

ROBERT REEDDUEWE REACH HIM TOO LATE, pulling him out of the curing pond, nothing left but a melted body and a pain-twisted face. For a moment or two, we talk about the dead expeditor, how he was good and why he wasn't perfect, and why he killed himself-- because he was imperfect, but noble is why. Then we wash his face and kiss him, as is customary, and I deliver the body to Scrap. Our plant manager needs a report, but she doesn't want stories of another suicide. She tells me that she doesn't. So I describe it as an accident, another misstep from the high corundum mesh, and maybe we should repair those railings during the next down cycle. But she doesn't want to hear that, either. "No cycles but up." She is delivering a threat. "We're too far behind as it is, Jusk." I nod. I smile. Then I ask, "When can I have a new expeditor?" "Three shifts," she warns. Which means ten shifts, or more. Then she gives me a hard stare, eyes and silence informing me that it would be so lovely if this little problem vanished on its own. I step outside. Traffic is scarce in the main corridor. I walk exactly as far as I can without leaving home, waving at the passing birth wagons until one pulls off. The driver shows me his cargo, but only one of the newborn is large enough to do the job. I ask what it will take for that big one to be lost during delivery, and the driver says, "I can't." He says, "That's a special rush order, that one." A lie, most likely. "Wait," I tell him. I go inside, then return with a piece of raw Memory. Memory has no color and very little mass, and of course it is incomplete. It's salvage. That's the only kind of Memory that's ever traded. Laying it flush against his forehead, the driver sighs and grows an erection, then says, "Deal." It's the Memory of one of His long-ago lovers -- a popular commodity. The driver is even willing to help carry the newborn through the closest door, he's so eager. Then I give him a look, asking where he got that Memory. "I found it," he says. "I don't remember where." "Good," I say. My crew is at work. Standing in the main aisle, I can see our entire line -- bugovens and the furnace; the curing pond and finishers-- and I see the tiny faces that look over at me, curious and eager. "Keep working," I tell them. Then, "Thank you." With laser shears, I cut the newborn out of its sack. It's a big worker, all right: shiny and slick and stinking of lubricants and newness. I unfold the long, long limbs, then engage its systems. There's no way to be certain what job it is meant to do, but anyone can be anything, if needed. All that matters is that we serve Him. I kick the newborn in its smooth crotch. With a flutter, its eyes open, absorbing light for the first time. "My name is Jusk," I tell it. "I'm your superior. This is my right hand. Shake it with your right hand, please." It obeys, without hesitation. "Stand," I say. Then after it succeeds, on its first attempt, I tell it, "Walk with me. This is your introductory tour. Pay close attention." "I shall." "What is my name?" "Jusk." "On your left is a stack of crates. Look at them. And now look at me. How many crates did you see?" "Fifteen." "What are the dimensions of the third-largest crate?" "Point one by point one by point four standard." "Now, without looking, tell me the serial number on the top crate." The newborn recites twenty-three digits before I lift my hand, stopping it. "Good," I say. "You're integrating nicely." The mouth can't yet smile, but I sense pleasure. Pride. "What do you make here?" my new expeditor inquires. "Bone." Its eyes are simple black discs, yet by some trick of the light, they seem astonished. Or disappointed, perhaps. "It's not a glamorous product," I concede, "but bone is vital." What would He be without a skeleton? Without His handsome, most perfect shape? "You'll be my expeditor. That's a critical job. Before you begin, you'll need to find an identity. A name and face, and a body suit." It nods. "Culture a sense of self," I advise. "My strongest workers have the strongest identities." It says nothing. "You'll find everything you need in Personnel. Mock-flesh. Eyes. Everything." I watch it for a moment, then add, "Most of us pattern ourselves after someone from His past. A trusted friend, a lover. Whomever. Just as long as it honors Him." The newborn is a head taller than I, and strongly built. Simple eyes gaze at my face. At my workers. Everywhere. Then it speaks quietly, warning me, "I'm not supposed to be here. I was intended for another duty." "Except you're needed here." I have given these

tours to more than a hundred new borns, and none has ever acted disappointed. "Come with me," I tell it. "I want to show you something." The stairs and high platform are a blue corundum mesh. The ceiling and distant floor are polished diamond, smooth and lovely, and the walls are a rougher diamond, catching and throwing the light. I point to Personnel, then the back doorway leading to the warehouse, and I name each of the five assembly lines. Every line has its own bug oven, squat and rectangular, the exteriors plated with gold. "You're my expeditor," I promise. "You'll feed my oven whatever raw materials it needs." "Your expeditor," it repeats. "Once you've got your name and face, visit the warehouse. Ask for Old Nicka. He'll show you what else you need to know." "How big is this place?" "Huge, isn't it?" I love this view. I always have. "It's nearly five thousand standards long, from Assembly to Shipping." "Yet this is all so tiny," my expeditor observes. "Compared to Him, this is nothing." I look at the faceless face, uncertain how to respond. "How many workers?" it asks. "Including you and me, five hundred and eleven." "And who am I replacing?" Newborns never ask that question. They're too grateful to be alive, and the prospect of anything else should be unimaginable. "Was it a suicide?" I hear. "No. An accident." Beyond the eyes is doubt. Clear and undeniable doubt. "Why bring up suicide?" I have to ask. The tiny, simple mouth seems to almost smile. "I must have overheard something. I'm sorry." New ears might have heard one of my people whispering, yes. "We run a careful clean shop here," I warn it. Softly, very softly, it says, "Due." "What's that?" "My name." With a long delicate finger, it writes Due against its own bright chest, in His language. "That is me." "Fine," I allow. Gazing clown at my home, and his, Due tells me, "It's surprising. You only make bone, but look how beautiful this is..." "As if it should be anything else, I think." "I think I'll stay," proclaims Due. As if any of us, in any large way, has the burden of choice. AGES AGO, WHEN the construction teams were erecting our plant, there were plans to include a large chapel where we would have worshipped Him in our spare moments. It would have been a glorious chamber filled with inspiring Memories free for the touching, plus likenesses of His family and trusted followers. But according to legend, a sudden decree put an end to that indulgence. Instead of a chapel, the workers were told to build a fifth assembly line, increasing the production of bone by a long way. And what's more, every existing chapel inside older plants were to be converted immediately, their space dedicated to making more of whatever those plants produced. Time is critical, the decree tells us. Maybe not with its words, but in the meaning that the words carry between them. Hurry, He calls to us. Hurry. "That new man --" "Due?" "Gorgeous." Mollene giggles, dancing around her work station. "I just wish he'd notice little me!" "Nothing on or about Mollene is little." So he found himself a pretty face," I say. "Not pretty," she warns. "Gorgeous. The whole package is. Handsome and strong...but not too strong..." "Which means?" "He's delicious," she purrs, and that from a woman who has tasted more than a few. "Am I right, Tannie? Tell him I'm right!" Tannie works across from Mollene. The women are old, nearly as old as this plant, and while they're both durable, it's a durability built in different ways. Tannie is small, quiet and glum, not prone to courage or her partner's hyperbole. Yet even she admits, "He's one of the most beautiful creatures that I've ever seen." "I told you, Jusk!" cackles Mollene. "You did. You did." The women are a good team. A great team, even. When I was made line foreman, I had an inspiration, putting them together at the bug oven's mouth. It takes good hands and balance to handle the freshly made bone, and it takes experience. And nearly two thousand shifts have passed since my inspiration. Much has gone wrong on the line, but nobody's better than Mollene and Tannie when it comes to giving our bone its first look and delicate touch. "A glorious, gorgeous man, and he didn't look at me," Mollene sings. "You like to have your looks at me. Don't you, Jusk?" Her mock-flesh is old and often-patched. The knees and elbows are worn thin, and a band of softness encircles her waist, and her big strong confident hands are shiny where the real Mollene peeks through. Yet even still, she is spectacular. Broad thighs and hips serve to carry her central features -- two jungles of shaggy black mock-hair, and

between the jungles, a pair of enormous, endlessly vigorous breasts complete with fat nipples that she paints a shouting red at the start of every shift. "I love looking at you," I tell the magnificent woman. She giggles, and in thanks, gives me a few good bounces. As I recall, Mollene fashioned herself around the partial Memory of an early love-- an insatiable older woman from His long-ago youth. By contrast, Tannie based herself on the wife of one of His current deputies -- the kind of woman who has said perhaps five words to Him in His life, if that. But of course everyone is important to Him. He treasures every face, no matter how small the person behind it. As I think, a sheet of hot white bone emerges from the oven, built of fibers and resins and a maze of finger-thick pores. Together, in a single motion, the women lift the bone and place it gently, gently onto the aerogel belt. It looks like perfect bone, at first glance. Mollene lifts a laser pen, ready to sign her name where it won't be too obvious. Every worker does it; a signature is a harmless way to leave a trace of yourself. But she pauses, noticing several coagulated masses of bugs clinging to the far side. To Tannie's side. Each mass looks like a drop of honey -- a gooey golden substance that I've seen only in His memories-- but unlike honey, the clusters are hard as jewels, and in a glancing fashion, alive. "How's the bone?" Mollene calls out. Tannie is prying off the bugs. Sometimes they're just stragglers, and the bone beneath is fine. Is perfect. "It looks all right," says the old woman. But then she touches it, and shudders, jerking back her hand in pain. "What is it?" I ask. Tannie cradles the hand with its mate, her tiny brown eyes staring off into the distance. "The bone's bad," she says. "Something's wrong...in the oven..." Mollene curses enough for three people, and with a relentless strength, she jerks that sheet of bone off the belt, getting beneath it and carrying it to the pallet where she's been stacking Scrap, her substantial ass jiggling in time to her quick steps. I take her place, for the moment. The next bone is even worse. Instead of a seamless snowy white, it's a pissy yellow, and the pores are more like out-and-out holes. Something's very wrong in the bug oven. Which isn't new news, of course. Our plant is more than ten thousand shifts old, and over time these bugs acquire mutations. Subtle failures of control. And a nasty tendency toward laziness. With an iridium hammer, I smack the emergency kill switch. Diamond chains and matching gears come to a grudging halt. What next? I wonder. Maintenance should be told -- that's policy -- but Maintenance means slow solutions and acidic, accusing questions. Hanging beside the oven are a suit and helmet and boots. Each is made from antigen-free mock-bone. That's how we fool the oven and its bugs. And they have to be fooled, or they'll assume that an intruder is just another raw material -- a collection of soulless atoms waiting to be gnawed to nothingness, one atom at a time. Bugs can't recognize a helping hand. They're stupid, and dangerous, and I despise them. Mollene returns while I'm dressing. With her voice and a touch, she tells me, "Darling, please be careful." You don't rise to foreman without knowing caution, at least now and then. The oven doors are gold-faced bone, heavy and slick. The chamber beyond is furiously hot and singing with bugs. Most of the mindless bastards are too small to see. Bristling with jointed arms and bucky-tube mouths, they build perfect fibers of proteins and plastics, ceramics and shape-memory metals. Other bugs, larger by a thousandfold, knit the fibers together. Then the largest few extrude the resins that finish the bone, creating a simple perfect and wondrously strong skeleton worthy of Him. Duty grabs me, forcing me deeper into the oven. The closest sheet of new bone is gray-black and brittle, its corner shattering with a touch of my gloved hand. I crawl beneath the bone, then look up. Clinging to the oven's ceiling, to one of the oven's bug-wombs, is some sort of phage, round and jeweled with spikes and sucking mouth parts. Climbing onto the diamond belt, I reach high with one hand. But as I grab the phage, it strikes back, a stream of brownish fluid rolling thick down my arm, making it taste wrong. Making it seem dangerous. The oven panics, marshaling every defense against the intruder. My arm is the intruder. I wrench the phage loose, then I'm running in a cowardly stoop, fleeing across a dozen standards of tangled and rasping bug heaven. My suit is pierced. A burning begins on my

hand and forearm, then the pain falls to nothing in the most terrible way. Glancing down, I see a ragged stump that's being gnawed shorter by the instant, an army of tiny sparkling flecks trying to kill me. The phage lies on the floor behind me. Using my good hand, I grab it. But more of that damned juice leaks out, splattering wildly, the bugs launching a second assault, happily gnawing away my final hand. I have nothing left to hold with. The phage drops in front of me, and with more luck than skill, I kick it, sending it flying through a gap in the doorway. Then I stagger out after it -- what is left of me -- my arms shrunk to wagging stumps and my helmet half-digested. But I see Mollene standing in the golden light, waiting for me with those lovely breasts; and if I wasn't half-dead and repulsive, I would kiss her breasts. And I'd kiss Tannie's tiny ones. That's how good and how awful I feel. Poor Jusk, I tell myself. Nearly murdered, and desperate for the saving taste of love... ! "You'll like these arms," the man promises, not caring the slightest about what I like or don't like. "They're good arms, mostly." I don't know him. He wears extra-thick flesh like everyone in Maintenance, and a solid broad face, and judging by the smooth, unworn condition of his hands, he's very young. A novice, at best. No one else is free to work on me, what with the bug oven damaged and nobody sure how bad it is. "How do the arms feel?" "Wrong," I admit. "Lift them. And again." His careful adjustments make everything worse. "Now once more. Is that better?" "Much," I lie. He seems satisfied. "Yeah, they're good arms. We didn't need to refurbish them all that much." "What's important is you," says another voice. A tense, acidic voice. Stepping into view, the plant manager conjures up a look of haggard concern. To the maintenance man, she says, "They need help at the oven." He makes a grateful retreat. I gesture with my tight arms. "What do we know?" "About the phage? It was built for sabotage." She speaks in a confidential tone, admitting the obvious. "Officially, we're reporting it as a contaminate from outside. The sloppiest bug ovens are making some free-ranging parasites..." "Why lie?" "Do you want to deal with Security troops? Do you, Jusk?" The obvious occurs to me: Who's in the best position to sabotage a bug oven? It's line foreman, of course. She watches as I flex my new arms, then she steps close to me, using a spare tool to make her own adjustments. I forgot that she began in Maintenance, back in that remote era when the plant was new. Her face belongs to His mother's strong handsome face that was popular in the early shifts but isn't seen much anymore. She looks young, exactly the same as she looked when He saw her as a young boy, complete with the wise sparkle in the pale brown eyes. Leaning closer, her mouth to my ear, she whispers, "That new man. How exactly did you find him?" I tell, in brief. "Due? Due?" She keeps saying the name, softer and softer. Then finally, without hope, she asks, "Do you know where that wagon was taking him?" "No." The wise eyes are distant. Who can she contact, in confidence, who might actually know something? Who can help us without Security finding out that we're involved in an unthinkable crime? Again, I lift my arms. "They feel fine now. Thanks." Once more, she says, "Due?" "Good arms," I say, for lack of better. Then she looks at me, asking, "You know where they came from, don't you?" From the recent suicide, sure. But I was rather hoping to get away without having to mention that. I am Jusk. In my locker, set between a flesh patch kit and a sample of the first bone that I helped build, waits a frazzled piece of Memory. I found it in Personnel. Whenever I place it against my forehead, I see my face just as He saw it. Not unhandsome, I like to think. But there's a vagueness about the edges, which is why this Memory is here. A tangle of imperfections make it unworthy when it comes to His glorious rebirth. I know precious little about the man behind that face. A loyal deputy, he is. And judging by the clues, someone trusted. Practically a friend. In the Memory, the deputy tells Him, "You look twenty years younger, sir. It's remarkable what these treatments can accomplish." He laughs in response -- a calm and wise and enormous laugh -- and with a voice that I have always loved, He promises, "And this is just the start of things." He lifts His hand before His own eyes. I'm helping to rebuild that hand. Inside it is the bone that I am making; in a fashion, I'm one of His deputies, too. "In a few years," He says, "we'll all

be gods...." "Yes, sir -- " "Just fucking wait!" He roars. Then the hand drops, and I can see my face smiling, and the man behind that facesmiles, saying, "I can hardly wait, sir --" THE BUG OVENS are down for inspection, every line useless, and for the timebeing, a holiday holds sway. People distract themselves with talk and littleparties. The usual orgy claims its usual corner, perched on a mat of scrap aerogel. Lubricated with grease, the bodies almost glow, limbs twisting and mouths crying out, the participants working at their fun with an athletic despair. I pause for a moment, watching faces. Where I should be is on my belly inside my own oven; foremen should show the proper interest, even if they can't help make repairs. But I want to speak to Mollene first... where is she...? She's not in the middle of the lovers, which is unlike her. Hearing a stranger's voice, I walk up the polished aisle, coming across a second group of people doing something unexpected. They are sitting quietly, listening as the stranger speaks calmly, describing the true shape of the world. "We live on a great sphere," he says. "What seems perfectly flat to little us actually falls away in every direction, equally and always. Without end." I know that voice but not the handsome face. Due. "Pick a line," says the newborn, "then walk it. Provided you stay true to that line and live long enough, you will walk around the world. But of course that trip takes trillions of shifts. By the time you return home, this facility will be gone, its atoms scattered over that enormous world, and not so much as single memory of us will persist." His audience murmurs quietly. Mollene sits in front, eager to absorb the lesson. "And our round world is part of another, still larger world," the newborn continues. "A trillion trillion times larger and several times older. And infinitely stranger. That world is a ball, too, but in its own peculiar fashion." I find myself listening. The voice compels me to do nothing but. "Think of a black cold emptiness," says Due. "That larger world is carved from that blackness, and within it are an uncountable sprinkling of little worlds like ours." Mollene leans closer to him, begging to be noticed. Due grins at his largest admirer, then asks, "What's the shape of an atom?" "It's round, too!" Mollene exclaims. Not exactly, I remind myself. The furious wanderings of electrons can make around shell, but it's too easy to call them balls. Yet Due agrees with Mollene. His new eyes are bright and gray, his smile nearly guileless. "What if I tell you that Creation -- all there is and all there can be -- is always built from spheres? Round atoms become round worlds, and those worlds become the rounded universe, and there is no end to the round universes that make up Creation "I work hard to say nothing, to let this useless noise vanish on its own. But Tannie, standing at the back of the audience, asks the obvious: "How do you know these things?" Due expects the question. He welcomes it. Nodding, he waits for a moment as if in reflection, then confesses, "I don't know how I know. I was born thinking these things, the same as I was born with these simple hands." What could I say to that? Keeping silent, I try to look unimpressed. There's no easy way to wrestle Mollene away from her new love. Instead, I slip behind the others, approaching Tannie and whispering, "A moment? I need to talk to you." She seems glad for the distraction. "Have you ever heard such talk?" I ask the old woman. I expect her to say, "No," but instead she tells me, "When I was a newborn, the old discussed strange things." "Like worlds within worlds?" "Sometimes. Yes." The audience is asking questions. How big is the world in standards? And exactly how much bigger is the blackness beyond? But the dimensions aren't part of Due's special knowledge, it seems. "You and I can't comprehend these distances," he warns. "We're too tiny. Too limited by a long ways." Too stupid, he means. In a careful murmur, I ask Tannie what I meant to ask her partner. "Did that newborn come close to you? While you were working, I mean. Did he ever, even for a moment, touch the oven?" She looks at me, a worn hand wiping at her patched forehead. "Mollene must have flirted with him," I add. "I've seen the symptoms." "I never saw him near the oven," she assures me. "He was returning to the warehouse for supplies, and he paused for a moment, just to see what new bone looks like." "And to flirt?" She shakes her head. "I know what you want, but I can't give it to you." "I'm not sure what I want, yet I feel

disappointed. Another thought occurs to me. "When you touched that bad bone, you made a face. Why?" She shakes her head for a long moment, then says, "I don't remember." I mean to press her, but suddenly Mollene is talking. "But what does all that mean?" she blurts out. "I'm sorry to be slow, but I don't understand." The newborn smiles, and with an easy charm, he says, "Maybe what I'm saying is that everything is tiny. Even those wonders that we look at as being enormous... they're always small in comparison to something... and never quite so wondrous..." The words don't sound important, but they hit me like a wall of tumbling bone. Due is talking about He who is our purpose. Without ever breaking taboos, he tries to diminish our great and glorious Him. Old Nicka has ruled the warehouse for my entire life, and he has always been Old Nicka -- a small man not meant for physical labor, clad in mock-flesh worn transparent by the ages, his face patched and patched again, its original shape irretrievably lost. Yet despite time and wear, he can tell you exactly how many nine-gauge buckybug wombs are in storage, and how many are on order, and which of them will most likely work once installed. "How's my new expeditor?" I ask Old Nicka. His response is nothing but honest. "He's smart in the worst ways, and stupid where it hurts, and dreamy, and he talks too much, and he'll never be any sort of expeditor. If you want to know what I think." I nod, then mention, "You never thought I'd make much of one, either." "So where are you now?" "I'm the line foreman. You know that." "Because you couldn't cut it as an expeditor." A crooked smile shines. "But so tell me, Jusk. Why ask about that newborn? On his first shift...?" "Curiosity," I offer. His eyes are mismatched in color and size. The newer eye, brown and huge, regards me for a long moment. "Do you want to speak with the boy? He's in the back, counting my stock of D-grade smart-clamps." "Why? Did you lose track of your inventory?" "No! He just needs practice with his counting." The battered old face is masterful when it comes to scorn and outrage. "Next time you buy a newborn off a wagon, make sure that he can count." I nod. "Is there anything else? Or do you want all of my time?" "Someday, Old Nicka will die from simple age -- the rarest of deaths -- and once I forget how he was, I'll miss him, sentimentality winning out over good sense." "Due is dreamy and talks too much," I repeat. "Does he talk to you?" "Not anymore." "But when he did... did he talk about the universe, and Him...?" "What about Him?" Old Nicka growls. I repeat what Due said, and what it seemed to mean, and what Tannic claimed to hear when she was young. "Some of that sounds familiar," Old Nicka admits, thoroughly unimpressed. "But this piss about calling Him small... that's just stupid... even for you, Jusk...!" I bristle, but remain silent. "We can't measure His size, or any other quality." A tiny hand, more metal than flesh, is driven into my chest. "Not His wisdom. Not His goodness. None of those things are knowable -- !" "I realize that," I mutter. "Child," Old Nicka replies, both eyes focusing on the highest shelves of his empire. "We are too small to know anything but this. What we can see, what we can count." He withdraws his hand, then promises, "If someone ever tells me that He is small, I will kill him. Immediately, and gladly. And with His blessing, of course." THE SHIFT ENDS, FINALLY. With the blaring of the first klaxon, each crew allows their line to run until empty. The last of the new bone is packed, then shipped. The freshly repaired bug ovens are placed into sleeping modes. Trash and every tool are set in the open. Then with a practiced haste, we begin to climb the bright blue corundum stairs, zigzagging up and up as the second, final klaxon roars, warning us that the janitors are being released from their bunkers. I pause, just for an instant. A silvery wave of frantic, nearly mindless machines are racing down the aisles, spraying their spit and piss into every corner, then working their way back again, licking up their juices, and with them, consuming every unwelcome molecule of grease, any diamond grit, plus severed toes and the flesh of workers too foolish or too feeble not to make the long climb. The world beneath grows dark, and very loud. One last set of stairs takes me to the roof. As always, my crew sits together, in an orderly line. Umbilicals deploy from the aerogel sky, inserting themselves into our feeding ports. What comes from Him tastes especially delicious tonight; I think it, and others say it. Wagons race back and forth in

the main corridor. We talk among ourselves, discussing the past shift -- gossip, mostly-- and we make plans for the next shift. I make our plans. But I slowly realize that nobody hears me, including me. Due is talking. Again. This newborn is incapable of saying anything that isn't strange. "What do we know about Him?" he inquires. "What is His nature?" He is everything to us. He is vast and vital, and we exist only to serve Him. Everyone born is born with that knowledge. "But how do we serve Him?" asks Due. "Tell me: Why does He need the likes of us?" Because something horrible has happened to Him. Unimaginable violence has torn apart His body and His mind. We have been born to do nothing but repair what can be repaired, and build the rest of Him from the soulless atoms. But Due knows that already. He knows it, yet he can't give the answer in ordinary terms. "This bone plant, and the twenty million million plants just like it... they constitute a civilization... a civilization that arose just to serve Him...!" The most noble of civilizations, I tell myself. "Why is this our shape?" he asks, regarding his naked self. "Two hands, two legs, and one two-eyed head... why are such things important...?" A long pause. More than my crew are listening to him. His audience stretches across the roof; every line crew maintains a respectful silence. "By wearing this shape," I hear, "we are honoring Him." The voice belongs to Mollene. With a stern patience, Due says, "Honor is something given. But our shape was given to us, not chosen by us." "So why are we this way?" cries an irritable voice. My voice. "This shape is adaptable. And more important, it is familiar." Due waits for a moment, then adds, "We resemble Him in many ways, of course. Intellectually and emotionally, he once was much as we are now." I feel a weakness spreading through me. A deep chill. "Then He became more than us. The bugs made him stronger and immortal, and they refashioned his mind, making it swift and powerful." A long pause. Or does it just seem long? "At first, the bugs didn't have us to help them. But of course even tiny souls know the hazards of relying too much on nanoscopic agents. These agents are industrious, and stupid. And dangerous. What if they mutated and slipped free of their ovens, out of our plant and across our civilization's borders... spreading over the true world...?" Bugs are demons; I know this better than I know the shape of my own hands. "Between the very small and very large stands us," Due proclaims. "We have been placed here to control the bugs, and in that sense, we are defending the world." A shudder and low moan move through his audience. The words have an authenticity that dispels doubt and every question. Revelation, I'm thinking, is a substance more real than sapphires, more perfect than the purest diamond, and it's always too small to be seen. "That's why we exist. To protect the world...!" "And to protect Him, too," I add, by reflex. Due says nothing. Then after a long moment -- it is a long moment, this time -- he asks, "Why does He make us wear these faces?" "Nobody makes us," I begin to say. It is our choice, our tradition. "Out of respect for his family and friends," Mollene declares, nearly giggling at what's obvious. "We are showing that we care!" Suddenly, too soon, the umbilicals are pulled away. The new shift begins with the klaxon. Due is sitting like everyone else, legs extended before him. He stares at me as if he has always been staring at me, yet he says another's name. "Tannie? Why do you think He wants us to wear these faces?" The old woman is behind me, hiding behind others. Quietly, with both conviction and genuine amazement, she says, "We look like the people... the people He can trust..." "Why should that matter, Tannie?" She stands slowly, regarding her own hands and saying, "I don't know why." Still, always, Due stares at me. "If someone is so glorious, so wondrous... why should He worry about the trust from such tiny things as us?" No one speaks. A Memory wagon is sliding past us, delivering its cargo to the growing mind. It's long and heavily armored, and a dozen Security troops sit in alert postures, front and aft, missing nothing as they gaze at the sky and at us. So many troops, I'm thinking. Is this a new policy? And if not, why have I never noticed them before? "Have you learned anything about him?" "About who?" asks the plant manager. "My new expeditor," I remind her. "You were going to ask about his origins. Or did I misunderstand...?" She acts indifferent, preoccupied. "Nothing suspicious to find," she assures. "An uneventful

manufacturing cycle. Designed for heavy labor in a memory plant, which is where he was being taken. And that's why he acts a little peculiar, I'm sure. Memory workers need different sorts of minds. "I want to feel sure, like she does. That's all I want." Here," she says, handing me the first order of the new shift. It looks like simple memory, but the red color means that it's a rush. I place the order against my forehead, the specifications flowing into me. I barely hear the plant manager warning, "We have to have it finished as soon as possible, or sooner." Questions?" she asks, wanting none. I shake my head, then hesitate. "What about his face?" "Whose face?" "Due's. I don't recognize it." I notice something in her gaze, then ask, "Have you ever seen anyone with that face?" A shrug, then a wistful grin. "I wish more men wore it," she chimes. "Whoever's it is." I deliver the rush order to my line, giving it to the feed crew who use it to program the bug oven. This particular bone is full of diamond and superconductive fibers, which is unusual. But not remarkable. What catches my eye is the pallet of barium ready to be fed into the oven. Why is it already here? "He said we'd need it," my feed chief replies. "Who said that?" "Due." I shake my head, complaining, "I didn't have the order till now." "I don't know. Maybe the boy heard something." The giant man scratches his broad round face, then adds, "Or maybe he's a good expeditor after all." Old Nicka might have heard about the order, then told Due to bring the barium; I tell myself that's what must have happened. Starting down the line, I'm preoccupied, my eyes watching my naked toes. Suddenly someone is walking beside me, and I wheel and take a clumsy step backward, as does my companion. He has my shape, my face, but a rich golden color to his bare flesh. I stare into the gold-embossed oven, and the strangest notion occurs to me. Reflections are infinitely thin, and frail beyond measure. If I step away from the oven, my reflection dies. Which, I think, helps explain its desperate expression. In the distance, loudly, a woman cries out, "No, no...!" I blink a few times, then turn. "Someone stop her...no, Tannic...!" Mollene is screaming. I break into a run, finding her at her station, but Tannic missing. The big woman tugs at her false hair, looking up, and following her eyes, I find her partner sitting on the high catwalk, in a gap in the old railing. It takes forever to understand what Tannic is doing up there. It takes too long. "Get her," Mollene begs me. "Save her, Jusk." Without hope, I start up the zigzagging stairs. Tannic is already above the curing pond. Suicides are usually swift; she can jump fifty times before I'll reach her. Yet this isn't a normal suicide. She seems to be waiting for me, rocking nervously back and forth, the corundum mesh leaving its mark in her thin rump. Glancing at me, the little woman manages an odd smile. I stop short, asking, "Why are you even thinking this, Tannie? You've done nothing wrong." "Haven't I?" The smile is enormous, and joyless. "Oh, Jusk...you can't understand what I'm thinking..." The curing pond is directly below us, waiting for new bone. "He's not what we think he is," she tells me. "He lies to us. All the time..." "Who's that! Due?" She shivers, saying, "Not the expeditor, no." "Then who --?" "But I know who she means. Interrupting myself, I shake my head, telling her, "That's ridiculous. Stupid. How can you know that?" "When that first bone went bad, and I touched it...I saw what's real..." I want Tannie to jump. Now. "I saw the Memories we aren't suppose to see." Her steady voice doesn't match her soft forlorn face. "The terrible things that He has done with his hands. The awful orders that He's made others carry out --" "Shut up," I tell her. "How else can he rule the world --?" "Tannie!" I shout. "You're talking about bone. Bone doesn't have memories. But you could easily, easily be insane. Have you thought that -- ?" A contemptuous look nearly slices me in two. "Come here," I say, offering a hand. "I'll take you straight to Maintenance. We'll get you back to normal. Before our next shift...all right...?" The odd smile returns. "That newborn's right about one thing." "What's that, Tannie?" "We exist for a purpose. We're supposed to protect the world." I don't know what to say. She sighs, rocking forward and gazing over the brink. I move, not even thinking first. I drive suddenly with my legs and grab with both arms, trying to sweep up that little body before the insanity takes her. My arms close on air. Suddenly I'm lying on the corundum,

watching Tannie shrink away, vanishing even before she strikes the pond. Then a furious storm of bubbles erupts, pulling what I can't see even further out of sight. "Where's the newborn?" Old Nicka looks up from a supply wagon's manifest, discounting me with a glance. Only when his face drops again does he say, "In the back. Counting." The warehouse always feels enormous, mysterious. In that, nothing is new. What works on me is a powerful sense that I don't know where I am going, and when I make my next turn, I'll become lost. It has happened more than once. A worker loses his bearings, and the shift ends without him. Then the lost man is found dead in a nameless corner, starved of power and picked bare of mock-flesh by the relentless janitors. I shout for Due; no one responds. A whispering voice is counting. I follow its rhythm, coming upon him sitting behind a stockpile of assorted rare earths. His back is to me, long legs stretched out before him and a pair of giant diamond-hulled bugs balancing his hands. "One, two," he says. "One, two. One, two. One, two." I stop short, and wait. Due doesn't look at me. He simply pauses, regarding the bugs as he says, "I was told to count. I'm counting." Even the back of his head is handsome. "You want me?" he inquires. I step closer, admitting, "Something awful has happened." Due turns, finally. His gray eyes are warm, but their black centers radiate a withering heat. "Does it involve me?" "No." He seems surprised, if only for a moment. "One of my line workers is dead. A bone handler...." Eyes flicker. "That fat woman?" "Her partner. Tannie." I can't read any emotion. It's unfair to expect grief from newborns, but this face seems more than adult. It's almost ancient. I'm the newborn here, and how can I hope to outsmart this bizarre, supremely gifted monster? "I need your help on the line," I tell him. Again, the eyes flicker. "You want me to handle the bone -- ?" "Until we find another newborn." "Who expedites?" "No one," I promise. "You've delivered enough raw material to do the order, and we won't finish till the end of the shift." A curt nod, then he rises, bugs glittering in his hands. "What kind of bugs are those?" I ask. "Five-gauge knitters," he lies, setting them on an obscure shelf. I step back. "Besides," he comments, "if I'm working with you, you'll be able to keep your eyes on me. Right?" I say nothing, knowing it isn't necessary. THE NEW BONE is meant for His skull. That's why it's been reinforced with diamond, and that's why it carries superconductive fibers: This bone must protect His vast mind, and it needs to be porous to His great thoughts. I watch that bone come out of the oven, pure white sheets punctuated with gray-black veins. Mollene is educating her new partner about how to check the product, then carry it. Grieving for Tannic, she makes no small talk. She doesn't flirt, much less try to seduce. And to her credit, when Due says something about the reinforced skull -- "Why does someone so loved need so much protection?" -- Mollene responds with a disinterested shrug and sharp words: "Love drags other emotions along with it. Envy and jealousy, and worse... from what I can see...." The belt carries the new bone down to the curing pond, and after its bath, it is hoisted into the air, cleaned and dried, then given a final measurement with lasers and eyes. Then the sheets are wrapped in aerogel and stacked. One hundred sheets at a time are inserted into armored boxes, then those boxes are sealed and loaded into a parked wagon. It's the third box that I have pulled aside, on my own authority. "Open it," I say. My packing crew obey. "Now pull out the top sheet," I tell them. They do it, but grudgingly. "Now, the next." Why? they ask. Not answering, I tell them to stack the second sheet on the first, just as they will lay in His skull. The superconductive materials are aligned, then the third sheet is added. And the fourth. My crew doesn't balk until the thirtieth sheet, but that's enough. I hope. Ignoring their complaints, I place my forehead against the gray-black material, and nothing happens. The electric surge coursing through me is my embarrassment. In front of everyone, I'm acting insane. I start to rise, slowly. And I pause. Faint gray marks have been left on the edges of the bone sheets. Alone, they're senseless. But stacked together, they become a word. A faint but unmistakable signature. JusK, I read. A hundred times. I kneel down, pressing my forehead against my name. Laughter blossoms behind me, then vanishes. Beneath a brilliant blue sky... people are running, shouting. And I'm

running with them, more excited than afraid, trying to remember what is happening... what I'm doing here... "....five times... with rocket slugs...!" His bodyguard steps up beside me, a tall, strong, and very pale man walking fast despite a gaping hole in his armor, a healing crater in his chest. I smell blood and pain killers on his breath, and smoke hangs thick in the air. "The assholes got past us. Not me, I mean... I did my job...." He hesitates, measuring his words. "Dropped two of those assholes myself. Took a round for Him, too. I wish I could have taken more, of course...!" "Of course," I mutter, my voice brittle. Unfamiliar to me. "But He'll be all right. No problem." The bodyguard wobbles, then straightens himself. "How in hell did they get past us, sir?" I shrug, not answering. Instead I ask my own question. "Who were they?" "Don't know," he says. "Separatists, or free-thinkers, I'd guess. . . unless it's something closer to home...!" "From inside His own government, he means. I say nothing. "Out of our way!" the bodyguard shouts. "The deputy wants to see Him....!" "I am the deputy. Among the hundreds, perhaps thousands of grieving sycophants, I see the maintenance man who installed my new arms. And my feed crew chief. And Old Nicka, as well as a weepy, pain-wracked Tannie. Except these aren't the people whom I know, just as I'm not Jusk anymore. "Look what they did to Him!" Tannie screams, in anguish. "How could they...?!" The crowd parts for me -- out of respect, and fear. A and He is revealed. Five rounds punctured His defensive array and His body armor, entering His flesh, then exploding with a brutal force. The body has been shredded. Composite bone is scattered, useless. One round even managed to puncture His skull, the warhead shaping its blast to obliterate His soul. But what is intact is what startles me. Beneath the shredded brain is a bloody but whole face -- Due's face -- gray eyes opened to the blue sky, staring down Death itself. The man with Old Nicka's face kneels, a hand pressed against my back. "Don't worry, sir," he mutters. "I've called for His full catalog. It'll be on site in two minutes." The catalog is His memory, saved for emergencies. "An hour, tops," he promises. "Then He'll be conscious again. In charge." I nod, saying nothing. "I wish we could have captured one of those assassins," he says, giving the bodyguard a reproachful glance. "Apparently they weren't using even the simplest nano-system. A pure suicide attack." I reach for the corpse. "You shouldn't, sir," says the bodyguard. "It might muddy up the healing cycle, if your little friends get mixed in with His..." My hand stops short, then drops, touching a fragment of freshly killed bone. Hopefully that will be enough... "Sir," I hear. "Step on back, please. We've got to let him heal on his own sir." I rise, nodding. And for the first time in years, I feel the smallest beginnings of hope... The plant manager invites me into her office. Set on a medium-high catwalk, it affords an impressive view of the entire plant. But all I can see is the stranger sitting behind her desk. He wears the bodyguard's face and body, and over his flesh is diamond mail of the sort used by Security troops. Suspicious eyes look at me, then move about the office. Even the most benign object seems worth a hard glare. "You've been checking the bone," says the manager. She makes no attempt to introduce our guest. "Find anything?" I shake my head. "No, nothing." "Neither have we," says the bodyguard, or whatever he is. Then he grins, adding "We don't need to unpack bone to make sure that it's all right." I look at the manager. "What's going on?" "Ask me," says the bodyguard. I turn to him, saying nothing. "You purchased a newborn. Due is his chosen name. Is that right?" "Yes." "And you're suspicious of him?" I nod. "There's no reason to be. He has a simple defect, something that happens on rare occasions." The lie is well-practiced, seamless. "He's responsible for some of your troubles, but they aren't very serious troubles. Believe me." Even now, after everything I want to believe him. With a careful voice, I ask, "If you're familiar with the problem, why don't you just take him out of here?" My manager says, "Jusk..." "We are getting him. Don't worry." The bodyguard smiles, casually scratching his crotch. "I'm here as a formality. As I understand it, you've had several conversations with the newborn. Correct?" "I am his boss --" "The warehouse manager claims that you've spoken to Due at length. Do you remember the subjects?" I hesitate. The

bodyguard's suspicions are focused squarely on me. Through the crystal walls of the office, I can see my line stretching out below me. Due and Mollene are handling the latest bone, working together smoothly. Perfectly. The bodyguard's associates are stalking Due. They creep along the narrow aisles, each wearing diamond mail and carrying an electric saber. In a few moments, everything is going to end. Whatever everything is... "Jusk?" says my manager, in pain. "Can you answer his question, please?" I look at the bodyguard, and smile. The ovens and belts stop in place and every light suddenly goes out, an instant of shocked silence followed by the rattling charge of janitors, and then, by hundreds of distant, white-hot screams. I bolt downstairs, pushing against the panicked flow of bodies. A limping figure slams against me, and I know those pendulous breasts. "Where is he?" I shout at Mollene. "Where's Due?" "Jusk...?" she squeals. "Are you all right?" She isn't. The janitors have plucked the meat off one of her legs, then tried to take the leg, too. But all I can think about is my expeditor. "Is he with you? Did he say anything to you. / What do you know...?" Pressing her mouth to my ear, she says, "I'm tired, Jusk... so tired..." I slip past her, reaching the floor just as the dim emergency lights come on. A single janitor is calmly dismantling one of the security troops. Simple eyes regard and dismiss me, then the machine returns to its task, removing another limb, inflicting careful misery on its victim. An electric saber lies forgotten against a pallet. It accepts my hand, which it shouldn't do. And it slices into the pallet on my first attempt, beads of pure calcium bouncing frantically across the diamond floor. I run with the quickest beads, making for the back of the plant. "Due," I call out. "Show yourself, Due!" Silence. When everything works normally, the warehouse is dimly lit. The indifferent glow of the emergency lights are nearly useless inside that cavernous place, accomplishing nothing but to make the shadows darker, more ominous. Softer this time, I say, "Due." Someone moves in the shadows. "You're going to run out of tricks," I tell him, dropping my saber to my side. "Eventually Security is going to catch you and kill you, and what's accomplished? A single bone plant is a shift behind in its work, which is nothing. Some or most of its workers have to be replaced, but that won't take long. And He ends up being reborn just the same." "Is that what you want, Due?" In the blackest shadow, flesh brushes against a pallet. I step closer, saying, "I'm sorry. That I stole you away from your mission. That I doubted what you were telling us. And now that I know better, I'm very, very sorry that He's going to live again..." "If there's anyway that I can help --" A figure charges out of the darkness, arms lifting what looks like an iridium hammer. Because it is a hammer, I realize finally. Then I look at the patched face, realizing that it's Old Nicka, not Due, and too late by a long way, I start to lift my saber, backing up, my sputtering voice saying, "No, wait...!" A sharp, clean noise comes from nowhere. Everywhere. Old Nicka collapses at my feet, the hammer missing my head by nothing, then banging its way to the floor. "You are mistaken," I hear. "But it's an easily forgiven mistake." Due appears on my left, the handsome face offering a smile tinged with sadness. "I've never wanted Him to stay dead. Even if that was possible, it would be dangerous. There would be a terrible civil war afterward, then someone would replace Him. Who knows who? And would that person be a more benign leader? You can't tell me yes, Jusk, and you can't tell me no." I nod, conceding the point. "We're here to protect the world," he promises. "And the best way to do that is to rebuild Him, but improve Him, too. To give Him insights so far lacking in Him, and a spirit worthy of His station..." With a flourish, Due hands me that pair of five-gauge knitters. "But about the rest of it, you're right," he tells me. No more smiles, just sadness. "I'm about to be caught, and I'll be killed. Which leaves you with a debt to pay..." He says. "The best of luck. Now, and always." Due has already cut a hole in the back wall of the warehouse, and when I climb through, in an instant, I've left the only home that I've ever known. The birth wagon waits. Its driver wears Mollene's face and body, but her voice is different. Slower, more thoughtful. She tells me to climb into the back end, and whatever happens, I shouldn't talk. Then she climbs in after me

and shuts the gate, hesitating briefly when the sound of fighting comes from the warehouse. A bomb detonates somewhere close, shaking us. The wagon drives itself, and this new Mollene gets me to lie on my back, then checks to make sure that I have both of the knitters. "What are these things supposed to do?" I inquire. "When it's time, they'll explain themselves." Then she warns me firmly, "You must stay quiet." I nod. The woman has a knife with the thinnest of blades, and leaning over me, she says, "Now I need to remove your flesh. To make you look like a newborn again." I nod again, compliant as a newborn. More bombs detonate. We're a long way from the plant, but the blasts seem even larger than before. Erasing evidence as well as the Security troops. With a practiced surety, the woman cuts at my legs. Then, higher. I can't help myself. I reach up with both hands, grabbing one of the enormous breasts, sucking on the brownish red nipple exactly as He must have done in His youth. Desperately. Gratefully. Wishing the moment will never end. "Stop that," she tells me, pushing my face down again. But I can't. I need the touch of flesh. Any flesh. So I grab hold of her again, and eventually she stops fighting me. I cling tight until nothing's left of Juskb but a shiny body and his familiar face, and even then I won't let go easily, sucking with a metal mouth when my fleshy one lies in the pile with the rest of the Scrap.