of an old wooden house. At the head of a chipped and dusty mahogany staircase she lingers on a landing piled with wooden crates of sale books, glances at the titles while she pants and finally catches her breath. Most of the books are French, German, Italian, or one of the many languages that use the Cyrillic alphabet, which she can't read. Scattered throughout, though, are Euro-English titles, mysteries, cookbooks, romances, serious-looking histories, and even a bird-guide. The books look so promising that she's afraid to go in. For so long now she's searched for HUNTER'S NIGHT that finding it would make a rip through the fabric of her daily life.

Before she can turn and head down the stairs, a young black woman, dressed in a blue and green dashiki, her head wrapped in matching cloth, appears in the open door.

"Help you with something, mam?"

Tiffany finds herself caught by the demands of civility.

"Well, yeah. I'm looking for a science fiction novel that's probably a Euro book. You guys carry something like that"

"We got some SF, yeah. Come on in."

Tiffany limps into the store, and for a moment the only open space that she can see is the narrow strip in front of the counter. The rest of the room appears to her sight as solid walls and towers of books, looming and leaning. The clerk shoves a box to one side with her foot, then slips behind the counter.

"What's the name?"

"Oh. Uhhere. I got it written down." Tiffany fishes through the cargo pockets of her pants, finds the slip of paper, and hands it over.

"I'll just run it through ROM. I seen that name, Allonsby, but I dint know he wrote a novel."

The comp unit hums, sighs, throws words onto a screen.

"That's weird," the clerk says. "No book by that name in print. Not in Europe, not here, not anywhere. We got the global service — everything that's been in print for ten years back shows up right here."

"Damn. Well, look, maybe I'm misremembering. I started reading it over a year ago now, got it from a USO in Greece, and maybe I just got the title wrong."

"Could be, for sure. Lemme run a check on Allonsby for you." She waits, chewing her lower lip, then shakes her head at the screen. "Good news, bad news. Only book by Allonsby listed is COLLECTED STORIES. Good news is we got a copy. Thirty bucks."

"Swell. I'll take it. That'll be something, anyway."

The clerk sidles out to navigate through the shoals and towers of books while Tiffany searches her cargo pockets and finds her debit card, down at the bottom where she shoved it last Saturday at the cafe. COLLECTED STORIES turns out to be a fat paper-book bound in slick pressboard. While the clerk transmits the sale, Tiffany stares at the cover. She remembers this picture, a dramatically cropped shot of a silver-gray fighter in the foreground, a golden planet looming in the middle in front of a vast reach of

black and starry space. She remembers, however, a very different title embossed in silver over that view. This is the cover for HUNTER'S NIGHT. She knows it, she's sure of it, she can't talk herself out of it. Or it was the cover, back in some other world.

"Mam? Your card?"

Tiffany realizes that the clerk's been holding her debit card out to her for some seconds. She takes it with a forced smile.

Thanks. Sorry. Uh, nice store you got here. Have to come back sometime."

"Thank you, and please do."

Clutching the book in both hands Tiffany hurries out and clatters down the stairs, takes the wrong turn on the sidewalk, keeps walking anyway, away from Geary Boulevard, in the somewhat muddled thought of picking up the Fulton trolley on Fell Street, over by the Panhandle section of the park. After a couple of blocks she slows down and shifts the book to the formerly bad hand, tucking the fingers round, cradling it against her body. Although her fast pace has made her break out into a sweat, when she glances at the sky she sees fog coming, wisping out gray and rolling over the city with a slap of cold wind. She zips the Forty-Niner jacket up and wonders if she should go back, but her panicked dash has left her just about halfway between bus lines. Ahead down the empty street, she can see the dark line of trees marking the Panhandle; a clock in a laundromat window tells her that it's only 1533. Mark won't even expect her home for another couple of hours. She might as well go for a walk in the park on the way, she decides, but by the time she reaches the narrow strip of grass and trees, she's exhausted. Next to a children's rusty swingset and slide stands a concrete bench, painted over with graffiti, speckled with pigeon-white. She finds a reasonably clean spot, sits down, stretches out the bad leg, and sighs in sheer relief.

When she settles the book on her lap, she sees the cover again. For a long time she merely stares at it, then forces herself to pick the book up, open it, hunt through the advertisements in front until she can finally locate the title page, but nowhere does she find one of those usual listings, "by the same author." She does read, however, an introduction that explains the lack. A brilliant author, Allonsby, or so his friend, writing in memorial, describes him, the author of these pitifully few short stories, each one a gem, full of a promise broken when he was killed by a "tragically senseless and random act of terrorism in

London when a street bomb exploded" some four years earlier, long before he could have written the novel Tiffany's been remembering. In fact, the friend goes on to state that when she sorted through his tapes and perma-disk after his death, she found notes, a few scattered pages, of a book he was planning on calling, there in its beginning stages, NIGHT OF THE HUNTER, "too few, too brief, too rough, alas, for me to think of publishing them here." She even remarks that of course, if indeed he'd lived to finish the project, Allonsby would have had to revise that title, reminiscent as it is of a tape dating from the so-called Golden Age of Video.

Tiffany slams the book shut and gets to her feet, tucking it back into the formerly bad hand again. Logically she knows that her wiring must have knitted itself together in some random way to produce another set of false memories. She can make up a new story, if she works at it, that will explain everything. Perhaps she was reading this very book, or perhaps one of his stories in a magazine. She could have seen a picture of the cover in an advert in that magazine, too. Later, in the Athens USO she picked up a novel by someone else and attached the now-sinister name of Albert Allonsby to that book, which was the one she never did finish and has been thinking of ever since. Even as she recites the logic of the thing, she knows deep in her heart and mind that she never heard of the little British bastard before

she picked up HUNTER'S NIGHT. She can see the cover in her mind, the same cover as graces this book of stories but with the other title embossed right at the top, and in the memory image she's holding an entire paper-book, not looking at an advert in some magazine on a screen. All at once she hates Albert Allonsby and his stupidly random death. Why couldn't he have stayed out of Harrod's, or avoided Hyde Park, or kept away from Buckingham Palace, or restrained himself from going on whatever trivial walk, errand, or adventure it was that had taken him into the arms of exploding flame and steel?

"You asshole, Allonsby!"

She's spoken aloud again. She feels the accusing blood rising in her face and looks round, but no one's near her in the park to hear. At that point she realizes that she's left the Panhandle behind, that quite unconsciously she's been walking, crossing the street without looking, wandering into Golden Gate Park proper and far away from the bus line again.

Eucalyptus rustles in a rising wind, spice in fog scent, silver-green on gray light. A long lawn stretches silent. She pulls the good hand, a balled fist, from her jacket pocket, makes herself open it, finds red lint in her palm and the crushed slip of paper, wipes the lint off on her pants and smooths the paper out. HUNTER'S NIGHT, by Albert Allonsby. Her talisman. Spent and broken.

"This sucks, you know. It really does."

She glances round for a trash can, finds none, shoves the paper back into her pocket because it has lived there for so long and she cannot bear another tiny change, another small loss. When she sees two men, one tall and blond, the other short and dressed all in black, hurrying across the lawn toward her, she isn't even surprised. It makes sense, somehow, that they'd show up now, to rub salt in the wound.

"Tiffany, my dear!" The rabbi raises his hat to her. "You left the hospital early, did you not?"

"You guys looking for me there?"

"Yeah," Nick snaps. "Now come on, Tiff, make up your mind. We gotta hurry. The interface isn't going to stay open forever, y'know."

"Tough. I gotta have a little more data before I make up anything, pal."

Nick stares, goggling in disbelief, while Akiba smiles. Together they start walking, drifting aimlessly down an asphalt path through green lawns, past gold and purple clumps of gazanias. Distantly conies music, carillon tapes from the antique carousel hidden behind a low hill, a stand of trees.

"Listen, you guys. I wanna know something before you start yammering on my head with this parallel world crap again. Why are you here? What's it to you what world I'm in?"

"A fair question," Reb Akiba says. "You did die for Israel, you know. Twice, as a matter of fact. You must admit that dying twice is rather remarkable, even in the part of the universe where I'm currently residing. Not exactly a common event, no, not at all, not until very recently, anyway. So it seemed to me that the least I could do was make sure you were happy where you were. So I arranged a small visit. If you weren't happy, I thought, well, we could simply take you back. It's not much, I know, but one feels that one has to show one's gratitude somehow."

"Okay. And thanks. Really, thanks for the thought." She glances at Nick. "You. Explain."

"Don't you order me around!"

"Why not? I been thinking, about a lot of old stories I heard when I was a kid. Creature. That's what the rabbi calls you, and it's true. You're as much a creature as I am. Created. It made you up, dint it? And you hate to admit it, but there you are, Its creature and not even human. I got a lot more right to order you around, buddy, than you do me."

Nick's face flames red with rage, the pale eyes filling with blood until they gleam like coals in a fire. When the rabbi whoops aloud in laughter, Nick spins on him. He raises one hand for a blow, and it seems that his fingernails turn long, curve, become claws — then he catches himself, stopping stone-cold before the rabbi's mocking smile.

"And so what are you going to do to me, with me already dead for thousands of years?"

Nick snarls. Slowly he lowers his hand, an ordinary human hand again, and sighs. Slowly the rage drains from his face, leaving him pale, his eyes the palest thing of all, unblinking as he scowls.

"Front and center, mister," Tiffany says. "Why?"

"You're in the wrong place. I told you that. Should be reason enough. You're out of order."

"So what's it to you?"

"I cannot stand it when things get out of order. Why do you think I warned It against you and all your wretched kind? I did, you know. They're just going to cause trouble, I said. Would It listen? Oh no. Told me to mind my own business. And then, the gall of It, when I went to prove my point, there in that stupid garden, and that's all I was doing, too, trying to prove my point, It got furious."

"Totally unfair." Reb Akiba folds his hands in fake piety. "How could It?" He winks at Tiffany. "Don't take him literally, my dear. There wasn't any real garden. He's the one who's mixing his metaphors now."

"Oh stop mocking me, will you?" Nick turns back to Tiffany with a snarl. "Human? Oh yes, you are that. I'd never deny it. Big fucking deal, lady, big fucking deal. All your kind's ever done is mess everything up for everyone else. Making your damn little choices. Worlds dividing off all over the place. Huh, one of your own kind said it best, "The trouble with organic life is it's so messy.""

"Beg pardon, but Lewis did put that line in the mouth of a villain," the rabbi breaks in. "That character worshipped you, as a matter of fact, which showed her rather alarmingly bad taste in gods, if nothing else."

Nick growls under his breath.

"All right, next question," Tiffany snaps. "Suppose, just suppose, you guys are telling me the truth. I got a choice to make. Well, okay, won't everything split again when I choose? Won't there be four worlds instead of two? You know, like this one where I stayed, and this one where I left, and that one where I stayed away, and that one where I came back."

"Jeez," Nick mutters. "I never thought of that. Oh crap."

"No no no no," Reb Akiba says. "You see, the worlds have already split. The only question remaining is into which one you fall. Let me see, I'm the one who needs a metaphor this time. Aha. Atomic orbits."

That's it. The potential for orbits exist unchanging for each element. Where each individual electron falls, now, well, that's another matter entirely. Like a page from the Torah. The letters must exist in each word in their proper order. Which drop of ink becomes which letter... that's not important. It doesn't alter the sense of the word, which molecule of ink the scribe uses to write it out."

"But we don't know what kind of choices this is going to influence down the line," Nick says. "Hey, old man, this is scary. What if..."

"No more what ifs!" Tiffany is determined to keep this discussion under her control. "Now, these parallel worlds, they can differ in a lot of small ways at once and still match in a lot of other ways, right?"

"Yeah," Nick says. "Or differ in big ways but match in all kinds of small ones. It just depends. Dunt make any sense. That's why I hate it so much."

"Okay, so tell me something." She appeals to Akiba. "I bet you know this. Just somehow I bet you do. In that other world, am I ever gonna heal enough to fly? I dunt mean, ride in some lousy plane. I mean: fly."

"No, dear, I'm afraid not. Your nervous system, what you call the wiring..." He lets his voice trail away. "Well, you could probably fly an antique plane someday. One of those ones with the blade-things on the front end."

"Big deal. If I could find one that could even still get off the ground, huh? Or the gas to put in it."

They stab her to the heart, his words. They burn through her entire body worse than the pain of waking from death upon a field hospital table. Her last hope is gone. She'll never fly again, not in any world. Not that she would want to fly in combat, no. She has drunk her fill of death, could never again inflict death upon another living soul no matter who ordered her to do so, not now, not having tasted it herself. But to be an instructor, say, to fly in peaceful skies, to feel again her mind meld with her plane's cybernetics until there is no mind, only flight... the lonely impulse. Rapture no more. Never. When both men swivel to look at her, she knows that she is weeping for the second time in a couple of days, for only the second time in a couple of years.

"It means that much?" Rab Akiba says, and softly.

"That much. The one thing I woulda left here for. The only lousy thing I ever wanted." She pulls herself together, wipes her face on the jacket sleeve. "Well, hell, then. Forget it. I ain't going anywhere."

"Yes you are too!" Nick snarls. "I'm not going to stand for this! You can't mess up two whole worlds ___"

"Hey, man, chill!" Tiffany uses her best officer's voice. "Nothing's ever going to be perfect, you know. Dunt matter what world you're in."

"It coulda! It coulda been perfect! You've spoiled it, all of you. And I hate you for it! All of you! You won't do what you're supposed to. You never would and you all blame me for it, as if I wouldn't whip you all into shape if only I had the chance! Why won't you go back? You belong there, you should be there, so why the hell won't you go there?"

"Too many people here are gonna miss me too much if I go. Mark, my mother, my sister, the kids. In that other world, they be over it already, losing me, I mean. Here, they never did lose me. If I leave, they

will. It'll hurt."

"Oh, that! I should have known. Your little cutesy-pie human sentiments. Love, I suppose you mean? Disgusting! What about the air base, Tin? What about the honor? They know, back there, that you're the best damn fighter pilot that ever lived."

"Yeah so? If I dunt go back, they'll still know. And I'll know they know. So what?"

Nick's defeat is almost comical. His mouth drops like a cartoon, he closes it with a snap, tries to speak, shakes his head. For a long moment he stares at the ground, then looks up, his eyes running tears to match hers.

"Please?" he says. "Just this one little thing?"

"Ain't a little thing, not to Mark and my family."

The tears stop as suddenly as they started.

"I really wish those old legends were true," Nick snarls. "The ones about the eternal fires and all that hell crap. I would love to drag you kicking and screaming —"

"Then she'd really be out of place, creature," the rabbi breaks in. "You're contradicting yourself."

Nick screams and vanishes. One moment he was there; now he's gone, completely gone. Rabbi Akiba stops walking, considers the spot where once the Devil stood on earth, and shrugs his shoulders.

"He always was a poor loser, you know. Well, my dear, I'm afraid that I have to go now, too, but I really do think you've made the right decision." As he speaks, he seems to be growing thin, stretched out like the fog at its edge, turning first pale, then transparent, wisping away. "And don't worry about that other world. It really won't split again, not because of you, anyway." Only his voice is left. "Farewell. And thank you again, my dear, for guarding my people."

He too is gone. Despite all her reservations, despite the part of her mind that is screaming at her, telling her that she's been hallucinating, that she's making all this up herself, Tiffany regrets his going. She would have liked to have sat at the feet of Rabbi Akiba for a long afternoon, the first woman in history to do so, most likely, to have listened to him talk about the law and the holy books without Nick around to interrupt.

"Neither of them were real, you know," she remarks aloud. "You gotta remember that. It's all in the wiring."

Spoken aloud, and she glances around fast. No one's within earshot, but the long lawn has disappeared, the trees have vanished, she stands on the sidewalk in front of a gray door, scabbing paint, beside a small window, covered with rusty iron bars, light gleaming through the window. Automatically she finds her key, puts it in the lock, walks the two steps down. Home. Shuts the door fast as Meebles gets to his feet on the sofa and stretches, yawning. She whirls round, sees gray light, the last of the foggy day, coming through the window. She's reached home before dark. It cannot still be Friday, as for one panicked moment she was convinced it was. Tonight, as well, she smells no chicken and garlic — smells sausage, rather, and a lot of onions, frying together, and she hears no TV, only Mark singing "Down by the Riverside" in the kitchen. If nothing else, she knows that she did not hallucinate every event for the past three days.

Yet still, she strokes the cat, soft and warm, rubs her hand along the scratchy back of the sofa, touches the smooth painted wall, too, just to reassure herself that she's no longer in the park, that somehow or other she must have kept walking in the company of the rabbi and the devil to fetch up like a bit of foam thrown by a wave against her door.

"I'm sorry, my dear, to startle you." Akiba's voice sounds just behind her right shoulder. "I was only trying to save your strength, you see, by bringing you home."

She swirls round. No one there.

"Tiff?" Mark calls out. "That you?"

"Sure is." She can feel the blood draining from her face as she hurries toward the kitchen.

"Someone with you?"

"No. Just me."

"Okay. Thought I heard someone else, that's all."

"Yeah? Just some kids outside."

All of a sudden her knees seem made of wet bath towels. By taking one careful step at a time, placing the bad leg just so, moving the good leg ahead of it, dragging the bad one forward again, she manages to get to the kitchen. Mark turns from the stove in some concern.

"Jeez, I'm so glad you're here." She catches the doorjamb and steadies herself. "Just for a minute there I thought — well, I dunno what I thought. Tell me something. We did go to my mom's yesterday, dint we?"

"Sure did."

"And on Saturday, LoDarryl, he was here, talking about dump running?"

"Yep. What's wrong? You having trouble with your memory again?"

"Fraid so." She's not sure if she's lying or telling the truth. "I'm gonna talk with the doctor bout it, tomorrow."

"Good. Hon, you look dead beat out. Come on, sit down."

"I did too much walking. God, I'm thirsty."

She lets him lead her to a chair, lets him sit her down like a child, and fetch her a glass of water, which she drinks fast, in big gulps. He refills it, frowns at the stove, then hands her the glass.

"You better take that jacket off, and I better stir this dinner."

She takes it off, spends a good couple of minutes smoothing it out, folds it neatly in half, then lets it slide unnoticed to the floor.

"How was your day, sweetheart?"

"Oh, pretty good."

His voice, his expression, are so carefully arranged that she knows he's hiding something.

"Oh yeah? Out with it. Something happened."

"Not much, really." All at once the grin breaks through. "Got myself that warehouse job today. Salary starts at fifteen hundred a month, but they's built-in risers."

"All right! Wish we had some champagne."

"Wish you could drink it."

Tired as she is, she manages to laugh, snaps him a salute, laughs again when he returns it. He takes the frying pan off the heat and sets it to one side, then sits down and catches both of her hands in his.

"So I been thinking," he goes on. "You wanna get married?"

"You bet." She can hear her own voice shaking. "I mean, hell, why not, now?"

"Just what I thought. Why the hell naff We can throw ourselves a big old party, hire a band, maybe. Gonna do it up right."

"Sounds good to me, man. And hey, if you want to invite LoDarryl and Manny Mike and the guys, that's cool with me."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. No matter what, they were in the war with you."

"Yeah, they sure were. Thanks, hon." He raises their clasped hands and kisses her fingers. "I think that's one reason I love you so much. You understand bout stuff like that, being in the war, and how you feel about the guys you were in the war with."

Tiffany merely smiles, thinking that she understands a great deal more, that she remembers a great deal more, than she can ever tell him.

AFTERWORD

On a Friday morning, some two weeks after their wedding, Tiffany is just leaving for the hospital when the mail carrier pounds on the door. She accepts a battered parcel, wrapped in torn brown paper and too much tape, starts to toss it onto the couch and leave, then hesitates. In the usual place right above the address, and spilling over the top of the box as well as running down the side are Israeli stamps, postmarked all over with Hebrew letters, far too many stamps for the weight and faded ones at that, a commemorative Golda Meir issue that must be at least twenty years old. Her first thought is to wonder where Reb Akiba dug them up this time. Her second is to decide that for a change she can be a few minutes late. When she finds a knife, back in the kitchen, and slices the parcel open, a big paper-book version of HUNTER'S NIGHT slides onto the table. For a long time she stares at the cover picture, the cropped silver-gray fighter, the golden planet against a backdrop of black sky and stars; at the title,

embossed silver; at the author's name in smaller black letters, Albert Allonsby. On top of the vuphone lies the COLLECTED STORIES.

"Right about that cover picture, wasn't I? Oh jeez!"

The book that doesn't exist, whose author died before he could write it, lies in front of her. She grabs the wrap, turns it this way and that: no return address, just the Israeli postmark, but the stamps convince her that Rabbi Akiba has sent her a wedding present from another world. No one else she knows in Israel would have put six times extra postage on a parcel like this. Anyone else would have sent her a note, even if they had time for only one line, a simple "write and let us know howyou're doing" if nothing else. When she reaches for the book she finds her hands are shaking. Slowly, carefully, as if it just might vanish at her touch, she picks it up, opens it, flips through the pages, reading a word here, a sentence there.

"Same book all right, just like I remembered. Well, I'll be damned."

Curled on a kitchen chair Meebles opens one eye, shuts it again. Tiffany tucks the book under her arm and heads for the door. Book or no book, she refuses to be late for therapy, and she can, after all, read a few pages on the bus. As she's locking the door behind her, it occurs to her that she never did tell Doctor Rosas about those hallucinations. As she walks down the street toward the streetcar stop, it also occurs to her that now, she never will. Once she's installed in her favorite seat, she flips through the book, glancing at a scene here, a bit of dialogue there, discovers that these words do lift off from the page and make sense, form pictures and sounds in her mind exactly as they used to. She finds, as well, her old place in the story. She remembers perfectly where she left off, right at the last chapter but one, just as the heroine realizes she can crack the traitor's comp access codes. As the car picks up speed, clanging round onto Seventh Avenue, Tiffany begins to read.