

ROBERT REED

WINEMASTER

THE STRANGER PULLED INTO the Quik Shop outside St. Joe. Nothing was remarkable about him, which was why he caught Blaine's eye. Taller than average, but not much, he was thin in an unfit way, with black hair and a handsome, almost pretty face, fine bones floating beneath skin that didn't often get into the sun. Which meant nothing, of course. A lot of people were staying indoors lately. Blaine watched him climb out of an enormous Buick -- a satin black '17 Gibraltar that had seen better days -- and after a lazy long stretch, he passed his e-card through the proper slot and inserted the nozzle, filling the Buick's cavernous tank with ten cold gallons of gasoline and corn alcohol.

By then, Blaine had run his plates.

The Buick was registered to a Julian Winemaster from Wichita, Kansas; twenty-nine accompanying photographs showed pretty much the same fellow who stood sixty feet away.

His entire bio was artfully bland, rigorously seamless. Winemaster was an accountant, divorced and forty-four years old, with O negative blood and five neo-enamel fillings imbedded in otherwise perfect teeth, plus a small pink birthmark somewhere on his right buttock. Useless details, Blaine reminded himself, and with that he lifted his gaze, watching the traveler remove the dripping nozzle, then cradling it on the pump with the overdone delicacy of a man ill-at-ease with machinery.

Behind thick fingers, Blaine was smiling.

Winemaster moved with a stiff, road-weary gait, walking into the convenience store and asking, "Ma'am.? Where's your rest room, please?"

The clerk ignored him.

It was the men's room that called out, "Over here, sir."

Sitting in one of the hard plastic booths, Blaine had a good view of everything. A pair of militia boys in their brown uniforms were the only others in the store. They'd been gawking at dirty comic books, minding their own business until they heard Winemaster's voice. Politeness had lately become a suspicious behavior. Blaine watched the boys look up and elbow each other, putting their sights on the stranger. And he watched Winemaster's walk, the expression on his pretty frail face, and a myriad of subtleties, trying to decide what he should do, and when, and what he should avoid at all costs.

It was a bright warm summer morning, but there hadn't been twenty cars in the last hour, most of them sporting local plates.

The militia boys blanked their comics and put them on the wrong shelves, then walked out the front door, one saying. "Bye now," as he passed the clerk.

"Sure," the old woman growled, never taking her eyes off a tiny television screen.

The boys might simply be doing their job, which meant they were harmless. But the state militias were full of bullies who'd found a career in the last couple years. There was no sweeter sport than terrorizing the innocent traveler, because of course the genuine refugee was too rare of a prospect to hope for.

Winemaster vanished into the men's room.

The boys approached the black Buick, doing a little dance and showing each other their malicious smiles. Thugs, Blaine decided. Which meant that he had to do something now. Before Winemaster, or whoever he was, came walking out of the toilet.

Blaine climbed out of the tiny booth.

He didn't waste breath on the clerk.

Crossing the greasy pavement, he watched the boys using a police-issue lock pick. The front passenger door opened, and both of them stepped back, trying to keep a safe distance. With equipment that went out of date last spring, one boy probed the interior air, the cultured leather seats, the dashboard and floorboard and even an empty pop can standing in its cradle. "Naw, it's okay," he was saying. "Get on in there."

His partner had a knife. The curled blade was intended for upholstery. Nothing could be learned by ripping apart the seats, but it was a fun game nonetheless.

"Get in there," the first boy repeated.

The second one started to say, "I'm getting in --" But he happened to glance over his shoulder, seeing Blaine coming, and he turned fast, lifting the knife, seriously thinking about slashing the interloper.

Blaine was bigger than some pairs of men.

He was fat, but in a powerful, focused way. And he was quick, grabbing the knife hand and giving a hard squeeze, then flinging the boy against the car's composite body, the knife dropping and Blaine kicking it out of reach, then giving the boy a second shove, harder this time, telling both of them, "That's enough, gentlemen."

"Who the fuck are you --?" they sputtered, in a chorus.

Blaine produced a badge and ID bracelet. "Read these," he suggested coldly. Then

he told them, "You're welcome to check me out. But we do that somewhere else. Right now, this man's door is closed and locked, and the three of us are hiding. Understand.?"

The boy with the surveillance equipment said, "We're within our rights."

Blaine shut and locked the door for them, saying, "This way. Stay with me."

"One of their nests got hit last night," said the other boy, walking. "We've been checking people all morning!"

"Find any.?"

"Not yet --"

"With that old gear, you won't."

"We've caught them before," said the first boy, defending his equipment. His status. "A couple, three different carloads..."

Maybe they did, but that was months ago. Generations ago.

"Is that yours?" asked Blaine. He pointed to a battered Python, saying, "It better be. We're getting inside."

The boys climbed in front. Blaine filled the back seat, sweating from exertion and the car's brutal heat.

"What are we doing?" one of them asked.

"We're waiting. Is that all right with you.?"

"I guess."

But his partner couldn't just sit. He turned and glared at Blaine, saying, "You'd better be Federal."

"And if not?" Blaine inquired, without interest.

No appropriate threat came to mind. So the boy simply growled and repeated himself. "You'd just better be. That's all I'm saying."

A moment later, Winemaster strolled out of the store. Nothing in his stance or pace implied worry. He was carrying a can of pop and a red bag of corn nuts. Resting his purchases on the roof, he punched in his code to unlock the driver's door, then gave the area a quick glance. It was the glance of someone who never intended to return here, even for gasoline -a dismissive expression coupled with a tangible sense of relief.

That's when Blaine knew.

When he was suddenly and perfectly sure.

The boys saw nothing incriminating. But the one who'd held the knife was quick to say the obvious: A man with Blaine's credentials could get his hands on the best BM sniffers in the world. "Get them," he said, "and we'll find out what he is!"

But Blaine already felt sure.

"He's going," the other one sputtered. "Look, he's gone -- !"

The black car was being driven by a cautious man. Winemaster braked and looked both ways twice before he pulled out onto the access road, accelerating gradually toward 1-29, taking no chances even though there was precious little traffic to avoid as he drove north.

"Fuck," said the boys, in one voice.

Using a calm-stick, Blaine touched one of the thick necks; without fuss, the boy slumped forward.

"Hey!" snapped his partner. "What are you doing --?"

"What's best," Blaine whispered afterward. Then he lowered the Python's windows and destroyed its ignition system, leaving the pair asleep in the front seats. And because the moment required justice, he took one of their hands each, shoving them inside the other's pants, then he laid their heads together, in the pose of lovers.

THE OTHER REFUGEES pampered Julian: His cabin wasn't only larger than almost anyone else's, it wore extra shielding to help protect him from malicious high-energy particles. Power and shaping rations didn't apply to him, although he rarely indulged himself, and a platoon of autodocs did nothing but watch over his health. In public, strangers applauded him. In private, he could select almost any woman as a lover. And in bed, in the afterglow of whatever passed for sex at that particular moment, Julian could tell his stories, and his lovers would listen as if enraptured, even if they already knew each story by heart.

No one on board was more ancient than Julian. Even before the attack, he was one of the few residents of the Shawnee Nest who could honestly claim to be DNA-made, his life beginning as a single wet cell inside a cavernous womb, a bloody birth followed by sloppy growth that culminated in a vast and slow and decidedly old-fashioned human being.

Julian was nearly forty when Transmutations became an expensive possibility.

Thrill seekers and the terminally ill were among the first to undergo the process, their primitive bodies and bloated minds consumed by the microchines, the sum total of their selves compressed into tiny robotic bodies meant to

duplicate every normal human function.

Being pioneers, they endured heavy losses. Modest errors during the Transmutation meant instant death. Tiny errors meant a pathetic and incurable insanity. The fledging Nests were exposed to heavy nuclei and subtle EM effects, all potentially disastrous. And of course there were the early terrorist attacks, crude and disorganized, but extracting a horrible toll nonetheless.

The survivors were tiny and swift, and wiser, and they were able to streamline the Transmutation, making it more accurate and affordable, and to a degree, routine.

"I was forty-three when I left the other world." Julian told his lover of the moment. He always used those words, framing them with defiance and a hint of bittersweet longing. "It was three days and two hours before the President signed the McGrugger Bill."

That's when Transmutation became illegal in the United States.

His lover did her math, then with a genuine awe said, "That was five hundred and twelve days ago."

A day was worth years inside a Nest.

"Tell me," she whispered. "Why did you do it? Were you bored? Or sick?"

"Don't you know why?" he inquired.

"No," she squeaked.

Julian was famous, but sometimes his life wasn't. And why should the youngsters know his biography by heart?

"I don't want to force you," the woman told him. "If you'd rather not talk about it, I'll understand."

Julian didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he climbed from his bed and crossed the cabin. His kitchenette had created a drink-- hydrocarbons mixed with nanochines that were nutritious, appetizing, and pleasantly narcotic. Food and drink were not necessities, but habits, and they were enjoying a renewed popularity. Like any credible Methuselah, Julian was often the model on how best to do archaic oddities.

The woman lay on top of the bed. Her current body was a hologram laid over her mechanical core. It was a traditional body, probably worn for his pleasure; no wings or fins or even more bizarre adornments. As it happened, she had selected a build and complexion not very different from Julian's first wife. A coincidence? Or had she actually done research, and she already knew the answers to her prying questions?

"Sip," he advised, handing her the drink. Their hands brushed against one another, shaped light touching its equivalent. What each felt was a synthetically generated sensation, basically human, intended to feel like warm, water-filled skin.

The girl obeyed, smiling as she sipped, an audible slurp amusing both of them.

"Here," she said, handing back the glass. "Your turn."

Julian glanced at the far wall. A universal window gave them a live view of the Quik Shop, the image supplied by one of the multitude of cameras hidden on the Buick's exterior. What held his interest was the old muscle car, a Python with smoked glass windows. When he first saw that car, three heads were visible. Now two of the heads had gradually dropped out of sight, with the remaining man still sitting in back, big eyes opened wide, making no attempt to hide his interest in the Buick's driver.

No one knew who the fat man was, or what he knew, much less what his intentions might be. His presence had been a complete surprise, and what he had done with those militia members, pulling them back as he did as well as the rest of it, had left the refugees more startled than grateful, and more scared than any time since leaving the Nest.

Julian had gone to that store with the intent of suffering a clumsy, even violent interrogation. A militia encounter was meant to give them authenticity. And more importantly, to give Julian experience--precious and sobering firsthand experience with the much-changed world around them.

A world that he hadn't visited for more than a millennium, Nest-time.

Since he last looked, nothing of substance had changed at that ugly store. And probably nothing would change for a long while. One lesson that no refugee needed, much less craved, was that when dealing with that other realm, nothing helped as much as patience.

Taking a long, slow sip of their drink, he looked back at the woman twenty days old; a virtual child -- and without a shred of patience, she said, "You were sick, weren't you? I heard someone saying that's why you agreed to be Transmuted...five hundred and twelve days ago..."

"No." He offered a shy smile. "And it wasn't because I wanted to live this way, either. To be honest, I've always been conservative. In that world, and this one, too."

She nodded amiably, waiting.

"It was my daughter," he explained. "She was sick. An incurable leukemia." Again he offered the shy smile, adding, "She was nine years old, and terrified. I could save her life by agreeing to her Transmutation, but I couldn't just

abandon her to life in the Nest...making her into an orphan, basically..."

"I see," his lover whispered.

Then after a respectful silence, she asked, "Where's your daughter now?"

"Dead."

"Of course..." Not many people were lucky enough to live five hundred days in a Nest; despite shields, a single heavy nucleus could still find you, ravaging your mind, extinguishing your very delicate soul. "How long ago...did it happen....?"

"This morning" he replied. "In the attack."

"Oh...I'm very sorry..."

With the illusion of shoulders, Julian shrugged. Then with his bittersweet voice, he admitted, "It already seems long ago."

WINEMASTER HEADED NORTH into Iowa, then did the unexpected, making the sudden turn east when he reached the new Tollway.

Blaine shadowed him. He liked to keep two minutes between the Buick and his little Tokamak, using the FBI's recon network to help monitor the situation. But the network had been compromised in the past, probably more often than anyone knew, which meant that he had to occasionally pay the Tollway a little extra to boost his speed, the gap closing to less than fifteen seconds. Then with the optics in his windshield, he would get a good look at what might or might not be Julian Winemaster -- a stiffly erect gentleman who kept one hand on the wheel, even when the AI-managed road was controlling every vehicle's speed and direction, and doing a better job of driving than any human could do.

Iowa was half-beautiful, half-bleak. Some fields looked tended, genetically tailored crops planted in fractal patterns and the occasional robot working carefully, pulling weeds and killing pests as it spider-walked back and forth. But there were long stretches where the farms had been abandoned, wild grasses and the spawn of last year's crops coming up in ragged green masses. Entire neighborhoods had pulled up and gone elsewhere. How many farmers had accepted the Transmutation, in other countries or illegally? Probably only a fraction of them, Blaine knew. Habit-bound and suspicious by nature, they'd never agree to the dis-mantlement of their bodies, the transplantation of their crusty souls. No, what happened was that farms were simply falling out of production, particularly where the soil was marginal. Yields were still improving in a world where the old-style population was tumbling. If patterns held, most of the arable land would soon return to prairie and forest. And eventually, the entire human species wouldn't fill so much as one of these abandoned farms...leaving the old world entirely empty...if those patterns were allowed to hold, naturally...

Unlike Winemaster, Blaine kept neither hand on the wheel, trusting the AIs to look after him. He spent most of his time watching the news networks, keeping tabs on moods more than facts. What had happened in Kansas was still the big story. By noon, more than twenty groups and individuals had claimed responsibility for the attack. Officially, the Emergency Federal Council deplored any senseless violence -- a cliché. which implied that sensible violence was an entirely different question. When asked about the government's response, the President's press secretary looked at the world with a stony face, saying, "We're investigating the regrettable incident. But the fact remains, it happened outside our borders. We are observers here. The Shawnee Nest was responsible for its own security, just as every other Nest is responsible...'

Questions came in a flurry. The press secretary pointed to a small, severe-looking man in the front row -- a reporter for the Christian Promise organization. "Are we taking any precautions against counterattacks?" the reporter inquired. Then, not waiting for an answer, he added, "There have been reports of activity in the other Nests, inside the United States and elsewhere."

A tense smile was the first reply.

Then the stony face told everyone, "The President and the Council have taken every appropriate precaution. As for any activity in any Nest, I can only say: We have everything perfectly well in hand."

"Is anything left of the Shawnee Nest.?" asked a second reporter.

"No." The press secretary was neither sad nor pleased. "Initial evidence is that the entire facility has been sterilized."

A tenacious gray-haired woman -- the perpetual symbol of the Canadian Newsweb -- called out, "Mr. Secretary...Lennie -- !"

"Yes, Cora..."

"How many were killed.?"

"I wouldn't know how to answer that question, Cora..."

"Your government estimates an excess of one hundred million. If the entire Nest was sterilized, as you say, then we're talking about more than two-thirds of the current U.S. population."

"Legally," he replied, "we are talking about machines."

"Some of those machines were once your citizens," she mentioned.

The reporter from Christian Promise was standing nearby. He grimaced, then muttered bits of relevant Scripture.

"I don't think this is the time or place to debate what life is or isn't," said

the press secretary, juggling things badly.

Cora persisted. "Are you aware of the Canadian position on this tragedy?"

"Like us, they're saddened."

"They've offered sanctuary to any survivors of the blast --"

"Except there are none," he replied, his face pink as granite.

"But if there were.? Would you let them move to another Nest in the United States, or perhaps to Canada....?"

There was a pause, brief and electric.

Then with a flat cool voice, the press secretary reported, "The McGrugger Bill is very specific. Nests may exist only in sealed containment facilities, monitored at all times. And should any of the microchines escape, they will be treated as what they are...grave hazards to normal life...and this government will not let them roam at will...!"

Set inside an abandoned salt mine near Kansas City, the Shawnee Nest had been one of the most secure facilities of its kind ever built. Its power came from clean geothermal sources. Lead plates and intricate defense systems stood against natural hazards as well as more human threats. Thousands of government-loyal AIs, positioned in the surrounding salt, did nothing but watch its borders, making certain that none of the microchines could escape. That was why the thought that local terrorists could launch any attack was so ludicrous. To have that attack succeed was simply preposterous. Whoever was responsible for the bomb, it was done with the abeyance of the highest authorities. No sensible soul doubted it. That dirty little nuke had Federal fingerprints on it, and the attack was planned carefully, and its goals were instantly apparent to people large and small.

Julian had no doubts. He had enemies, vast and malicious, and nobody was more entitled to his paranoias.

Just short of Illinois, the Buick made a long-scheduled stop.

Julian took possession of his clone at the last moment. The process was supposed to be routine -- a simple matter of slowing his thoughts a thousandfold, then integrating them with his body -- but there were always phantom pains and a sick falling sensation. Becoming a bloated watery bag wasn't the strangest part of it. After all, the Nest was designed to mimic this kind of existence. What gnawed at Julian was the gargantuan sense of Time: A half an hour in this realm was nearly a month in his realm. No matter how brief the stop, Julian would feel a little lost when he returned, a step behind the others, and far more emotionally drained than he would ever admit.

By the time the car had stopped, Julian was in full control of the body. His

body, he reminded himself. Climbing out into the heat and brilliant sunshine, he felt a purposeful stiffness in his back and the familiar ache running down his right leg. In his past life, he was plagued by sciatica pains. It was one of many ailments that he hadn't missed after his Transmutation. And it was just another detail that someone had thought to include, forcing him to wince and stretch, showing the watching world that he was their flavor of mortal.

Suddenly another old pain began to call to Julian.

Hunger.

His duty was to fill the tank, then do everything expected of a road-weary driver. The rest area was surrounded by the Tollway, gas pumps surrounding a fast food/playground complex. Built to handle tens of thousands of people daily, the facility had suffered with the civil chaos, the militias and the plummeting populations. A few dozen travelers went about their business in near-solitude, and presumably a team of state or Federal agents were lurking nearby, using sensors to scan for those who weren't what they seemed to be.

Without incident, Julian managed the first part of his mission. Then he drove a tiny distance and parked, repeating his stiff climb out of the car, entering the restaurant and steering straight for the restroom.

He was alone, thankfully.

The diagnostic urinal gently warned him to drink more fluids, then wished him a lovely day.

Taking the advice to heart, Julian ordered a bucket-sized ice tea along with a cultured guinea hen sandwich.

"For here or to go?" asked the automated clerk.

"I'm staying," he replied, believing it would look best.

"Thank you, sir. Have a lovely day."

Julian sat in the back booth, eating slowly and mannerly, scanning the pages of someone's forgotten e-paper. He made a point of lingering over the trite and trivial, concentrating on the comics with their humanized cats and cartoonish people, everyone playing out the same jokes that must have amused him in the very remote past.

"How's it going?"

The voice was slow and wet. Julian blanked the page, looking over his shoulder, betraying nothing as his eyes settled on the familiar wide face. "Fine," he replied, his own voice polite but distant. "Thank you."

"Is it me? Or is it just too damned hot to live out there...?"

"It is hot," Julian conceded.

"Particularly for the likes of me." The man settled onto a plastic chair bolted into the floor with clown heads. His lunch buried his little table: Three sandwiches, a greasy sack of fried cucumbers, and a tall chocolate shake. "It's murder when you're fat. Let me tell you...I've got to be careful in this weather. I don't move fast. I talk softly. I even have to ration my thinking. I mean it! Too many thoughts, and I break out in a killing sweat !"

Julian had prepared for this moment. Yet nothing was happening quite like he or anyone else had expected.

Saying nothing, Julian took a shy bite out of his sandwich.

"You look like a smart guy," said his companion. "Tell me. If the world's getting emptier, like everyone says, why am I still getting poorer?"

"Excuse me?"

"That's the way it feels, at least." The man was truly fat, his face smooth and youthful, every feature pressed outward by the remnants of countless lunches. "You'd think that with all the smart ones leaving for the Nests...you'd think guys like you and me would do pretty well for ourselves. You know.?"

Using every resource, the refugees had found three identities for this man: He was a salesman from St. Joseph, Missouri. Or he was a Federal agent working for the Department of Technology, in its Enforcement division, and his salesman identity was a cover. Or he was a charter member of the Christian Promise organization, using that group's political connections to accomplish its murderous goals. What does he want? Julian asked himself. He took another shy bite, wiped his mouth with a napkin, then offered his own question. "Why do you say that...that it's the smart people who are leaving....?"

"That's what studies show," said a booming, unashamed voice. "Half our people are gone, but we've lost ninety percent of our scientists. Eighty percent of our doctors. And almost every last member of Mensa...which between you and me is a good thing, I think... !"

Another bite, and wipe. Then with a genuine firmness, Julian told him, "I don't think we should be talking. We don't know each other."

A huge cackling laugh ended with an abrupt statement:

"That's why we should talk. We're strangers, so where's the harm?"

Suddenly the guinea hen sandwich appeared huge and inedible. Julian set it down and took a gulp of tea.

His companion watched him, apparently captivated.

Julian swallowed, then asked, "What do you do for a living?"

"What I'm good at." He unwrapped a hamburger, then took an enormous bite, leaving a crescent-shaped sandwich and a fine glistening stain around his smile. "Put it this way, Mr. Winemaster. I'm like anyone. I do what I hope is best."

"How do you -- ?"

"Your name? The same way I know your address, and your social registration number, and your bank balance, too." He took a moment to consume half of the remaining crescent, then while chewing, he choked out the words, "Blaine. My name is. If you'd like to use it."

Each of the man's possible identities used Blaine, either as a first or last name.

Julian wrapped the rest of his sandwich in its insulated paper, watching his hands begin to tremble. He had a pianist's hands in his first life but absolutely no talent for music. When he went through the Transmutation, he'd asked for a better ear and more coordination -- both of which were given to him with minimal fuss. Yet he'd never learned how to play, not even after five hundred days. It suddenly seemed like a tragic waste of talent, and with a secret voice, he promised himself to take lessons, starting immediately.

"So, Mr. Winemaster...where are you heading...?"

Julian managed another sip of tea, grimacing at the bitter taste.

"Someplace east, judging by what I can see..."

"Yes," he allowed. Then he added, "Which is none of your business."

Blaine gave a hearty laugh, shoving the last of the burger deep into his gaping mouth. Then he spoke, showing off the masticated meat and tomatoes, telling his new friend, "Maybe you'll need help somewhere up ahead. Just maybe. And if that happens, I want you to think of me."

"You'll help me, will you?"

The food-stuffed grin was practically radiant. "Think of me," he repeated happily. "That's all I'm saying."

FOR A LONG WHILE, the refugees spoke and dreamed of nothing but the mysterious Blaine. Which side did he represent? Should they trust him? Or move against him? And if they tried to stop the man, which way was best? Sabotage his car? Drug his next meal? Or would they have to do something genuinely horrible?

But there were no answers, much less a consensus. Blaine continued shadowing them, at a respectful distance; nothing substantial was learned about him; and

despite the enormous stakes, the refugees found themselves gradually drifting back into the moment-by-moment business of ordinary life.

Couples and amalgamations of couples were beginning to make babies.

There was a logic: Refugees were dying every few minutes, usually from radiation exposure. The losses weren't critical, but when they reached their new home -- the deep cold rock of the Canadian Shield -- they would need numbers, a real demographic momentum. And logic always dances with emotion. Babies served as a tonic to the adults. They didn't demand too many resources, and they forced their parents to focus on more manageable problems, like building tiny bodies and caring for needy souls.

Even Julian was swayed by fashion.

With one of his oldest women friends, he found himself hovering over a crystalline womb, watching nanochines sculpt their son out of single atoms and tiny electric breaths.

It was only Julian's second child.

As long as his daughter had been alive, he hadn't seen the point in having another. The truth was that it had always disgusted him to know that the children in the Nest were manufactured -- there was no other word for it -- and he didn't relish being reminded that he was nothing, more or less, than a fancy machine among millions of similar machines.

Julian often dreamed of his dead daughter. Usually she was on board their strange ark, and he would find a note from her, and a cabin number, and he would wake up smiling, feeling certain that he would find her today. Then he would suddenly remember the bomb, and he would start to cry, suffering through the wrenching, damning loss all over again.

Which was ironic, in a fashion.

During the last nineteen months, father and daughter had gradually and inexorably drifted apart. She was very much a child when they came to the Nest, as flexible as her father wasn't, and how many times had Julian lain awake in bed, wondering why he had ever bothered being Transmuted. His daughter didn't need him, plainly. He could have remained behind. Which always led to the same questions: When he was a normal human being, was he genuinely happy? Or was his daughter's illness simply an excuse...a spicy bit of good fortune that offered an escape route...?

When the Nest was destroyed, Julian survived only through more good fortune. He was as far from the epicenter as possible, shielded by the Nest's interior walls and emergency barricades. Yet even then, most of the people near him were killed, an invisible neutron rain scrambling their minds. That same rain had knocked him unconscious just before the firestorm arrived, and if an autodoc hadn't found his limp body, then dragged him into a shelter, he would have been

cremated. And of course if the Nest hadn't devised its elaborate escape plan, stockpiling the Buick and cloning equipment outside the Nest, Julian would have had no choice but to remain in the rubble, fighting to survive the next moment, and the next.

But those coincidences happened, making his present life feel like the culmination of some glorious Fate.

The secret truth was that Julian relished his new importance, and he enjoyed the pressures that came with each bathroom break and every stop for gas. If he died now, between missions, others could take his place, leading Winemaster's cloned body through the needed motions...but they wouldn't do as well, Julian could tell himself...a secret part of him wishing that this bizarre, slow-motion chase would never come to an end...

The Buick stayed on the Tollway through northern Illinois, slipping beneath Chicago before skipping across a sliver of Indiana. Julian was integrated with his larger self several times, going through the motions of the stiff, tired, and hungry traveler. Blaine always arrived several minutes later, never approaching his quarry, always finding gas at different pumps, standing outside the rest rooms, waiting to show Julian a big smile but never uttering so much as a word in passing.

A little after midnight, the Buick's driver took his hand off the wheel, lay back and fell asleep. Trusting the Tollway's driving was out of character, but with Blaine trailing them and the border approaching, no one was eager to waste time in a motel bed.

At two in the morning, Julian was also asleep, dipping in and out of dreams. Suddenly a hand took him by the shoulder, shaking him, and several voices, urgent and close, said, "We need you, Julian. Now."

In his dreams, a thousand admiring faces were saying, "We need you."

Julian awoke.

His cabin was full of people. His mate had been ushered away, but his unborn child, nearly complete now, floated in his bubble of blackened crystal, oblivious to the nervous air and the tight, crisp voices.

"What's wrong?" Julian asked.

"Everything," they assured.

His universal window showed a live feed from a security camera on the North Dakota-Manitoba border. Department of Technology investigators, backed up by a platoon of heavily armed Marines, were dismantling a Toyota Sunrise. Even at those syrupy speeds, the lasers moved quickly, leaving the vehicle in tiny pieces that were photographed, analyzed, then fed into a state-of-the-art decontamination unit.

"What is this?" Julian sputtered.

But he already knew the answer.

"There was a second group of refugees," said the President, kneeling beside his bed. She was wearing an oversized face -- a common fashion, of late -- and with a very calm, very grim voice, she admitted, "We weren't the only survivors."

They had kept it a secret, at least from Julian. Which was perfectly reasonable, he reminded himself. What if he had been captured? Under torture, he could have doomed that second lifeboat, and everyone inside it...

"Is my daughter there?" he blurted, uncertain what to hope for.

The President shook her head. "No, Julian."

Yet if two arks existed, couldn't there be a third? And wouldn't the President keep its existence secret from him, too?

"We've been monitoring events," she continued. "It's tragic, what's happening to our friends...but we'll be able to adjust our methods...for when we cross the border..."

He looked at the other oversized faces. "But why do you need me? We won't reach Detroit for hours."

The President looked over her shoulder. "Play the recording."

Suddenly Julian was looking back in time. He saw the Sunrise pull up to the border post, waiting in line to be searched. A pickup truck with Wyoming plates pulled up behind it, and out stepped a preposterously tall man brandishing a badge and a handgun. With an eerie sense of purpose, he strode up to the little car, took aim and fired his full clip through the driver's window. The body behind the wheel jerked and kicked as it was ripped apart. Then the murderer reached in and pulled the corpse out through the shattered glass, shouting at the Tech investigators:

"I've got them! Here! For Christ's sake, help me!"

The image dissolved, the window returning to the real-time, real-speed scene.

To himself, Julian whispered, "No, it can't be..."

The President took his hands in hers, their warmth a comfortable fiction. "We would have shown you this as it was happening, but we weren't sure what it meant."

"But you're sure now?"

"That man followed our people. All the way from Nebraska." She shook her head, admitting, "We don't know everything, no. For security reasons, we rarely spoke with those other survivors --"

"What are we going to do?" Julian growled.

"The only reasonable thing left for us." She smiled in a sad fashion, then warned him, "We're pulling off the Tollway now. You still have a little while to get ready..."

He closed his eyes, saying nothing.

"Not as long as you'd like, I'm sure...but with this sort of thing, maybe it's best to hurry..."

THERE WERE NO GAS PUMPS or restaurants in the rest area. A small divided parking lot was surrounded by trees and fake log cabin lavatories that in turn were sandwiched between broad lanes of moonlit pavement. The parking lot was empty. The only traffic was a single truck in the westbound freighter lane, half a dozen trailers towed along in its wake. Julian watched the truck pass, then walked into the darkest shadows, and kneeled.

The security cameras were being fed false images -- images that were hopefully more convincing than the ludicrous log cabins. Yet even when he knew that he was safe, Julian felt exposed. Vulnerable. The feeling worsened by the moment, becoming a black dread, and by the time the Tokamak pulled to stop, his newborn heart was racing, and his quick damp breath tasted foul.

Blaine parked two slots away from the sleeping Buick. He didn't bother looking through the windows. Instead, guided by intuition or hidden sensor, he strolled toward the men's room, hesitated, then took a few half-steps toward Julian, passing into a patch of moonlight.

Using both hands, Julian lifted his weapon, letting it aim itself at the smooth broad forehead.

"Well," said Blaine, "I see you're thinking about me."

"What do you want?" Julian whispered. Then with a certain clumsiness, he added, "With me."

The man remained silent for a moment, a smile building.

"Who am I?" he asked suddenly. "Ideas? Do you have any?"

Julian gulped a breath, then said, "You work for the government." His voice was testy, pained. "And I don't know why you're following me!"

Blaine didn't offer answers. Instead he warned his audience, "The border is a lot harder to pierce than you think."

"Is it?"

"Humans aren't fools," Blaine reminded him. "After all, they designed the technologies used by the Nests, and they've had just as long as you to improve on old tricks."

"People in the world are getting dumber," said Julian. "You told me that."

"And those same people are very scared, very focused," his opponent countered. "Their borders are a priority to them. You are their top priority. And even if your thought processes are accelerated a thousandfold, they've got AIs who can blister you in any race of intellect. At least for the time being, they can."

Shoot him, an inner voice urged.

Yet Julian did nothing, waiting silently, hoping to be saved from this onerous chore.

"You can't cross into Canada without me," Blaine told him.

"I know what happened..." Julian felt the gun's barrel adjusting itself as his hands grew tired and dropped slightly. "Up in North Dakota...we know all about it..."

It was Blaine's turn to keep silent.

Again, Julian asked, "Who are you? Just tell me that much."

"You haven't guessed it, have you?" The round face seemed genuinely disappointed. "Not even in your wildest dreams..."

"And why help us?" Julian muttered, saying too much.

"Because in the long run, helping you helps me."

"How?"

Silence.

"We don't have any wealth," Julian roared. "Our homes were destroyed. By you, for all I know --"

The man laughed loudly, smirking as he began to turn away. "You've got some time left. Think about the possibilities, and we'll talk again."

Julian tugged on the trigger. Just once.

Eighteen shells pierced the back of Blaine's head, then worked down the wide back, devastating every organ even as the lifeless body crumpled. Even a huge

man falls fast, Julian observed. Then he rose, walking on weak legs, and with his own aim, he emptied the rest of his clip into the gore.

It was easy, pumping in those final shots.

What's more, shooting the dead carried an odd, unexpected satisfaction -- which was probably the same satisfaction that the terrorists had felt when their tiny bomb destroyed a hundred million soulless machines.

With every refugee watching, Julian cut open the womb with laser shears.

Julian Jr. was born a few seconds after two-thirty A.M., and the audience, desperate for a good celebration, nearly buried the baby with gifts and sweet words. Yet nobody could spoil him like his father could. For the next few hours, Julian pestered his first son with love and praise, working with a manic energy to fill every need, every whim. And his quest to be a perfect father only grew worse. The sun was beginning to show itself; Canada was waiting over the horizon; but Julian was oblivious, hunched over the toddler with sparkling toys in both hands, his never-pretty voice trying to sing a child's song, nothing half as important in this world as making his son giggle and smile...!

They weren't getting past the border. Their enemies were too clever, and too paranoid. Julian could smell the inevitable, but because he didn't know what else to do, he went through the motions of smiling for the President and the public, saying the usual brave words whenever it was demanded of him.

Sometimes Julian took his boy for long fides around the lifeboat. During one journey, a woman knelt and happily teased the baby, then looked up at the famous man, mentioning in an off-handed way, "We'll get to our new home just in time for him to grow into it."

Those words gnawed at Julian, although he was helpless to explain why.

By then the sun had risen, its brilliant light sweeping across a sleepy border town. Instead of crossing at Detroit, the refugees had abandoned the Tollway, taking an old highway north to Port Huron. It would be easier here, was the logic. The prayer. Gazing out the universal window, Julian looked at the boarded up homes and abandoned businesses, cars parked and forgotten, weeds growing in every yard, every crack. The border cities had lost most of their people in the last year-plus, he recalled. It was too easy and too accepted, this business of crossing into a land where it was still legal to be remade. In another year, most of the United States would look this way, unless the government took more drastic measures such as closing its borders, or worse, invading its wrong-minded neighbors...!

Julian felt a deep chill, shuddering.

That's when he suddenly understood. Everything. And in the next few seconds, after much thought, he knew precisely what he had to do.

Assuming there was still time...

A dozen cars were lined up in front of the customs station. The Buick had slipped in behind a couple on a motorcycle. Only one examination station was open, and every traveler was required to first declare his intentions, then permanently give up his citizenship. It would be a long wait. The driver turned the engine off, watching the Marines and Tech officials at work, everything about them relentlessly professional. Three more cars pulled up behind him, including a Tokamak, and he happened to glance at the rearview screen when Blaine climbed out, walking with a genuine bounce, approaching on the right and rapping on the passenger window with one fat knuckle, then stooping down and smiling through the glass, proving that he had made a remarkable recovery since being murdered.

Julian unlocked the door for him.

With a heavy grunt, Blaine pulled himself in and shut the door, then gave his companion a quick wink.

Julian wasn't surprised. If anything, he was relieved, telling his companion, "I think I know what you are."

"Good," said Blaine. "And what do your friends think?"

"I don't know. I never told them." Julian took the steering wheel in both hands. "I was afraid that if I did, they wouldn't believe me. They'd think I was crazy, and dangerous. And they wouldn't let me come here."

The line was moving, jerking forward one car-length. Julian started the Buick and crept forward, then turned it off again.

With a genuine fondness, Blaine touched him on a shoulder, commenting, "Your friends might pull you back into their world now. Have you thought of that?"

"Sure," said Julian. "But for the next few seconds, they'll be too confused to make any big decisions."

Lake Huron lay on Blaine's left, vast and deeply blue, and he studied the picket boats that dotted the water, bristling with lasers that did nothing but flip back and forth, back and forth, incinerating any flying object that appeared even remotely suspicious.

"So tell me," he asked his companion, "why do you think I'm here?"

Julian turned his body, the cultured leather squeaking beneath him. Gesturing at Port Huron, he said, "If these trends continue, everything's going to look that way soon. Empty. Abandoned. Humans will have almost vanished from this world, which means that perhaps someone else could move in without too much trouble. They'll find houses, and good roads to drive on, and a communication system already in place. Readymade lives, and practically free for the taking."

"What sort of someone?"

"That's what suddenly occurred to me." Julian took a deep breath, then said, "Humans are making themselves smaller, and faster. But what if something other than humans is doing the same thing? What if there's something in the universe that's huge, and very slow by human standards, but intelligent nonetheless. Maybe it lives in cold places between the stars. Maybe somewhere else. The point is, this other species is undergoing a similar kind of transformation. It's making itself a thousand times smaller, and a thousand times quicker, which puts it roughly equal to this." The frail face was smiling, and he lifted his hands from the wheel. "Flesh and blood, and bone... these are the high-technology materials that build your version of microchines!"

Blaine winked again, saying, "You're probably right. If you'd explained it that way, your little friends would have labeled you insane."

"But am I right?"

There was no reason to answer him directly. "What about me, Mr. Winemaster? How do you look at me?"

"You want to help us." Julian suddenly winced, then shuddered. But he didn't mention it, saying, "I assume that you have different abilities than we do...that you can get us past their sensors --"

"Is something wrong, Mr. Winemaster?"

"My friends...they're trying to take control of this body..."

"Can you deal with them?"

"For another minute. I changed all the control codes." Again, he winced. "You don't want the government aware of you, right." And you're trying to help steer us and them away from war...during this period of transition --"

"The way we see it," Blaine confessed, "the chance of a worldwide cataclysm is just about one in three, and worsening."

Julian nodded, his face contorting in agony. "If I accept your help...?"

"Then I'll need yours." He set a broad hand on Julian's neck. "You've done a remarkable job hiding yourselves. You and your friends are in this car, but my tools can't tell me where. Not without more time, at least. And that's time we don't have..."

Julian stiffened, his clothes instantly soaked with perspiration.

Quietly, quickly, he said, "But if you're really a government agent...here to fool me into telling you...everything....?"

"I'm not," Blaine promised.

A second examination station had just opened; people were maneuvering for position, leaving a gap in front of them.

Julian started his car, pulling forward. "If I do tell you...where we are...they'll think that I've betrayed them...!"

The Buick's anticollision system engaged, bringing them to an abrupt stop.

"Listen," said Blaine. "You've got only a few seconds to decide --"

"I know..."

"Where, Mr. Winemaster? Where?"

"Julian," he said, wincing again.

"Julian."

A glint of pride showed in the eyes. "We're not...in the car..." Then the eyes grew enormous, and Julian tried shouting the answer...his mind suddenly losing its grip on that tiny, lovely mouth...

Blaine swung with his right fist, shattering a cheekbone with his first, blow, killing the body before the last blow.

By the time the Marines had surrounded the car, its interior was painted with gore, and in horror, the soldiers watched as the madman -- he couldn't be anything but insane -- calmly rolled down his window and smiled with a blood-rimmed mouth, telling his audience, "I had to kill him. He's Satan."

A hardened lieutenant looked in at the victim, torn open like a sack, and she shivered, moaning aloud for the poor man.

With perfect calm, Blaine declared, "I had to eat his heart. That's how you kill Satan. Don't you know?"

For disobeying orders, the President declared Julian a traitor, and she oversaw his trial and conviction. The entire process took less than a minute. His quarters were remodeled to serve as his prison cell. In the next ten minutes, three separate attempts were made on his life. Not everyone agreed with the court's sentence, it seemed. Which was understandable. Contact with the outside world had been lost the instant Winemaster died. The refugees and their lifeboat were lost in every kind of darkness. At any moment, the Tech specialists would throw them into a decontamination unit, and they would evaporate without warning. And all because they'd entrusted themselves to an old DNA-born human who never really wanted to be Transmuted in the first place, according to at least one of his former lovers...

Ostensibly for security reasons, Julian wasn't permitted visitors.

Not even his young son could be brought to him, nor was he allowed to see so much as a picture of the boy.

Julian spent his waking moments pacing back and forth in the dim light, trying to exhaust himself, then falling into a hard sleep, too tired to dream at all, if he was lucky...

Before the first hour was finished, he had lost all track of time.

After nine full days of relentless isolation, the universe had shriveled until nothing existed but his cell, and him, his memories indistinguishable from fantasies.

On the tenth day, the cell door opened.

A young man stepped in, and with a stranger's voice, he said, "Father."

"Who are you?" asked Julian.

His son didn't answer, giving him the urgent news instead. "Mr. Blaine finally made contact with us, explaining what he is and what's happened so far, and what will happen...!"

Confusion wrestled with a fledging sense of relief.

"He's from between the stars, just like you guessed, Father. And he's been found insane for your murder. Though of course you're not dead. But the government believes there was a Julian Winemaster, and it's holding Blaine in a Detroit hospital, and he's holding us. His metabolism is augmenting our energy production, and when nobody's watching, he'll connect us with the outside world."

Julian couldn't imagine such a wild story: It had to be true!

"When the world is safe, in a year or two, he'll act cured or he'll escape -- whatever is necessary -- and he'll carry us wherever we want to go."

The old man sat on his bed, suddenly exhausted.

"Where would you like to go, Father?"

"Out that door," Julian managed. Then a wondrous thought took him by surprise, and he grinned, saying, "No, I want to be like Blaine was. I want to live between the stars, to be huge and cold, and slow..."

"Not today, maybe..."

"But soon...definitely soon...!"