

Inherit the Earth

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INHERIT THE EARTH

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For Jane, and all those who toil in the forge of the will

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PART ONE

Paranoia Fantasies

One

Silas Arnett stood on the bedroom balcony, a wineglass in his hand, bathing in the ruddy light of the evening sun. He watched the Pacific breakers tumbling lazily over the shingle strand. The ocean was in slow retreat from the ragged line of wrack that marked the height of the tide. The dark strip of dead weed was punctuated by shards of white plastic, red bottle tops and other packaging materials not yet redeemed by the hungry beach cleaners. They would be long gone by morning-one more small achievement in the great and noble cause of depollution.

Glimpsing movement from the corner of his eye, Silas looked up into the deepening blue of the sky.

High above the house a lone wing glider was playing games with the wayward thermals disturbed by the freshening sea breeze. His huge wings were painted in the image of a bird's, each pinion feather carefully outlined, but the colors were acrylic-bright, brazenly etched in reds and yellows. Now that the gaudier birds of old were being brought back from the temporary mists of extinction mere humans could no longer hope to outdo them in splendor, but no actual bird had ever been as huge as this pretender.

Silas frowned slightly as he watched the glider swoop and soar. The conditions were too capricious to allow safe stunting, but the soaring man was careless of the danger. Again and again he dived toward the chalky cliff face that loomed above the ledge on which the house was set, only wheeling away at the last possible moment. Silas caught his breath as the glider attempted a loop which no bird had ever been equipped by instinct to perform, then felt a momentary thrill of irritation at the ease with which his admiration had been commanded.

Nowadays, a careless Icarus would almost certainly survive a fluttering fall from such a height, provided that he had the best internal technology that money could buy. Even the pain would quickly be soothed; its brutal flaring would merely serve as a trigger to unleash the resources of his covert superhumanity. Flirtation with catastrophe was mere sport for the children of the revolution.

Silas's sentimental education had taken place in an earlier era, when the spectrum of everyday risks had been very different. His days with Conrad Helier had made him rich, so he now had all the benefits that the best nanotech repairmen could deliver, but his reflexes could not be retrained to trust them absolutely. The bird man was evidently young as well as rich: authentically young. Whatever PicoCon's multitudinous ads might claim, the difference between the truly young and the allegedly rejuvenated Architects of Destiny was real and profound.

"Why does the sun look bigger when it's close to the horizon?"

Silas had not heard his guest come up behind him; she was barefoot, and her feet made no sound on the thick carpet. He turned to look at her.

She was wearing nothing but a huge white towel, wrapped twice around her slender frame. The thickness of the towel accentuated her slimness-another product of authentic youth. Nanotech had conquered obesity, but it couldn't restore the full muscle tone of the subcutaneous tissues; middle age still spread a man's midriff, if only slightly, and no power on earth could give a man as old as Silas the waist he had possessed a hundred years before.

Catherine Prail was as young as she looked; she had not yet reached her full maturity, although nothing remained for the processes of nature to do, save to etch the features of her body a little more clearly. The softness of her flesh, its subtle lack of focus, seemed to Arnett to be very beautiful, because it was not an effect of artifice. He was old-fashioned, in every sense of the word, and unrepentant of his tastes. He loved youth, and he loved the last vestiges which still remained to humankind of the natural processes of growth and completion. He had devoted the greater part of his life to the overthrow of nature's tyranny, but he still felt entitled to his affection for its art.

"I don't know," he said, a little belatedly. "It's an optical illusion. I can't explain it."

"You don't know!" There was nothing mocking in her laughter, nothing contrived in her surprise. He was more than a hundred years older than she was; he was supposed to know everything that was known, to understand everything that could be understood. In her innocence, she expected nothing less of him than infinite wisdom and perfect competence. Men of his age were almost rare enough nowadays to be the stuff of legend.

He bowed his head as if in shame, then took a penitent sip from the wineglass as she looked up into his eyes. She was a full twenty centimeters shorter than he. Either height was becoming unfashionable again or she was exercising a kind of caution rare in the young, born of the awareness that it was far easier to add height than to shed it if and when one decided that it was time for a change.

"I gave up trying to hold all the world's wisdom in my head a long time ago," he told her. "When all the answers are at arm's length, you don't need to keep them any closer." It was a lie, and she knew it. She had grown up with the omniscient Net, and she knew that its everpresence made ignorance more dangerous, not less-but she didn't contradict him. She only smiled.

Silas couldn't decipher her smile. There was more than amusement in it, but he couldn't read the remainder. He was glad of that small margin of mystery; in almost every other respect, he could read her far better than she read him. To her, he must be a paradox wrapped in an enigma-and that was the reason she was here.

Women of Cathy's age, still on the threshold of the society of the finished, were only a little less numerous than men of his antiquity, but that did not make the two of them equal in their exoticism. Silas knew well enough what to expect of Cathy-he had always had women of her kind around him, even in the worst of the plague years-but men of his age were new in the world, and they would continue to establish new precedents until the last of his generation finally passed away. No one knew how long that might take; PicoCon's new rejuve technologies were almost entirely cosmetic, but the next generation would surely reach more deeply into a man's essential being.

"Perhaps I did know the answer, once," he told her, not knowing or caring whether it might be true. "Fortunately, a man's memory gets better and better with age, becoming utterly ruthless in discarding the trivia while taking care to preserve only that which is truly precious." Pompous old fool! he thought, even

as the final phrase slid from his tongue-but he knew that Cathy probably wouldn't mind, and wouldn't complain even if she did. To her, this encounter must seem untrivial-perhaps even truly precious, but certainly an experience to be savored and remembered. He was the oldest man she had ever known; it was entirely possible that she would never have intimate knowledge of anyone born before him. It was different for Silas, even though such moments as this still felt fresh and hopeful and intriguing. He had done it all a thousand times before, and no matter how light and lively and curious the stream of his consciousness remained while the affair was in progress, it would only be precious while it lasted.

Silas wondered whether Cathy would be disappointed if she knew how he felt. Perhaps she wanted to find him utterly sober, weighed down by ennui-and thus, perhaps, even more worthy of her awe and respect than he truly was.

He placed his hand on her shoulder and caressed the contour of her collarbone. Her skin, freshly washed, felt inexpressibly luxurious, and the sensation which stirred him was as sharp- perhaps even as innocent-as it would have been had he never felt its like before.

A practiced mind was, indeed, exceedingly adept at forgetting; it had wisdom enough not merely to forget the trivial and the insignificant, but also that which was infinitely precious in rediscovery.

"It must be strange," she said, insinuating her slender and naked arm around his waist, "to look out on the sea and the sky with eyes that know them so well. There's so much in the world that's unfamiliar to me I can't begin to imagine what it would be like to recognize everything, to be completely at home." She was teasing him, requiring that he feed her awe and consolidate her achievement in allowing herself to be seduced, "That's not what it's like," he said dutifully. "If the world stayed the same, it might be more homely; but one of the follies of authentic youth is the inability to grasp how quickly, and how much, everything changes-even the sea and the sky. The line left behind by the tide changes with the flotsam; even the clouds sailing serenely across the sky change with the climate and the composition of the air. The world I knew when I was young is long gone, and depollution will never bring it back. I've lived through half a hundred worlds, each one as alarming and as alien as the last. I don't doubt that a dozen more lie in ambush, waiting to astonish me if I stay the course for a few further decades."

He felt a slight tremor pass through her and wondered whether it was occasioned by a sudden gust of cool wind or by (he thrust of her eager imagination. She had known no other world than the one into which recently acquired maturity had delivered her, but she must have had images in her mind of the various phases of the Crisis. It was all caught in the Net, if only as an infinite jumble of glimpses. Today's world was still haunted by the one which had gone madly to its destruction-the one which Silas Arnett had helped to save.

She smiled at him again, as innocently as a newly hatched sphinx.

It's not my wisdom which makes me attractive to her, Silas thought. She sees me as something primitive, perhaps feral. I was born of woman, and there was a full measure of effort and pain in my delivery. I grew to the age she is now without the least ability to control my own pain, under the ever present threat of injury, disease, and death. There's something of the animal about me still.

He knew that he was melodramatizing for the sake of a little extra excitement, but it was true nevertheless. When Silas had been in his teens there had been more than ten billion people in the world, all naturally born, all naked to the slings and arrows of outrage and misfortune. Avid forces of destruction had claimed all but a handful, and his own survival had to be reckoned a virtual miracle. When Catherine Prail came to celebrate her hundred-and-twentieth birthday, by contrast, nine out of ten of her contemporaries would still be alive. Her survival to that age was virtually assured, provided that she did

not elect to waste herself in submission to extravagant and extraordinary risks.

Silas looked up briefly, but the bird man was out of sight now, eclipsed by the green rim of the cliff. He imagined Catherine costumed with brightly colored wings, soaring gloriously across the face of the sinking sun-but he preferred her as she was now, soft and fresh and unclothed.

"Let's go inside," he said, meaning Let's make love while the sunlight lasts, while we can revel in the fleeting changes of the colored radiance.

"Might as well," she said, meaning Yes, let's do exactly that.

Sexual intercourse never left Arnett deflated or disappointed. It never had, so far as he could remember. It might have done, sometimes, when he was authentically young, but in the fullness of his maturity lovemaking always left him with a glow of profound satisfaction and easeful accomplishment. He knew that this seeming triumph probably had as much to do with the gradual adjustment of his expectations as with the honing of his skills but he did not feel in the least diminished by that hint of cynicism. He believed with all sincerity that he knew the true value of everything he had-and his expert memory had scrupulously erased most of the prices he had been forced to pay by way of its acquisition.

Cathy had drifted into a light sleep almost as soon as they had finished, and when her sleep had deepened Arnett was able to disentangle his limbs from hers without disturbing her. He helped the half-reflexive movements which eased her into a more comfortable position, and then he slowly withdrew himself from the bed. Naked, he went back to the open window and on to the balcony.

The sun had set and the wing glider was long gone. Arnett relaxed into the luxury of being unobserved. He put a high value on that privilege, as anyone would who had grown to maturity in a world teeming with people, where the friction of social intercourse had only just begun to be eased by access to the infinite landscapes of virtual reality.

He had chosen the house in which he lived precisely because it was hidden from all its neighbors by the contours of the cliff. The house was not large, and far from fashionable-it was all above ground, its walls as white as the chalkiest aspects of the cliff face, its angles stubbornly square, its windows unrepentant panes of plain glass-but that was exactly why he liked it. It did not blend in with its surroundings; its roots and all its other quasi living systems were hidden away in closets and conduits. It was, after its own fashion, every bit as old-fashioned as he was, although it was no more than twenty years old-almost as young as Catherine Prail.

Silas wondered whether Cathy would quickly drift away now that she had "collected" him, or whether she would attempt to maintain their friendship, seeking further amusement and further enlightenment in the patient acquaintance of one of the oldest men in the world. He didn't want her to drift away. He wanted her to stay, or at least to return again and again and again-not because her slowly evaporating youth was such a rare commodity, but because he had long ago learned to appreciate constancy and to expand his pleasures to fit the time and space that were available for their support.

A movement caught his eye: something which emerged very briefly from the gathering shadows at the foot of the cliff face and then faded back into obscurity.

He was not immediately anxious, even though he guessed that it must be a human being who had descended unannounced into his haven of privacy-but he stepped back from the balcony and went to

dress himself.

The bedroom was dark by now, but he had no difficulty finding what he needed. He pulled on the various elements of his suitskin. Their seams reacted to his body heat, joining up with smooth efficiency as if they were eager to begin their cleansing work. He stepped into a pair of slippers, no stronger or more massive than was necessary to protect the suitskin's soles in an indoor environment.

Silas didn't switch on the landing light until the door was safely closed behind him. He didn't want to wake the girl from what he hoped were pleasant dreams. He went swiftly down to the hallway and stepped into the tiny room beneath the staircase. He activated the house's night eyes, bringing a dozen different images to the bank of screens mounted on the wall. He picked up the VE hood, which would give him a far clearer view once he had selected the right pair of artificial eyes-but there was no way to make the choice.

The foot of the cliff, limned in red, was stubbornly bare. The shadows in which he had glimpsed movement were empty now.

One of the screens blanked out, and then another.

That did alarm him; in the circumstances, he couldn't believe that it was a mere malfunction. He lifted the VE hood, but he still had no idea which connection he should make-and if the screens were going down, the hood would be just as useless as they were. Someone was blinding the house's eyes, and must have come equipped to do it-but why? He had no enemies, so far as he knew, and the rewards of burglary had long ago sunk to the level which made the risk unacceptable to anyone but a fool. The quaint outward appearance of the house might, he supposed, have indicated to juvenile vandals that it was poorly protected, but he couldn't imagine anyone scaling the cliff face in the dark merely to do a little gratuitous damage.

He watched, helplessly, as the screens went out. When six more of the night eyes had been blinded without his catching the briefest glimpse of a hand or a face, he knew that it was not the work of children or foolish thieves. He became afraid-and realized as he did so how strange and unfamiliar fear had become.

A rapid dance of his fingertips sealed all the locks that were not routinely engaged, activated all the house's security systems and notified the police that a crime might be in progress. That, at least, was what his instructions should have accomplished- but the confirmatory call which should have come from the police didn't arrive; the telephone screen remained ominously inactive. He knew that there was no point in putting the VE hood over his head and he lowered it onto its cradle.

Several seconds dragged by while he wondered whether it was worth running to his study, where the house's main workstation was, but when he emerged from the cupboard he didn't head in that direction. Instead, he stood where he was, watching the door at the end of the hallway. It was obvious that his links with the outside world had been severed, and that the door in question was the only security left to him. He wondered whether the threat might be to her rather than to himself, feeling a pang of bitter resentment because a near perfect day was about to be ruined at the eleventh hour-but that was just a desperate attempt to pretend that the danger wasn't his danger.

The simple truth was that his communication systems were very nearly the best that money could buy, and that someone had nevertheless overridden them with ridiculous ease. Whatever reason they had, it couldn't be trivial.

When the door burst in, Silas couldn't quite believe his eyes. In spite of the failure of his artificial eyes and voice he had not believed that his locks could be so easily broken-but when he saw the human figures come through, wearing black clothes and black masks, the outer layers of his patiently accreted, ultracivilized psyche seemed to peel away. He knew that he had to fight, and he thanked providence that he still knew how. In his innermost self, he was still primitive, even feral. He had no weapon, and he could see the foremost of the invaders had some kind of snub-nosed pistol in his hand, but he knew that he had to go forward and not back.

His rush seemed to take the intruder by surprise; the man's eyes were still slightly dazzled by the bright light. Silas lashed out with his foot at the hand which held the gun, and felt his slippered toes make painful connection-but the pain was immediately controlled by his internal technology.

The gun flew away. It was the unexpectedness of the assault rather than its force that had jolted it free, but the effect was the same. Silas was already bringing his flattened hand around in a fast arc, aiming for the man's black-clad throat-but the intruder had evidently been trained in that kind of fighting, and was more recently practiced in its skills. The blow was brutally blocked and Silas felt unexpectedly fiery pain shoot along his forearm; it was controlled, but not before he had flinched reflexively and left himself open to attack.

His hesitation probably made no difference; there would have been no time for a riposte and no effective blow he could have dealt. There were three intruders coming at him now, and they hurled themselves upon him with inelegant but deadly effect. He flailed his arms desperately, but there was no way he could keep them all at bay.

With his arms still thrashing uselessly, Silas was thrown back and knocked down. His head crashed against the wall and the pain was renewed yet again. The pain was almost instantly contained and constrained, but it could only be dulled. Merely deadening its fury could not free his mind to react in artful or effective fashion. There was, in any case, no action he could take that might have saved him. He was outnumbered, and not by fools or frightened children.

One of the intruders bent to pick up the fallen gun, and he began firing even as he plucked it from the floor. Silas felt a trio of needles spear into the muscles of his breast, not far beneath the shoulder. There was no pain at all now, but he knew that whatever poison the darts bore must have been designed to resist the best efforts of his internal technology. These people had come equipped to fight, and their equipment was the best. He knew that their motives must be similarly sophisticated and correspondingly sinister.

It was not until the missiles had struck him and burrowed into his efficiently armored but still-frail flesh, that Silas Arnett called to mind the deadliest and most fearful word in his vocabulary: Eliminators! Even as the word sprang to mind, though- while he still lashed out impotently against the three men who no longer had to struggle to subdue him-he could not accept its Implications.

I have not been named! he cried silently. They have no reason! But whoever had come to his house, so cleverly evading its defenses, clearly had motive enough, whether they had reason enough or not.

While his internal defenses struggled unsuccessfully to cope with the drug which robbed him of consciousness, Silas could not evade the dreadful fear that death-savage, capricious, reasonless death-had found him before he was ready to be found.

TWO

Damon Hart had never found it easy to get three boxes of groceries from the trunk of his car to his thirteenth-floor apartment. It was a logistical problem with no simple solution, given that his parking slot and his apartment door were both so far away from the elevator. Some day, he supposed, he would have to invest in a collapsible electric cart which would follow him around like a faithful dog. For the moment, though, such a purchase still seemed like another step in the long march to conformism—perhaps the one which would finally seal his fate and put an end to the last vestiges of his reputation as a rebel. How could a man who owned a robot shopping trolley possibly claim to be anything other than a solid citizen of the New Utopia?

In the absence of such aid Damon had no alternative but to jam the elevator door open while he transferred the boxes one by one from the trunk of the car. By the time he got the third one in, the elevator was reciting its standard lecture on building policy and civic duty. While the elevator climbed up to his floor he was obliged to listen to an exhaustive account of his domestic misdemeanors, even though he hadn't yet clocked up the requisite number of demerits to be summoned before the leasing council for a token reprimand. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to ride all the way on his own; two middle-aged women with plastic faces and brightly colored suitskins got in at the third and traveled up to the tenth, doubtless visiting another of their ubiquitous kind. They pretended to ignore the elevator, but Damon knew that they were drinking in every word. He had never been introduced to either one of them and had no idea what their names might be, but they probably knew everything there was to know about him except his real name. He was the building's only ex-streetfighter; in spite of their youth—and partly because of it—he and Diana had more real misdemeanors credited to their law accounts than all the remaining inhabitants of their floor.

He managed to get all three boxes out of the elevator without actually jamming the door, but he had to leave two behind while he carried the third to the door of his apartment. He set it down, ringing his own doorbell as he turned away to fetch the second. When he came back with the second box, however, he found that his ring had gone unanswered. The first box was still outside. Given the number of spy eyes set discreetly into the corridor walls there was no way anyone would take the risk of stealing any of its contents, but its continued presence was an annoyance nevertheless. When Damon had placed the second box beside the first he fished out his key and opened the door himself, poking his head inside with the intention of calling for assistance.

He closed his mouth abruptly when the blade of a carving knife slammed into the doorjamb, not ten centimeters away from his ducking head. The blade stuck there, quivering.

"You bastard!" Diana said, rushing forward to meet him from the direction of his edit suite.

It didn't take much imagination to figure out what had offended her so deeply. The reason she hadn't answered the doorbell was that she'd been too deeply engrossed in VE—in the VE that he'd been in the process of redesigning when concentration overload had started his head aching. Damon realized belatedly that he ought to have tidied the work away properly, concealing it behind some gnomish password.

"It's not a final cut," he told her, raising his arms with the palms flat in a placatory gesture. "It's just a first draft. It won't be you in the finished product-it won't be anything like you."

"That's bullshit," Diana retorted, her voice still taut with pent-up anger. "First draft, final cut-I don't give a damn about that. It's the principle of the thing. It's sick, Damon."

Damon knew that it might add further fuel to her wrath, but he deliberately turned his back on her and went back into the corridor. He hesitated over the possibility of picking up one of the boxes of groceries he'd already brought to the threshold, but he figured that he needed time to think. He walked all the way back to the elevator, taking his time.

This is it, he thought, as he picked up the third box. This is really it. If she hasn't had enough, I have.

He couldn't help but feel that in an ideal world-or even the so-called New Utopia which was currently filling the breach- there ought to be a more civilized way of breaking up, but his relationship with Diana Caisson had always been a combative affair. It had been his combativeness that first attracted her attention, in the days when he had wielded the knives-but he had only done so in the cause of sport, never at the behest of mere rage.

A great deal had changed since then. He had switched sides; instead of supplying the raw material to be cut, spliced, and subtly augmented into a salable VE product, he was now an engineer and an artist. She had changed too, but the shift in her expectations hadn't matched the shift in his. With every month that passed she seemed to want more and more from him, whereas he had found himself wanting less and less from her. She had taken that as an insult, as perhaps it was.

Diana thought that the time he spent building and massaging VEs was a retreat from the world, and from her, which ought to be discouraged for the sake of his sanity. She couldn't see how anyone could absorb themselves in the painstaking creation of telephone answering tapes and pornypops-and because every stress and strain of their relationship had always become manifest in her explosive anger, she had developed a profound hatred even for the more innocuous products of his labor.

In the beginning, Diana's habit of lashing out had added a certain excitement to their passion, but Damon had now reached a stage when the storm and the stress were nothing but a burden-a burden he could do without. He had given up street-fighting; he was an artist now, through and through. He had hoped that Diana would share and assist his adaptation to a new lifestyle and a new philosophy-and he had to give her some credit for trying-but the fact remained that their move into polite society had never really come close to working out. Diana even got steamed up when the elevator took leave to remind her of the small print in the building rules.

It's over, Damon told himself again as he picked up the third box of groceries. He was testing himself, to see whether anxiety or relief would rise to the surface of his consciousness.

Diana was all ready to fight when he came back through the door, but Damon wasn't about to oblige her. He put the box he'd carried from the elevator on the floor and stepped back to collect another. She knew that he was buying time, but she let him go back for the third without protest. The expression in her blue-gray eyes said that she wasn't about to calm down, but she hadn't gone back for another knife, so he had reason to hope that the worst was already over.

Once the last box was inside the apartment and the door was safely closed behind him, Damon felt that he was ready to face Diana. Fortunately, her tremulous rage was now on the point of dissolving into tears. She had dug her fingernails into her palms so deeply that they had drawn blood, but they were

unclenching now. With Diana, violence always shifted abruptly into a masochistic phase; real pain was sometimes the only thing that could blot out the kinds of distress with which her internal technology was not equipped to deal.

"You don't want me at all," she complained. "You don't want any living partner. You only want my virtual shadow. You want a programmed slave, so you can be absolute master of your paltry sensations. That's all you've ever wanted."

"It's a commission," Damon told her as soothingly as he could. "It's not a composition for art's sake, or for my own gratification.

It's not even technically challenging. It's just a piece of work. I'm using your body template because it's the only one I have that's been programmed into my depository to a suitable level of complexity. Once I've got the basic script in place I'll modify it out of all recognition-every feature, every contour, every dimension. I'm only doing it this way because it's the easiest way to do it. All I'm doing is constructing a pattern of appearances; it's not real."

"You don't have any sensitivity at all, do you?" she came back. "To you, the templates you made of me are just something to be used in petty pornography. They're just something convenient- something that's not even technically challenging. It wouldn't make any difference what kind of tape you were making, would it? You've got my image worked out to a higher degree of digital definition than any other, so you put it to whatever use you can: if it wasn't a sex tape it'd be some slimy horror show . . . anything they'd pay you money to do. It really doesn't matter to you whether you're making training tapes for surgeons or masturbation aids for freaks, does it?"

As she spoke she struck out with her fists at various parts of his imaging system: the bland consoles, the blank screens, the lumpy edit suite and-most frequently-the dark helmets whose eyepieces could look out upon an infinite range of imaginary worlds. Her fists didn't do any damage; everything had been built to last.

"I can't turn down commissions," Damon told her as patiently as he could. "I need connections in the marketplace and I need to be given problems to solve. Yes, I want to do it all: phone links and training tapes, abstracts and dramas, games and repros, pornypops and ads. I want to be master of it all, because if I don't have all the skills, anything I devise for myself will be tied down by the limits of my own idiosyncrasy."

"And templating me was just another exercise? Building me into your machinery was just a way to practice. I'm just raw material."

"It's not you, Di," he said, wishing that he could make her understand that he really meant it. "It's not your shadow, certainly not your soul. It's just an appearance. When I use it in my work I'm not using you."

"Oh no?" she said, giving the helmet she'd been using one last smack with the white knuckles of her right hand. "When you put your suit of armor on and stick your head into one of those black holes, you leave this world way behind. When you're there-and you sure as hell aren't here very often-the only contact you have with me is with my appearance, and what you do to that appearance is what you do to me. When you put my image through the kind of motions you're incorporating into that sleazy fantasy it's me you're doing it to, and no one else."

"When it's finished," Damon said doggedly, "it won't look or feel anything like you. Would you rather I paid a copyright fee to reproduce some shareware whore? Would you rather I sealed myself away for hours on end with a set of supersnoopers and a hired model? By your reckoning, that would be another woman, wouldn't it? Or am I supposed to restrict myself to the design and decoration of cells for VE monasteries?"

"I'd rather you spent more time with the real me," she told him. "I'd rather you lived in the actual world instead of devoting yourself to substitutes. I never realized that giving up fighting meant giving up life."

"You had no right to put the hood on," Damon told her coldly. "I can't work properly if I feel that you're looking over my shoulder all the time. That's worse than knowing that I might have to duck whenever I come through the door because you might be waiting for me with a deadly weapon."

"It's only a kitchen knife. At the worst it would have put your eye out."

"I can't afford to take a fortnight off work while I grow a new eye-and I don't find experiences like that amusing or instructive."

"You were always too much of a coward to be a first-rate fighter," she told him, trying hard to wither him with her scorn. "You switched to the technical side of the business because you couldn't take the cuts anymore."

Damon had never been one of the reckless fighters who threw themselves into the part with all the flamboyance and devil-may-care they could muster, thinking that the tapes would make them look like real heroes. He had always fought to win with the minimum of effort and the minimum of personal injury-and in his opinion, it had always worked to the benefit of the tapes rather than to their detriment. Even the idiots who liked to consume the tapes raw, because it made the fights seem "more real," had appreciated his efficiency more than the blatant showmanship of his rivals.

Because most of his opponents hadn't cared much about skill or sensible self-preservation Damon had won thirty-nine out of his forty-three fights and had remained unbeaten for the last eighteen months of his career. He didn't consider that to be evidence of stupidity or stubbornness-and he'd switched to full-time tape doctoring because it was more challenging and more interesting than carving people up, not because he'd gone soft.

Unfortunately, the new business wasn't more challenging or more interesting for Diana. Watching a VE designer working inside a hood wasn't an engaging spectator sport.

"If you're hankering after the sound and fury of the streets," Damon said tiredly, "you know where they are."

It wasn't the first time he'd said it, but it startled her. Her fists unclenched briefly as she absorbed the import of it. She knew him well enough to read his tone of voice. She knew that he meant it, this time.

"Is that what you want?" she said, to make sure. Her palms were bleeding; he could see both ragged lines of cuts now that she was relaxing.

Damon toyed with the possibility of parrying the question. It's what you want, he could have said-but it would have been less than honest and less than brave.

"I can't take it anymore," he told her frankly. "It's run its course."

"You think you don't need me anymore, don't you?" she said, trying to pretend that she had reason to believe that he was wrong in that estimation. When she saw that he wasn't going to protest, her shoulders slumped-but only slightly. She had courage too, and pride. "Perhaps you're right," she sneered. "All you ever wanted of me is in that template. As long as you have my appearance programmed into your private world of ghosts and shadows you can do anything you like with me, without ever having to worry whether I'll step out of line. You'd rather live with a virtual image than a real flesh-and-blood person, wouldn't you? You wouldn't even take that helmet off to eat and drink if you didn't have to. If you had any idea how much you've changed since...."

The charges were probably truer than she thought, but Damon didn't see any need to be ashamed of the changes he'd made. The whole point about the world inside a VE hood, backed up by the full panoply of smartsuit-induced tactile sensation, was that it was better than the real world: brighter, cleaner, and more controllable. Earth wasn't hell anymore, thanks to the New Reproductive System and the wonders of internal technology, but it wasn't heaven either, in spite of the claims and delusions of the New Utopians. Heaven was something a man could only hope to find on the other side of experience, in the virtuous world of virtual imagery.

The brutal truth of the matter, Damon thought, was that everything of Diana Caisson that he actually needed really was programmed into her template. The absence from his life of her changeable, complaining, untrustworthy, knife-throwing, flesh-and-blood self wouldn't leave a yawning gap. Once, it might have done-but not anymore. She had begun to irritate him as much as he irritated her, and he hadn't her gift of translating irritation into erotic stimulation.

"You're right," he told her, trying to make it sound as if he were admitting defeat. "I've changed. So have you. That's okay. We're authentically young; we're supposed to change. We're supposed to become different people, to try out all the personalities of which we're capable. The time for constancy is a long way ahead of us yet."

He wondered, as he said it, whether it was true. Were his newly perfected habits merely a phase in an evolutionary process rather than a permanent capitulation to the demands of social conformity? Was he just taking a rest from the kind of hyped-up sensation-seeking existence he'd led while he was running with Madoc Tamlin's gang, rather than turning into one of the meek whose alleged destiny was to inherit the earth? Time would doubtless tell.

"I want the templates back," Diana said sharply. "All of them. I'm going, and I'm taking my virtual shadow with me."

"You can't do that," Damon retorted, knowing that he had to put on the appearance of a fight before he eventually gave in, lest it be too obvious that all he had to do was remold her simulacrum by working back from the modified echoes which he had built into half a dozen different commercial tapes of various kinds. While he only required her image, he could always get her back.

"I'm doing it," she told him firmly. "You're going to have to start that slimy sideshow from scratch, whether you pay for a ready-made template or rent some whore who'll let you build a new one on your own."

"If I'd known that it had come to this," he said with calculated provocativeness, "I wouldn't have had to struggle upstairs with three boxes of groceries."

From there, it was only a few more steps to a renewal of the armed struggle, but Damon managed to keep the carving knife out of it. His aim-as always-was to win with the minimum of fuss. He made her work hard to dispel her bad feeling in pain and physical stress, but she got there in the end, without having to bruise her knuckles too badly, or cut her palms to pieces, or even make her throat sore by screaming too much abuse.

Afterwards, while Diana was still slightly stoned by virtue of the anesthetic effect of her internal technology, Damon helped her to pack up her things.

There wasn't that much to collect up; Diana had never been much of a magpie. She was a doer, not a maker, and it was easy enough for Damon to see, in retrospect, that it was the doer in him that she had valued, not the maker. Unfortunately, he had had enough of doing, at least for the time being; his only hunger now was for making.

When the time came to divide the personal items that might have been reckoned joint property Damon gave way on every point of dispute, until the time arrived when Diana realized that he was purging his life of everything that was associated with her-at which point she began insisting that he keep certain things to remember her by. After that, he began insisting that she kept her fair share of things, precisely because he didn't want to be surrounded by things that were, in principle, half hers. In all probability, it was not until then that the reality of the situation really came home to her-but it was too late for her to scrub out the fight and start again in the hope of rebuilding the broken bridge.

The possessions Diana was prevailed upon to take with her filled up the trunk she'd brought when she moved in plus the three boxes Damon had used to transport the groceries and a couple of black-plastic waste sacks. Even though there were two of them to do the work, there was far too much of it not to pose a logistical problem when the time came to take them down to her car. They had to jam the elevator door open in order to load the stuff inside, and they had to compound that misdemeanor with another when they had to tell an old man who stopped the elevator on the eleventh that there wasn't room to fit him in and that he'd have to wait. The elevator gave them hell about that one, but neither of them was in a fit state to care.

When they had packed the stuff away in the trunk and rear-seat space of her car, Damon tried to bid her a polite good-bye, but Diana wasn't having any of it. She just scowled at him and: told him it was his loss.

As he watched her drive off, muted pangs of regret and remorse disturbed Damon's sense of relief, but not profoundly. When he walked back to the elevator his step was reasonably light. When it came down again the man from the eleventh floor stepped out, scowling at him almost as nastily as Diana, but Damon met the scowl with a serene smile. Although his past sins had not been forgotten, the elevator never said a word as it bore him upward; it was not permitted to harbor grudges. By the time it released him he was perfectly calm, looking forward to an interval of solitude, a pause for reflection.

Unfortunately, he saw as soon as the elevator doors opened that he wasn't about to get the chance. There were two men waiting patiently outside his apartment door, and even though they weren't wearing uniforms he had experience enough of their kind to know immediately that they were cops.

Three

Damon knew that it couldn't be a trivial matter. Cops didn't make house calls to conduct routine interviews. In all probability they'd soon be conducting all their interrogations in suitably tricked-out VEs; if the LAPD contract ever came up for tender he'd go for it like a shot. For the time being, though, the hardened pros who had been in the job for fifty years and more were sticking hard to the theory that meeting a man eye-to-eye made it just a little more difficult for their suspects to tell convincing lies.

One of the waiting men was tall and black, the other short and Japanese. Cops always seemed to work in ill-matched pairs, observing some mysterious sense of propriety carried over from the most ancient movies to the most recent VE dramas, but these two didn't seem to be in dogged pursuit of the cliché. Damon knew even before the short man held out a smartcard for his inspection that they were big-league players, not humble LAPD.

The hologram portrait of Inspector Hiru Yamanaka was blurred but recognizable. Although Damon had never seen an Interpol ID before he was prepared to assume that it was authentic; he handed it back without even switching it through his backpack.

"This is Sergeant Rolfe," said Yamanaka, obviously assuming that once his own identity had been established his word was authority enough to establish the ID of his companion.

"Whatever it is," Damon said, as he unlocked the door, "I'm not involved. I don't run with the gangs anymore and I don't have any idea what they're up to. These days, I only go out to fetch the groceries and help my girlfriend move out."

The men from Interpol followed Damon into the apartment, ignoring the stream of denials. Inspector Yamanaka showed not; a flicker of interest as his heavy-lidded gaze took in the knife stuck into the doorjamb, but his sidekick took silently ostentatious offense at the untidy state of the living room. Even Damon had to admit that Diana's decampment had left it looking a frightful mess.

As soon as the door was shut Yamanaka said, "What do you know about the Eliminators, Mr. Hart?"

"I was never that kind of crazy," Damon told him affrontedly. "I was a serious streetfighter, not a hobbyist assassin."

"No one's accusing you of anything," said Sergeant Rolfe, in the unreliably casual way cops had. Damon's extensive experience of LAPD methods of insinuation encouraged him to infer that although they didn't have an atom of evidence they nevertheless thought he was guilty of something. Long-serving cops always had a naive trust in their powers of intuition.

"You only want me to help with your inquiries, right?"

"That's right, Mr. Hart," said Yamanaka smoothly.

"Well, I can't. I'm not an Eliminator. I don't know anyone who is an Eliminator. I don't keep tabs on Eliminator netboards. I have no interest at all in the philosophy and politics of Elimination."

It was all true. Damon knew no more about the Eliminators than anyone else-probably far less, given that he was no passionate follower of the kind of news tape which followed their activities with avid fascination. He was not entirely unsympathetic to those who thought it direly unjust that longevity, pain control, immunity to disease, and resistance to injury were simply commodities to be bought off the nanotech shelf, possessed in the fullest measure only by the rich, but he certainly wasn't sufficiently hung up about it to become a terrorist crusader on behalf of "equality and social justice for all."

The Eliminators were on the lunatic fringe of the many disparate and disorganized communities of interest fostered by the Web; they were devoted to the business of giving earnest consideration to the question of who might actually deserve to live forever. Some of their so-called Operators were in the habit of naming those whom they considered "unworthy of eternity," via messages dispatched to netboards from public phones or illicit temporary linkpoints. Such messages were usually accompanied by downloadable packages of "evidence" which put the case for elimination. Damon had scanned a few such packages in his time; they were mostly badly composed exercises in hysteria devoid of any real substance. The first few freelance executions had unleashed a tide of media alarm back in the seventies-a blaze of publicity whose inevitable effect had been to glamorize the entire enterprise and conjure into being a veritable legion of amateur assassins. Things had quieted down in recent years, but only because the Operators had become more careful and the amateur assassins more cunning. Being named by a well-known Operator wasn't a cast-iron guarantee that a man would be attacked-and perhaps killed, in spite of all that his internal technology could contrive-but it was something that had to be taken seriously. It didn't require much imagination on Damon's part to figure out that Interpol must be keen to nail some guilty parties and impose some severe punitive sanctions, pour encourager les autres-but he couldn't begin to figure out why their suspicions might have turned in his direction.

"There's really no need to be so defensive," Yamanaka told him. "We find ourselves confronted by a puzzle, and we hope that you might be able to help us to understand what's going on."

The sergeant, meanwhile, had begun to drift around the apartment, looking at the pictures on the wall, scanning the discs on the shelves and eyeing Damon's VE equipment as if its abundance and complexity were a calculated affront to his stubborn fleshiness.

"A puzzle?" Damon echoed sceptically. "Crossword or jigsaw?"

"May I?" Yamanaka asked, refusing to echo Damon's sarcasm. His neatly manicured finger was pointing to the main window screen.

"Be my guest," Damon said sourly.

Yamanaka's fingers did a brief dance on the window screen's keyboard. The resting display gave way to a pattern of words etched in blue on a black background:

CONRAD HELIER IS NAMED AN ENEMY OF MANKIND

CONRAD HELIER IS NOT DEAD

FIND AND IDENTIFY THE MAN WHO WAS CONRAD HELIER

PROOFS WILL FOLLOW

OPERATOR 101

Damon felt a sinking sensation in his belly. He knew that he ought to have been able to regard the message with complete indifference, but the simple fact was that he couldn't.

"What has that to do with me?" he asked combatively.

"According to the official record," Yamanaka said smoothly, "you didn't adopt your present name until ten years ago, when you were sixteen. Before that, you were known as Damon Helier. You're Conrad Helier's natural son."

"So what? He died twenty years before I was born, no matter what that crazy says. Under the New Reproductive System it doesn't matter a damn who anybody's natural father was."

"To most people," Yamanaka agreed, "it's a matter of complete indifference-but not to you, Mr. Hart. You were given ' your father's surname. Your four foster parents were all close colleague's of your father. Your father left a great deal of money in trust for you-an inheritance which came under your control two years after you changed your name. I know that you've never touched the money and that you haven't seen any of your foster parents for some years, apparently doing your utmost to distance yourself from the destiny which your father had planned out for you-but that doesn't signify indifference, Mr. Hart. It suggests that you took a strong dislike to your father and everything he stood for."

"So you think I might do something like this? I'm not that stupid, and I'm certainly not that crazy. Who told you I might know something about this? Was it Eveline?"

"No one has named you as a possible suspect," the inspector said soothingly. "Your name came up in a routine data trawl. We know that Operator one-oh-one always transmits his denunciations from the Los Angeles area, and you've been living hereabouts throughout the time he's been active, but-

Damon cut him off in midsentence. "I told you-I'm not that kind of lunatic, and I try never to think about Conrad Helier and the plans he had for me. I'm my own man, and I have my own life to lead. Why are you so interested in a message that's so patently false? You can't possibly believe that Conrad Helier is Mill alive-or that he was an enemy of mankind, whatever that's supposed to mean."

"If you had let me finish," Yamanaka said, his voice still scrupulously even although he was obviously becoming impatient, "I'd have emphasized yet again that you're not under suspicion. Although the local police have an extensive file on your past activities there's nothing in it to suggest any involvement with the Eliminators. I'm afraid this is a more complicated matter than it seems."

Now Damon wondered whether Yamanaka might want to recruit him as an informant-to use his contacts as a means of furthering their investigation. He wanted to interrupt again, to say that he wasn't about to do that, but he knew that the conclusions he'd jumped to had so far only served to slow things down. He figured that if he held his tongue, this might be over much sooner.

"Before going on to the other aspect of our inquiry, however,"

Yamanaka continued, when he realized that he still had the floor, "it might be worth my pointing out that this message has some unusual features. No Operator, including one-oh-one, has ever used the phrase

enemy of mankind before; unworthy of immortality is the customary formula. Nor is it usual for Operators to appeal to kindred spirits to find and identify someone. It might be a hoax, of course; one of the nastiest aspects of the Eliminators' game is that anyone can play. Code number one-oh-one has been used a dozen times, and the relative coherency of the attached files has allowed it to build up a certain reputation, but that doesn't necessarily mean that all the messages came from one source. In any case, the message was only the first piece of the puzzle. You know, I suppose, that you're not the only person connected with Conrad Helier living on the Pacific Coast."

"One of my foster parents, Silas Arnett, lives near San Francisco," Damon admitted warily. "Some stupid resort area landscaped to look like the south coast of Old England-or some so-called continental engineer's notion of what the south coast of England used to look like. I haven't seen Silas in years. We don't communicate."

Actually, Silas Arnett was the only one of his foster parents with whom Damon might have communicated, had he been a little less rigorous in his determination to carve out his own destiny. Silas had been far more of a father to him than Karol Kachellek or Conrad Helier ever had, and had made his own escape from the tight-knit group shortly after Damon-but Damon had always had other things on his mind, and Silas hadn't contacted him except for sending dutiful messages of goodwill on his birthdays and at each year's end.

"Silas Arnett has disappeared from his home," Yamanaka said. "According to a witness, he was forcibly removed-kidnapped-the night before last."

Damon felt a stab of resentment. Why hadn't the Interpol man told him this first, instead of teasing him with all that crap about the Eliminators? He knew, though, that it was mostly his own fault that the discussion had got bogged down.

"What witness?" he asked.

"A young woman named Catherine Prail. She was an overnight guest at Arnett's house. She was asleep when the abduction took place-she heard the struggle but she didn't see anything."

"Is she involved?"

"We have no reason to think so. There's no evidence of any untoward activity on her part, and no indication of a possible motive." Yamanaka was being very careful, and Damon could understand why. Silas Arnett's house must have had all the standard security systems; it would have been very much easier to bypass them if the intruders had someone inside with direct access to the controls. The police must have gone through Catherine Prail's records very carefully indeed.

"Was she a very young woman?" Damon asked.

"There is little to distinguish her from dozens of other guests Mr. Arnett had entertained during the last few years," Yamanaka replied diplomatically-perhaps meaning that if the kidnappers knew Arnett's tastes and habits well enough, it would have been easy enough to get someone inside to facilitate their work.

"You think the people who took Silas also posted that message?" Damon said, pointing at the window screen.

"We think that it's an interesting coincidence," Yamanaka admitted. "There's more. Another of your father's contemporaries has an address in San Diego, but he's proving equally difficult to trace."

"Who?"

"A man named Surinder Nahal."

Damon could understand why the pedantic inspector has chosen the word contemporaries. Conrad Helier and Surinder Nahal had been in the same line of work, but they'd never been colleagues. They'd been rivals-and there had been a certain amount of bad blood between them. Damon didn't know exactly why; it hadn't been an acceptable topic of conversation among his foster parents.

"Has he been abducted too?" Damon asked.

"Not as far as we know," said Yamanaka, careful as ever.

The inspector's associate had now drifted back to his side, having completed his superficial inspection of the apartment. "Karol Kachellek also claimed that he hadn't seen Silas Arnett for many years," Rolfe put in. "Eveline Hywood said the same. It seems that your surviving foster parents fell out with one another as well as with you."

Damon realized that it would be foolish to swing from one extreme to the other-from taking it for granted that he was a suspect to taking it for granted that he wasn't. The Interpol men were undoubtedly fishing for anything they could catch. "I dare say it's true," he said cautiously. "Silas's decision to retire must have seemed to Karol and Eveline to be a failure of vocation almost as scandalous as my own: yet another betrayal of Conrad Helier's sacred cause."

Yamanaka nodded as if he understood-but Damon knew that he almost certainly didn't. It was difficult to guess Yamanaka's true age, because a man of his standing would have the kind of internal technology which was capable of slowing down the aging process to a minimum, as well as PicoCon's latest cosmetic engineering, but he was probably no more than sixty. To the inspector, as to Damon, the glittering peak of Conrad Helier's career would be the stuff of history. At school the young Hiru Yamanaka would have been dutifully informed that the artificial wombs which Conrad Helier had perfected, and the techniques which allowed such wombs to produce legions of healthy infants while the plague of sterility spread like wildfire across the globe, were the salvation of the species-but that didn't mean that he could understand the appalling reverence in which Conrad Helier had been held by his closest coworkers.

"Do you have any idea why anyone would want to kidnap Silas Arnett?" Yamanaka asked Damon with unaccustomed bluntness.

"None at all," Damon replied, perhaps too reflexively.

"Do you have any idea why anyone would want to blacken your father's name?" The follow-up seemed as bland as it was blunt, but Damon knew that if Yamanaka was right in his estimation of the interesting coincidence this might be the key that tied everything together. A brusque none at all would not serve as an adequate answer. "I was encouraged in every possible way to see my father as the greatest hero and saint the twenty-second century produced," Damon said judiciously, "but I know that there were some who had a very different opinion of him. I never knew him, of course, but I know there were people who resented the strength of his views and his high media profile. Some thought him unbearably arrogant, others thought he got more credit for the solution to the Crisis than was due to him. On the other hand, although I couldn't follow in his footsteps-and never wanted to-I don't disapprove of anything he did, or anything my foster parents did in pursuit of his ambitions. If you want my opinion, whoever posted this

notice is sick as well as stupid. It certainly wasn't Silas Arnett, and I find it difficult to believe that it might have been anyone who understood the nature and extent of Conrad Helier's achievements. That includes Surinder Nahal."

Sergeant Rolfe curled his lip, evidently thinking that this eye-to-eye interview was turning out to be a waste of valuable time.

"There were several witnesses to the death of Conrad Helier," the inspector said matter-of-factly, "and his last days were recorded, without apparent interruption, on videotape which can still be accessed by anyone who cares to download it. The doctor who was in attendance and the embalmer who prepared the body for the funeral both confirm that they carried out DNA checks on the corpse, and that the gene map matched Conrad Helier's records. If the man whose body was cremated on 27 January 2147 wasn't Conrad Helier then the gene map on file in the Central Directory must have been substituted." He paused briefly, then said: "You don't look at all like your father. Is that deliberate, or is it simply that you resemble your mother?"

"I've never gone in for cosmetic reconstruction," Damon told him warily. "I have no idea what my mother looked like; I don't even know her name. I understand that her ova were stripped and frozen at the height of the Crisis, when they were afraid that the world's entire stock might be wiped out by the plague. There's no surviving record of her. At that time, according to my foster parents, nobody was overly particular about where healthy ova came from; they just wanted to get as many as they could in the bank. They were stripping them from anyone more than five years old, so it's possible that my mother was a mere infant."

"It's possible, then, that your natural mother is still alive," Yamanaka commented, with a casualness that was probably feigned.

"If she is," Damon pointed out, "she can't possibly know that one of her ova was inseminated by Conrad Helier's sperm and that I was the result."

"I suppose Eveline Hywood and Mary Hallam must both have been infected before their wombs could be stripped," Yamanaka said, disregarding the taboos that would presumably continue to inhibit free conversation regarding the legacy of the plague until the last survivors of the Crisis had retired from public life. "Or was it just that Conrad Helier was reluctant to select one of your foster parents as a natural mother in case it affected the partnership?"

"I don't think any of this is relevant to the matters you're investigating," Damon said. "The kidnapping is the important thing-the other thing was probably posted simply to confuse the matter."

"I can't tell as yet what might be relevant and what might not," Yamanaka said unapologetically. "The message supposedly deposited by Operator one-oh-one might be pure froth, and there might be nothing sinister in the fact that I can't contact Surinder Nahal-but if Silas Arnett really has been seized by Eliminators this could represent the beginning of a new and nastier phase of that particular species of terrorism. Eliminators already attract far too much media attention, and this story might well become headline news. I'd like to stay one step ahead of the dozens of newsmen who must have been commissioned to start digging- in fact, I need to stay at least one step ahead of them because they'll certainly confuse the issue once they begin stirring things up. I'm sorry to have troubled you, Mr. Hart, but I thought it best that I contact you directly to inform you of what had happened. If you think of anything that might help us, it might be to your own advantage to let us know immediately."

He's implying that I might be in danger too, Damon thought. If he's right, and the message is connected

to Silas's disappearance, this really might be the beginning of something nasty- even if it's only a news-tape hatchet job. "I'll ask around," he said carefully. "If I discover anything that might help you, I'll be sure to let you know."

"Thank you, Mr. Hart," the man from Interpol said, offering no clue as to exactly what he understood by Damon's promise to ask around. "I'm grateful for your cooperation."

When he had closed the door behind his unwelcome visitors Damon pulled the carving knife out of the jamb, wondering what Sergeant Rolfe had made of it. Would Interpol be checking Diana's record as carefully as they had checked his? Would they find anything there to connect her to the Eliminators? Probably not-but how well did he know her? How well had he ever known her? And where would she go, now that she was homeless again? Might she too become "untraceable," like Silas Arnett and Surinder Nahal? Suddenly, he felt an urgent need of someone to talk to-and realized belatedly that since he had quit the fight game he had gradually transferred all his conversational eggs to one basket. Now that Diana was gone, there was no one who regularly passed the time of day with him except the censorious elevator, which didn't even qualify as a worm-level AI.

All I want is a chance to work, he thought. All I need is the space to get on with my own projects. None of this is anything to do with me. But he knew, even as he voiced the thought within the virtual environment of his mind, that he didn't have the authority to decide that he was uninvolved in this affair. Nor, he realized-slightly to his surprise-was he able to attain the level of indifference that would allow him simply to turn his back on the mystery. In spite of everything that had happened to spoil the relationship between himself and his foster parents, he still cared-about Silas Arnett, at least.

Oh, Silas, he thought, what on earth have you done? Who can you possibly have annoyed sufficiently to get yourself kidnapped? And why have the Eliminators turned their attention to a saint who's been dead for nearly fifty years?

Four

Damon knew that there was no point searching the apartment for the bugs that Sergeant Rolfe had planted while he was wandering around. Interpol undoubtedly had nanomachines clever enough to evade detection by his antique sweeper. Nor was he about to ask for help-Building Security had better sweepers but they also had a rather flexible view of the right to privacy that they were supposedly there to guarantee. He had enough demerits on his account already without giving formal notification of the fact that he was under investigation by a high-level law enforcement agency.

Instead, he donned his phone hood and started making calls.

It was, as he'd anticipated, a waste of time. Everybody in the world-not to mention everybody off-world-had a backpack and a personal call-number, but that didn't mean that anybody in the world was accessible twenty-four hours a day. Everybody in the world also had an AI answering machine, which functioned for most people as a primary status symbol as well as a protector of privacy, and which

needed to be shown off if they were to perform that function adequately. The higher a man's social profile was the cleverer his AI needed to be at fielding and filtering calls. Damon usually had no cause to regret the trend-customizing virtual environments for the AI simulacra to inhabit provided nearly 40 percent of his business-but whenever he actually wanted to make urgent contact with some people he found the endless routine of stagy reply sequences just as frustrating as anyone else.

Karol Kachellek's simulacrum was standing on a photo-derived Hawaiian beach with muted breakers rolling in behind him. The unsmiling simulacrum brusquely reported that Karol was busy operating a deep-sea dredger by remote control and couldn't be disturbed. It warned Damon that his call was unlikely to be returned for several hours, and perhaps not until the next day.

Damon told the sim that the matter was urgent, but the assurances he received in return were patently hollow.

Eveline Hywood's simulacrum wasn't even full length; it was just a detached head floating in what Damon took to be a straightforward replication of her lab. The room's only decoration-if even that could be reckoned a mere ornament-was a window looking out upon a rich star field. It was the kind of panorama which people who lived with five miles of atmosphere above their heavy heads only ever got to see in virtual form, and it therefore functioned as a status symbol, even though Lagrangists were supposed to be above that sort of thing. The sim's gray hair was trimmed to a mere fuzz, according to the prevailing minimalist philosophy of the microgee colonists, but its features were slightly more naturalistic than those Karol had contrived for his alter ego.

The sim told Damon that Eveline was working on a delicate series of experiments and wouldn't be returning any calls for at least twenty-four hours. Again, Damon told the sim that the matter was urgent-but the sim looked back at him with a cold hauteur which silently informed him that nothing happening on Earth could possibly be urgent by comparison with the labor of a dedicated Lagrangist.

Damon doubted that the news about Silas and the strange declaration of Operator 101 had reached either of his foster parents as yet; unless Interpol had sent someone to see them face-to-face the information would be stuck in the same queue as his own calls, probably assigned an equally low priority by the two AI filtering devices.

Madoc Tamlin's simulacrum had a lot more style, as did the surreal backcloth which Damon had designed for it, with a liquid clock whose ripples told the right time and a very plausible phoenix that rose afresh from its pyre every time the sim accepted a call. The sim gave no reason for Madoc's unavailability, although the expression in its eyes carefully implied that being the kind of rakehell he was he was probably up to no good. Damon knew, though, that its promise that Madoc would get back to him within the hour was trustworthy.

When he lifted the hood again the one thing on Damon's mind WHS getting to the bathroom, so it wasn't until he'd done what he had to do and emerged again that he saw the envelope lying on the floor just inside the apartment door. The absurdity of it stopped him dead in his tracks and almost made him laugh. Nobody pushed envelopes under apartment doors-not, at any rate, in buildings as well supplied with spy eyes as this one.

Damon picked the envelope up. It wasn't sealed.

He drew the enclosed piece of paper out and unfolded it curiously. The words printed on it might have been put there by any of a million near identical machines. They read:

DAMON IT IS TRUE

CONRAD HELIER IS ALIVE

ARNETT WILL BE RELEASED WHEN HE HAS TESTIFIED

AHASUERUS AND HYWOOD HAVE THE REMAINING ANSWERS

OPERATOR 101

This time, Damon did laugh. This made the whole affair seem suddenly childish, like a silly game. He remembered the way Yamanaka had carefully called his attention to the unusual features of the original message, implying that it wasn't really an Eliminator who had posted it. This was surely confirmation of the fact-no authentic Eliminator would post personal messages under someone's door. This had to be a joke.

Damon slipped back under the hood and called Building Security.

The call was answered by a real person, just as the lease specifications promised. "This is thirteen four seven," he said reflexively, although she could have read that from the automatic display.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Hart?" said the real person gravely. She had a broad halo of honey blond hair, a superabundance of facial jewelry, and an anxious expression, none of which were properly coordinated with her sober gray uniform.

"Somebody just slipped something under my door-within the last thirty minutes. Could you decant me the spy-eye tape that gives the clearest picture?"

He took her assent so much for granted that he almost severed the connection before she said: "I'm sorry, Mr. Hart, but that won't be possible. We've suffered a slight system failure." She sounded very embarrassed, as well she might. Setting aside such routine antisocial behavior as jamming the elevator open for a couple of minutes, the misdemeanor rate within the building was so low that Security was having a hard time justifying its proportion of the lease tax.

"What do you mean, a slight system failure?" Damon asked, although he had a pretty good idea.

"Well," said the blond woman unhappily, "to tell the truth, it's not that slight. In fact, it's fairly general."

Damon considered the implications of this news for a few moments before saying: "General enough to allow someone to walk into the building, take the elevator to the thirteenth, push something under a door, take the elevator back down again, and walk out undetected?"

"It's possible," she conceded, quickly adding: "It's a very unusual situation, Mr. Hart. I've never known anything like it."

Damon judged from her tone that she had encountered similar situations several times before, but had been instructed not to admit the fact to the tenants. This wasn't the kind of building that software

saboteurs would target, but it wasn't the kind they'd leave alone either. Damon had crashed similar systems in the days when he'd been in training to be an all-around juvenile delinquent and taken pride in it. The only authentically unusual thing about this particular act of sabotage was that someone had taken advantage of it to pay a personal call. The blond woman, who was waiting impatiently for him to break the connection and let her get on with her work, obviously hadn't cottoned on to that.

"Thanks," he said reflexively. He didn't give her time to say "You're welcome," although she probably wouldn't have bothered.

When he'd slipped off the hood, Damon devoted a few moments to wondering who might want to make a joke at his expense, and why. Diana hadn't had time to set it up, and it wasn't her style-although she certainly knew enough amateur saboteurs capable of crashing Building Security. Madoc Tamlin knew many more, and he was one of the few people to whom he'd confided his original surname and his reasons for changing it, but Madoc wouldn't stoop so low.

Eventually, he came around full circle. What if it weren't a joke? Interpol seemed to be taking it seriously enough, even though they didn't think it was authentic Eliminator action-and something had happened to Silas Arnett.

He wondered whether he ought to tell the police about the note. He had no particular reason to conceal it, although its sender presumably intended it for his eyes only. He decided to keep his options open, at least for the time being, and tackle the matter himself. That had always been his natural inclination- an inclination which, if it was hereditary, had very probably been gifted to him by his long-dead father. He put the envelope in a drawer and the note into the inside pocket of his suitskin. Then he went to get something to eat.

Just as Damon finished his meal the alarm he'd set to notify him of any response to his various calls began beeping. He ducked under the phone hood and displaced his AI answering machine, which was in the middle of telling Madoc Tamlin that he was on his way. The VE which surrounded them was a lush forest scene whose colorful birds and butterflies were the product of a spontaneous ecology rather than a simple tape loop; it was unnecessarily elaborate but it served as an ad for his VE engineering skills.

"Is this about Diana?" Madoc said-which at least solved the minor mystery of where Diana had gone after storming out of Damon's life. It made sense; she had known Tamlin a good deal longer than she had known Damon, and she was on no better terms with her foster parents than Damon was with his.

"No, it's not," he said. "It's business. Have you heard anything about a kidnap up the coast?"

Madoc raised a quizzical eyebrow. His eyebrows were as black as his hair and as neatly shaped; they made an interesting contrast with his pale eyes, which had been tinted a remarkably delicate shade of green. "Haven't seen the news," he said. "Anyone you know?"

"My foster father. There may be an Eliminator connection." The quizzical expression disappeared. "Not good," Madoc said-then waited, expecting more.

"I've got a proposition that might interest you," Damon said carefully.

"Yeah?" Madoc knew better than to ask for details over the phone. "Well, I won't be back at the apartment for quite a while, and that might not be a good place, all things considered. You can find me in

the alley where we shot your second-to-last fight. You remember where that is, I suppose?"

"I remember," Damon assured him dryly. "I'll be there in an hour and a half, traffic permitting."

"No traffic here," Madoc drawled. "You should never have moved so close to the coast, Damie. World's still overcrowded, thanks to you-know-who. Too many people, too many cars, wherever the real estate is in good condition. It'll be a long time before the gantzers get to this neighborhood."

"Don't bet on that," Damon said. "The new generation can turn rubble back into walls with no significant effort at all. Around here you'd never know there was ever an earthquake, let alone two plague wars."

"Around the alley," Madoc riposted, "we don't forget so easily. We're conservationists, remember? Preserving the legacy of the plague wars and the great quakes, keeping alive all the old traditions."

"I'm on my way," Damon said shortly. He wasn't in the mood for banter.

Tamlin laughed, and might have said more, but Damon cut him off and the forest faded into darkness, leaving nothing visible except the customary virtual readouts, limned in crimson against the Stygian gloom.

He didn't waste any time leaving the apartment and taking the elevator down to the basement. The elevator's voice was back online but it didn't have a word of complaint to utter.

The traffic was bad enough to make Damon wonder whether the twenty-first-century mythology of endless gridlock was as fanciful as everyone thought. At the turn of the millennium the world's population hadn't been much over five billion; the present day's seven billion might be distributed a little more evenly in geographical terms, but people only thought of it as "small" by comparison with the fourteen billion peak briefly attained before the Second Plague War. As Madoc had said, the planet could still be considered overcrowded, thanks to Conrad Helier. The rising curve of the birthrate would cross the declining curve of the death rate again within ten or twelve years, and yet another psychologically significant moment would be upon the worrying world. Los Angeles had been so severely depopulated in the plague wars that it still lay half in ruins, but now that PicoCon had the Gantz patents all wrapped up and the last of the ancient antitrust laws had been consigned to the dustbin by the Washington Rump it was only a matter of time before the deconstructionists started the long march inland.

The further east Damon went the thinner the traffic became. He headed straight into the heart of the badlands, where the Second Plague War had struck hardest once the bugs had moved out of Hollywood, leaving nothing for the '77 quake to do but a little minor vandalism-by the time the Crisis arrived some twenty years later there had been no one around these parts to care. Soon enough, he was in a region where all the buildings which hadn't already collapsed were in permanent danger of so doing: a district which was, in practice if not in theory, beyond the reach of the LAPD.

In truth, little enough of what Madoc Tamlin and his fellows got up to out here was unambiguously illegal. The fights were private affairs, which couldn't concern the police unless a combatant filed a complaint-which, of course, none ever did-or someone died. Fighters did die, occasionally; a lot of the kids who got involved did so in order to earn the money that would pay for advanced IT, and some of them didn't advance far enough quickly enough to keep themselves from real harm. Taping the fights wasn't against the law, nor was selling them-except insofar as the tapes in which someone did get killed might be counted as evidence of accessory activity-so Madoc's reputation as an outlaw was 90 percent myth. His only real crimes arose out of his association with software saboteurs and creative accountants.

Damon's own record was no dirtier, formally or informally. He had never killed anyone, although he'd

come close once or twice. He really had tried to see the fighting as a sport, with its own particular skills, its own unique artistry, and its own distinctive spectator appeal. He hadn't given it up out of disgust, but simply because he'd become more and more interested in the technical side of the business-the way the raw tapes of ham-fisted brawls were turned into scintillating VE experiences for the punters. That, at least, was what he had told himself-and anyone else who cared to ask.

Damon found Madoc easily enough. He hadn't been down the alley for more than a year, but it was all familiar-almost eerily so. The graffiti on the walls had been renewed but not significantly altered; all the heaps of rubble had been carefully maintained, as if they were markings on a field of play whose proportions were sacred. Madoc was busy wiring up a fighter who didn't look a day over fourteen, although he had to be a little older than that.

"It's too tight," the fighter complained. "I can't move properly." Damon had no difficulty deducing that it was the boy's first time.

"No it's not," said Madoc, with careful patience, as he knelt to complete the synaptic links in the *reta mirabile* which covered the fighter's body like a bright spiderweb. "It's no tighter than the training suit you've been using all week. You can move quite freely."

The novice's fearful eyes looked over Madoc's shoulder, lighting on Damon's face. Damon saw the sudden blaze of dawning recognition. "Hey," the boy said, "you're Damon Hart! I got a dozen of your fight tapes. You going to be doctoring the tape for this? That's great! My name's Lenny Garon."

Damon didn't bother to inform the boy that he hadn't come to watch the fight and he didn't deny that he had been brought in to doctor the tapes. He understood how scared the youngster must be, and he didn't want to say anything that might be construed as a put-down. If he had judged the situation rightly, Lenny Garon was due to be cut up by a skilled knifeman, and he hadn't need any extra damage to his ego. Damon didn't recognize the boy's opponent, but he could see that the other wired-up figure was at least three years older and much more comfortable with the pressure and distribution of the *reta mirabile*.

Madoc stood up, already issuing stern instructions as to where the combatants shouldn't stab one another. He didn't want the cording apparatus damaged. "The only way you can make real money for this kind of work," he told the novice, "is to get used to the kit and to make damn sure it doesn't get damaged. Given that your chances of long-term survival are directly proportional to your upgrade prospects, you'd better get this right. It's a good break, if you can carry it off. Brady's tough, but you'll have to go up against tougher if you're to make your mark in this game."

Lenny nodded dumbly. "I can do it," he said uneasily. "I got all the feints and jumps. It'll be okay. I won't let you down."

"We don't want feints and jumps," Madoc said, with a slight contemptuous sneer that might have been intended to wind the boy up. "We want purpose and skill and desperation. Just because we're making a VR tape.... Explain it to him, Damon."

Madoc turned away to check the other fighter's equipment, leaving Lenny Garon to look up at Damon with evident awe. Damon was acutely embarrassed by the thought that it might have been using his tapes that had filled this idiot with the desire to get into the fight game himself. The cleverer the tapes became as a medium of entertainment, the easier it became for users to forget the highly significant detail that fighters who were doing it for real were not insulated, as VE users were, from the consequences of their mistakes. Even if they had IT enough to blot out their pain, the actual fighters still got stabbed and slashed; the blood they lost was real, and if they were unfortunate enough to take a blade in the eye they

lost the sight of it for a very uncomfortable couple of weeks.

"Any advice?" the boy asked eagerly.

Damon was tempted to say: Forget it. Get out now. Make the money some other way. He didn't, because he knew that he had no right to say any such thing. He hadn't even needed the money. "Don't try to look good," he said, instead. "Remember that we aren't making a straightforward recording that will give a floater the illusion that he's going through your moves. We're just making a template-raw material. You just concentrate on looking after yourself-leave it to the doctor to please the audience."

"Shit, Damon!" Madoc complained. "Don't tell the kid he doesn't have to give us any help at all. He's just trying to go easy on you, Lenny, with it being your first time and all. Sure, playacting doesn't do it-it reeks of fake-but you have to show us something. You have to show us that you have talent. If you want to be good at this, you have to go all the way ... but you have to look after the wiring. No record at all is far worse than a bad one."

The boy nodded respectfully in Damon's direction before turning to face his opponent. The gesture brought it home to Damon that he still had a big reputation on the streets. He might be out of circulation, but his tapes weren't; his past was going to be around for a long time. But that, in a sense, was why he was here. Aspects of his past that seemed even more remote than his fighting days were still capable of tormenting him, still capable of involving him.

"Just remember," Madoc Tamlin said as he pushed the boy forward, "it's a small price to pay for taking one more step toward immortality."

Like the Eliminators, street slang always spoke of immortality rather than emortality-which, strictly speaking, was all that even the very best internal technology could ever hope to provide. Not that anyone expected current technology to guarantee them more than a hundred and fifty years-but in a hundred and fifty years' time, current technology would be way out of date. Those who got the very best out of today's IT would still be around to get the benefit of tomorrow's-and might, if all went well, eventually arrive at the golden day when all the processes of aging could be arrested in perpetuity.

According to the ads, today's young people were solidly set on an escalator that might take them all the way to absolute immunity to aging and disease. As the older generation-who had already aged too badly to be brought back permanently from the brink-gradually died off, the younger would inherit the earth in perpetuity. Not that anyone believed the ads implicitly, of course-ads were just ads, when all was said and done.

Five

Damon watched the two fighters square up. Their kit was more than a little cumbersome, but very few artificial organics were as delicate as the real thing and you couldn't get template precision with thinner webs. As the two moved together, though, he deliberately looked away at the ruined buildings to either

side of the street.

His eye was caught by one of the items of graffiti sketched in luminous paint on a smoke-blackened fragment of wall. It read: Live fast, die young, leave a beautiful corpse. It was an antique, so old that Madoc must have found it in a history book. In fact, he could imagine Madoc chuckling with glee when he discovered it, immediately appropriating it as part of the backcloth for his dramatic productions. No child of today, however dangerously he or she might want to live, would ever have come up with such a ridiculous slogan-although there were plenty of centenarians who might like to believe it of them.

Centenarians loved to see themselves as the survivors of the Second Deluge. Those who had made no effective contribution to the world's survival were worse than those who had, swelling with absurd pride at the thought that they had endured the worst trial by ordeal that nature had ever devised and proved their worth. Such people could not imagine that anyone who came after them could possibly value the earth, or life itself, as much as they did-nor could they imagine that anyone who came after them could be as worthy of life as they were, let alone of immortality. No one knew for sure, but Damon's suspicion was that a hundred out of every hundred-and-one Eliminator Operators were in their dotage.

He wondered what the neighborhood must have been like in the bad old days of the early twenty-first century, and what angry words might have been scrawled on the walls by boys and girls who really were condemned to die young. Throughout that century this neighborhood would have been crowded out with the unemployable and the insupportable: one of countless concentration-city powder kegs waiting for a revolutionary spark which had never come, thanks to the two plague wars-the first allegedly launched by the rich against the poor and the second by the poor against the rich. In the short term, of course, the rich had won both of them; it had taken the Crisis to restore a measure of equality and fraternity in the face of disaster. Now the Crisis was over and the New Utopia was here-but the neighborhood was still derelict, still host to darkness and to violence, still beyond the reach of supposedly universal civilization.

When the fight began in earnest, Damon couldn't help looking back. He couldn't refuse to watch, so he contented himself with trying to follow every nuance with a scrupulously clinical eye. The other watchers-whose sole raison d'être was to whip the combatants into a frenzy-weighed in with the customary verve and fury, howling out their support for one boy or the other.

Amazingly, Lenny Garon managed to stick Brady in the gut while the experienced fighter was arrogantly playing a teasing game of cat and mouse with him-which made Brady understandably furious. It was immediately clear to Damon that the older boy wasn't going to settle for some token belly wound as a reprisal; he wanted copious bloodshed. That would be more than okay by Madoc Tamlin, so long as the cuts didn't do too much damage to the recorders. Lenny Garon would suffer more than he had anticipated, perhaps more than he had thought possible, and for far longer-but it probably wouldn't put him off. In all probability, he would be all the more enthusiastic to work his way up to something really heavy, in order to pay for the nanotech that would make him as good as new and keep him; that way no matter what injuries his frail flesh might sustain.

Madoc had, of course, taken note of Damon's reluctance to join in the loud exhortations of the crowd. "Don't get all stiff on me, Damon," he said. "You may be in the Big World now, but you're still too young to get rigor mortis. Are you worried about splitting with Diana? She's at my place now, but it isn't permanent. I could help fix things up if you want me to." Damon took the inference that Madoc had found Diana's sudden reintroduction into his life burdensome.

"Interpol paid a call on me yesterday," Damon told him, thinking that it was time to get down to business. No one was likely to be listening to them while the fight was on. "Silas Arnett has been snatched by persons unknown. They seem to think that I might be a target too."

Madoc put on a show of astonishment. "I can't believe that," he said. "Eliminators only go after the older generation-and they use bombs and bullets. They're all loners, and losers too. If they had any real organization they'd have been busted long ago. A snatch takes planning-not their style at all. What's it go to do with you, anyhow? I thought you didn't talk to your family."

"I don't, but it is Silas-the nearly human one. I don't suppose you know anything at all about a particular loner who calls himself Operator one-oh-one? He's said to be local."

"Not my territory," Madoc said with a shrug. "You want me to ask around, right?"

"It's more complicated than that. The Operator in question named Conrad Helier as an enemy of mankind. When you're through, okay?"

Madoc looked at him sharply before nodding. Even Diana Caisson didn't know that Damon Hart had once been Damon Helier, and Madoc knew how privileged he was to have been let in on the secret. He'd probably have found out anyway-Madoc knew some very light-footed Webwalkers, first-rate poachers who had not yet turned gamekeeper-but he hadn't had to go digging. Damon had trusted him, and obviously trusted him still. Damon knew that he could rely on Madoc to do everything he could to help, for pride's sake as well as anything else he might be offered.

Lenny Garon was in real trouble now. The crowd were baying for blood, and getting it. Damon kept his own eyes slightly averted as Madoc turned back to concentrate fully on the business in hand, but he couldn't turn away. He could feel the stir and surge of his own adrenalin, and his muscles were tensing as he put himself in the shoes of the younger fighter, trying to urge the boy on with his body language.

It didn't work, of course.

A roar went up from the watchers as Brady finally rammed home his advantage. Poor Lenny was on the ground, screaming. The blade had gone deep, but the wound wasn't mortal.

Damon knew that it would all be feeding into the template: the reflexes and convulsions of pain; the physical dimensions of the shock and the horror. It would all be ready digitized, ripe for manipulation and refinement. The tape doctor would take a little longer to tease it into proper shape than the real doctor would take to stitch up the fighters, but once the tape was made it would be fixed and finished. Lenny Garon might never be the same. His wounds would mend, leaving no obvious scars, but....

He abandoned the train of thought. This affair seemed to be feeding an unhealthy tendency to melodrama. He reminded himself of what he'd told Diana about the porn tape. By the time the doctor had finished with the recordings there'd be nothing of Lenny left at all; there'd only be the actions and the reactions, dissected out and purified as a marketable commodity. The fighter on the tape might have Lenny's face and Lenny's pain, but it wouldn't be him. It would be an artifact, less than a shadow and nothing like a soul.

The whole thing was in rank bad taste, of course, but it was a living for all concerned. For the first few months after he had quit fighting, it had been his own living, and it had been based in talents that were entirely and exclusively his own, using nothing that Conrad Helier had left to him-in his will, at least.

Damon had wanted then, and he wanted still, to be his own man.

Madoc Tamlin had moved forward to help the stricken street-fighter, not because he was overly

concerned for the boy's health but because he wanted to make certain that the equipment was still in good order. Not until the silvery web had been stripped away were the two fighters handed over to the amateur ambulance drivers waiting nearby. Brady got in under his own steam but Lenny Garon had to be carried.

The crowd drifted away, evaporating into the concrete wilderness.

Damon waited patiently until Madoc's gear was all packed up and the produce of the day had been handed on to the next phase of its development.

"Your place or mine?" Madoc said, waving his hand in a lazy arc which took in both their cars. Damon led the way to his own vehicle and the older man followed. Damon waited until both doors had closed before starting to set out his proposition.

"If this thing turns out to be serious," Damon said, stressing the if, "I'd be willing to lay out serious credit to pursue it."

"How serious?" Madoc asked, for form's sake.

"I've got some put away," Damon said, knowing that his friend would understand exactly what he meant. He fished a smartcard out of his pocket and held it out. "I'll call the bank in the morning and authorize it for cash withdrawals," he said. "Everything's aboveboard-there's no need to hide the transactions. I'll fix it so that you can draw ten thousand with no questions asked. If you need more, call me-but it had better be worth paying for."

"What am I looking for?" Madoc asked mildly. "Apart from Operator one-oh-one, that is."

"Silas was with a girl named Catherine Prail when he was snatched. The police don't think she was involved, but you'd better check her out. Interpol also mentioned the name of another biotechnologist by the name of Surinder Nahal, recently resident in San Diego. That might also be irrelevant, but it has to be checked. If you can find Silas, or identify the people who took him, I'll pay a suitable finder's fee."

"I'll see what I can do," Madoc said equably. "Are you going to tell me what Operator one-oh-one has posted, or do I have to go trawling through the Eliminators' favorite netboards?"

"He posted a message saying that Conrad Helier is still alive and calling him an enemy of mankind. He also sent me a personal message, which Interpol might not know about."

Damon took the piece of paper from his suitskin's inner pocket and handed it to Madoc Tamlin. Madoc read it and gave it back. "Could be from anybody," he observed.

"Could be," admitted Damon, "but whoever carried it up to the thirteenth floor took the trouble to crash Building Security. A playful move-but sometimes playful is serious in disguise. Somebody's trying to jerk my strings, and I'd like to know who- and why."

Madoc nodded, carefully furrowing his remarkable eyebrows. "Hywood's another of your foster parents, right?"

"Right. Eveline Hywood. Currently resident in Lagrange-Five, allegedly very busy with important experiments of an unspecified nature. I doubt that she'll return my call."

"It won't be easy to check her out. The Lagrangists don't play by our rules, and they have their own playspace way out on the lunatic fringe of the Web."

"Don't worry too much about that. I can't imagine that Eveline's involved in the kidnapping or the Eliminator messages, even if she does have some relevant information. What do you know about Ahasuerus?"

"The original guy or the foundation?"

"I presume that the reference is to the foundation, rather than the legend," Damon said, refusing to treat the issue as a joke.

"Not much," Madoc admitted. "Been around for the best part of two hundred years. Major players in the longevity game, funding research here, there, and probably everywhere. Reputation ever-so-slightly shady because of a certain bad odor attached to their start-up capital, although it beats me why anybody should care after all this time. Every fortune in the world can be traced back to some initial act of piracy, isn't that what they say? What was it they used to call the Ahasuerus guy, way back, when?"

"The Man Who Stole the World," Damon said.

"Yeah-that's right. Zimmer, was it? Or Zimmerman?"

"Zimmerman."

"Right." Madoc nodded, as if he were the one answering instead of the one who'd asked. "Well, if he did steal the world, we" seem to have got it back again, don't we?"

Damon didn't want to get sidetracked. "I'll dig up what I can about connections between Ahasuerus and my father," he said, "although it'd be no surprise at all to find that they'd had extensive dealings. Ahasuerus must have had dealings with every biotech team in the world if they've been handing out cash to longevity researchers since the days before the Crash.

Madoc stroked his chin pensively. It seemed that his green eyes now glowed a little more powerfully than they had before. "What that note implies," he said, "is that Arnett was taken because he knows something about Conrad Helier-something dirty. I don't suppose you have any idea what that is, do you?"

"If I did," Damon told him, "I'd probably want to sit on it awhile longer, just in case this business can be wrapped up quickly and quietly-but as it happens, I don't. I was only ever told about Saint Conrad the Savior, in whose holy footsteps I was supposed to follow."

"Were you ever given any cause to think that he might not be dead?"

"Quite the reverse," Damon said. "According to his disciples, it was a major point of principle with Saint Conrad that an overcrowded world of long-lived individuals had to develop an etiquette, if not an actual legal requirement, whereby a dutiful citizen of the New Utopia would postpone the exercise of his-or her-right of reproduction until after death. If my foster parents are to be believed, my very existence is proof of Conrad Helier's demise; if he were still alive, he'd be guilty of an awkward hypocrisy."

"It's Conrad Helier you're really interested in, isn't it?" Madoc suggested, running his neatly manicured fingernails speculatively buck and forth along the edge of the smartcard that Damon had given him. "This

Arnett guy is a side issue. You want to know if your natural father really is alive, and if the Eliminators really have grounds for resenting his continued presence in the world."

"Concentrate on finding Silas Arnett, for the time being," Damon said flatly.

Madoc nodded meekly. "I'll put the Old Lady herself onto it," he said. "She doesn't take this kind of work normally, but she likes me. I can talk her into it."

"I don't want you hiring someone just because she's a living legend," Damon told him sharply. "I want someone who can get the job done."

"Trust me," Madoc advised him, with the casual air of a man who was as trustworthy as his own artificial graffiti. "Harriet's the best. I know these things. Have I ever let you down?"

"Once or twice."

Madoc only grinned at that, refusing to take the complaint seriously. "How are things otherwise?" he asked as he put the smartcard away. "Honest toil living up to your expectations?" Damon knew that what Madoc really wanted to know was whether he and Diana were washed up for good and all-but it wasn't a topic he wanted to discuss.

"I'm thinking of taking a little break," Damon told him. "I have some digging of my own to do tonight, but if I don't get answers to a couple of calls I might have to take a brief excursion. to Hawaii tomorrow."

"What for?"

"Karol Kachellek is there, working out of Molokai. Like Eveline, he's pointedly refusing to get back to me. He won't want to tell me anything, even if he knows what all this is about, but if I go in person I might get something out of him. At the very least, I might unsettle him a bit."

Madoc grinned. "You always were good at unsettling people. Is that it?" When Damon nodded, he let himself out of the car.

"Give my regards to Diana," Damon said as Madoc began to walk away. "Tell her I'm sorry, but that it'll all work out for the best."

Madoc nearly turned back in order to follow that up, but he must have judged Damon's mood more accurately than he'd let on. After a moment's hesitation he kept going, answering the instruction with a calculatedly negligent wave.

As soon as the other car had pulled away Damon began to ask himself whether he'd done the right thing. Taking money from the legacy to bankroll Madoc's investigations wasn't really a betrayal of his determination to make his own way in the world- it was surely wholly appropriate that Conrad Helier's money should be used in an attempt to find out what had happened to Silas, especially if it was Silas's association with Conrad Helier that had given his kidnappers their motive. The real problem was whether Madoc's involvement would actually help to solve the mystery, or merely add a further layer of complication. If he found anything damning, he would certainly offer it to Damon first... but what might he do with it thereafter? Even if Operator 101 could be thwarted, he might only be the first of many- and if Conrad Helier really had been an enemy of mankind, why should the secret be kept, even if it could be?

Damon checked the alarms on the car's console, just to make sure that their inactivity really was

testimony to the fact that neither Karol nor Eveline had replied to his calls.

They were in perfect working order; the silence was real. In fact, now that he was alone at the end of the alley the silence was positively oppressive. The night was clear and the stars were out, but they seemed few and very faint by comparison with the starscape he'd glimpsed in Eveline's phone VE. Each one seemed set in splendid isolation against the cloth of black oblivion- and he had never felt as keenly as he did now that he was alone himself, a mere atom of soul stuff lost in a desert void.

"You're going soft," he told himself, unashamed of speaking the words aloud. "It was what you wanted, after all. No parents, no girlfriend, no opponents wielding knives. Just you, magnificently alone in the infinite wilderness of virtual space."

It was true. The sense of relief he felt as he raced away from the gloomy badlands toward the welcoming city lights seemed far less ambiguous than what he'd felt when Diana had driven off and left him to his own devices.

Six

First thing next morning, Damon obtained a reservation on the two 'clock flight to Honolulu. There was no point in taking the earlier flight because he'd only have had to spend an extra two hours in Honolulu waiting for the shuttle to take him on to Molokai.

He called Karol again, to warn him of his imminent arrival; the sim accepted the news impassively, as any AI would have done, but Damon took some small comfort from the fact that Karol would now have cause to regret not having taken the trouble to return his earlier call. Damon reset his own answerphone to make sure that if Karol chose to call back now he'd be conclusively stalled. He also put in a second call to Eveline Hywood, but he got the same response as before. In Lagrange-5 no one had to worry about frustrated callers deciding to put in a personal appearance.

It only took his search engine forty seconds to sort through the news tapes and Eliminator netboards for any mention of Silas Arnett, Conrad Helier, Surinder Nahal, or Operator 101, but it took Damon a further hour and a half to check through its findings, making absolutely sure that there was no authentic news. No one of any importance was issuing serious speculations about a possible connection between the Operator 101 posting and Arnett's kidnapping, although a couple of newswriters had been alerted to Surinder Nahal's unavailability by their search-engine" synthesizers. So far, everyone in the public arena was whistling in the dark-just like Interpol.

Damon knew that he ought to do some work, but he hadn't the heart to start the tawdry business of recovering Diana's vital stats for the pornypop tape and the only other worthwhile commission he had on hand was an action/adventure game scenario which required him to develop an entire alien ecosphere. It wasn't the sort of job he wanted to start when he knew he'd have to break off in three hours to go to the airport-especially when he had another option. He knew that it was just as likely to turn into a blind alley as trying to place a call to Eveline Hywood, but he figured that it had to be explored, just in case.

He packed his overnight bag and deposited it in the trunk of his car. Then he instructed the automatic pilot to find out where the nearest offices of the Ahasuerus Foundation were located and offer him an ETA. Given the size of the world-or even the USNA-he could easily have got an ETA that was the day after tomorrow, but the display assured him that he could be there long before noon.

The offices in question were close enough, and in territory familiar enough, for him to take the controls himself, but driving in downtown traffic was bad for his stress level at the best of times, and these were definitely not the best of times. He told the machine to set a course, but he didn't retreat into the safe haven of the VE hood the way most nondrivers did. He just sat back with eyes front, rehearsing the questions he intended to ask, if it turned out that there was anyone prepared to give him some answers. He tilted his seat back slightly so that the traffic wouldn't be too distracting.

The effect of the slight tilt was to fix his eyes on the shifting skyline way ahead of the traffic stream. At first, while the car seemed to be turning at every second intersection, the skyline kept changing, but once the pilot had found a reasonably straight route by which to follow its heading the Two Towers stuck out like a pair of sore thumbs-or a gateway to which the vehicle was being inexorably drawn.

The symbolism of the illusory gateway was not lost on Damon. The whole world was steering a course into the future with OmicronA on the left and PicoCon on the right. Ostensibly archrivals, the two megacorps and their various satellites were an effective cartel controlling at least 70 percent of the domestic nanotech business and 65 percent of the world's. Now that PicoCon had the Gantz patents stitched up, its masters probably had 70 percent of the domestic biotech business too, insofar as it made any sense to separate biotech from nanotech when the distinction between organic and inorganic molecular machines was becoming more and more blurred with every year that went by.

Possession of the Gantz patents entitled PicoCon to the slightly higher tower, so the edifice that reared up on the right was just a little more massive than the one to the left, but both had been forged out of ocean-refined sand and both architects had done their utmost to take advantage of sparkling salt in catching and reflecting the sun's bright light. Although PicoCon was the larger, it wasn't necessarily the brighter. There was a curious defiance about the glow of OmicronA which refused to accept the metaphorical shade-but Damon knew that it was only an optical illusion. As a beacon signaling the advent of tomorrow the two corps were flames of the same furious fire.

Needless to say, the offices of the Ahasuerus Foundation weren't in the same league. Ahasuerus didn't even have its own building-just a couple of floors in one of the humbler structures right across the road from the PicoCon tower. By comparison with its taller neighbor the building looked as if it had been gantzed out of an unusually objectionable mudslide; there was not a glimmer of sea salt about its stern exterior and its windows were tinted brown. Most of its neighbors were equipped for a measure of continuing accretion, so that salt from windblown spray had accumulated on their slightly blurred surfaces, giving each of them a curious glittering sheen, but the building housing Ahasuerus had been comprehensively finished, and it seemed utterly self-satisfied in its relative dullness-although some observers might have reckoned it sinister as well as stern. Its car park was certainly dimmer and dingier than fashion prescribed.

Damon had already decided that the best course of action was to throw the burden of secrecy onto the foundation's own security, so he simply marched up to the reception desk and summoned a human contact. When a smartly dressed young man eventually emerged from the inner offices Damon gave him the folded note.

"My name's Damon Hart," he said. "I'm the biological son of Conrad Helier and the foster son of Silas

Arnett and Eveline Hywood. It might be to the advantage of the foundation if someone in authority were to read this document. It might also be to the advantage of the foundation if lesser mortals-including yourself-refrained from reading it. Personally, I don't care at all; if you or anyone else wants to take the risk of looking at it, you're welcome."

That, he figured, should get the item as far up the chain of command as was feasible without the contents of the enigmatic message becoming common knowledge.

The fetcher-and-carrier disappeared into the inner offices again, leaving Damon to his own devices for a further ten minutes.

Eventually, a woman came to collect him. She had silky red hair and bright blue eyes. For a moment Damon thought that she was genuinely young, and his jaw tightened as he concluded that he was about to be fobbed off, but the hair and eye colors were a little too contrived and a slight constriction in her practiced smile reassured him that she had undergone recent somatic reconstruction of the kind that was misleadingly advertised as "rejuvenation." Her real age was likely to be at least seventy, if not in three figures.

"Mr. Hart," she said, offering him the piece of paper, still folded, in lieu of a handshake. "I'm Rachel Trehaine. Won't you come through?"

The corridors behind the security wall were bare; the doors had no nameplates. The office into which Rachel Trehaine eventually led Damon was liberally equipped with flat screens and fitted with shelves full of discs and digitapes, but it had no VE hood. "Perhaps I'd better warn you that I'm only a senior reader," she said as she waved him to a chair. "I don't have any executive authority. I've had an encrypted version of your document relayed to New York, but it may take some time to get a response from them. In the meantime, I'd like to thank you for bringing the matter to our attention-we had not been independently informed."

"You're welcome," Damon assured her insincerely. "I hope you'll show me the same courtesy of bringing to my attention any pertinent matters of which I might not have been independently informed." He winced slightly as he heard the pomposity in his tone, realizing that he might have overrehearsed his opening speech.

"Of course," said Rachel Trehaine, with the charming ease of a practiced dissembler. "I don't suppose you have any idea-if only the merest suspicion-who this mysterious Operator might be, or why this attack on your family has been launched?"

"I thought you might know more about that than I do," Damon said. "You'll have complete records of any dealings between Ahasuerus and Conrad Helier's research team."

"When I say that I'm a senior reader," she told him mildly, "I don't mean that I have free access to the foundation's own records. My job is to keep watch on other data streams, selecting out data of interest, collating and reporting. I'm a scientific analyst, not a historian."

"I meant you plural, not you singular," Damon told her. "Someone in your organization must be able to figure out which particular closeted skeleton Operator one-oh-one intends to bring out into the open. Why else would he have sent me to you?"

"Why would he-or she-have sent you anywhere at all, Mr. Hart? Why send you a personal message? It seems very odd- not at all the way that Eliminators usually operate."

The delicate suggestion was, of course, that Damon was the source of the message-that he himself was Operator 101. As a scientific analyst Rachel Trehaine would naturally have considerable respect for Occam's razor.

"That's an interesting question," Damon said agreeably. "When Inspector Yamanaka referred to the situation as a puzzle he was speaking metaphorically, but that message implies that the instigator of this series of incidents really is creating a puzzle, dangling it before me as a kind of lure-just as I, in my turn, am dangling it before you. Operator one-oh-one wants me to go digging, and he's offering suggestions as to where I might profitably dig. Given that Conrad Helier is dead, he can't possibly be the Eliminators' real target-and if their promise that Silas Arnett will be released after he's given them what they want is honest, he isn't the real target either. If the note is to be taken at face value, Operator one-oh-one might be building a file on Eveline Hywood, with particular reference to her past dealings with your foundation."

Rachel Trehaine took a few moments to weigh that up, presumably employing all her skills as a senior reader. Anyone but a scientific analyst might have challenged his conclusions, or at least pointed out the tentative nature of his inferences, but she was content merely to observe and record.

"Have you spoken to Eveline Hywood?" she asked.

"I've tried," Damon told her. "She isn't accepting calls at the moment. There's nothing sinister in that-she tends to get engrossed in her work. She never liked being interrupted. I'll get through eventually, but she'll probably tell me that it isn't my business anymore-that I forfeited any right I might have had to be told what's going on when I walked out on the Great Crusade to run with the gangs."

The red-haired woman pondered that information too. Damon judged that she was under real pressure to make sense of this, or thought she was. However lowly her position within the organization might be she was obviously in charge of the Los Angeles office, at least for the moment. She knew that she might have decisions to make, as well as orders to follow from New York.

"The Ahasuerus Foundation's sole purpose is to conduct research into technologies of longevity," she said sententiously. "It's entirely probable that we provided funding to Conrad Helier's research team if they were involved in projects connected with longevity research. I can't imagine that there was anything in our dealings to attract the interest of the so-called Eliminators."

"That is strange, isn't it?" Damon said, trying to sound insouciant. "The usual Eliminator jargon charges people with being unworthy of immortality-a formula which takes it for granted that your researchers will eventually hit the jackpot. In a way, you and the Eliminators represent different sides of the same coin. If and when you come up with an authentic fountain of youth you'll be forced into the position of deciding who should drink from it."

"We're a nonprofit organization, Mr. Hart. Our constitution requires us to make the fruits of our labor available to everyone."

"I looked up your constitution last night," Damon admitted. "It's an interesting commitment. But I also glanced at the way in which you've operated in the past. It's true that Ahasuerus has always placed its research findings in the public domain, but that's not the same thing as ensuring equal access to the consequent technologies. Consider PicoCon's new rejuvenation procedures, for example: there's no secret about the manner in which the reconstructive transformations are done, but it's still an expensive process to carry out because it requires such a high level of technical expertise and so much hospital time. Effectively, it's available only to the rich. It seems highly likely to me that the next breakthrough in

longevity research will be a more wide-ranging kind of somatic transformation which will achieve an authentic rejuvenation rather than a merely cosmetic one.

Assuming that it requires even more technical expertise and even more hospital time, it's likely to be available only to the very rich, at least in the first instance, even if all the research data is in the public domain. If so, the megacorps will still have effective control over its application. Isn't that so?"

"In the first instance is the vital phrase, Mr. Hart," she informed him, still carefully maintaining the stiffness of her manner. "The early recipients of such a treatment would be those who could most easily afford it, but it would eventually filter through the entire population. The rich are always first in every queue-but that only means that the poor have to be patient, and in the New Utopia even the poor have time enough. Provided that your hypothetical technology of authentic rejuvenation were to take the form of a treatment that a person need only undergo once-or even if it needed to be repeated at long intervals-there'd be plenty of time to work through the queue. No one has any interest in delaying our work, Mr. Hart-and that includes the lonely and resentful individuals who have nothing better to do with their time than denounce the follies and failures of their fellow men and urge maniacs to attempt murder."

"I couldn't agree more," Damon said, although he wasn't sure that the matter was as simple as she made it out to be. "As I said, I've read your constitution. It's a fine and noble commitment, even if it was written by a man who made his fortune by turning a minor storm in the troubled waters of the world's financial markets into a full-scale hurricane. But lonely and resentful individuals often nurse paranoid fantasies. Operator one-oh-one might have got it into his head that you've already developed a method of authentic rejuvenation, but that you're keeping it very quiet. Perhaps he thinks that you're the real Eliminators, standing by while the people you consider to be undesirables peacefully pass away, and saving your immortality serum for the deserving few."

"That's absolutely untrue," said Rachel Trehaine, her bright blue eyes as fathomless as the California sky.

"A paranoid fantasy," Damon agreed readily. "But I did happen to notice, while inwardly digesting your constitution, that although it commits you to releasing the results of the research you fund, it doesn't actually specify when you have to do it. You're not the only player in the field, of course-I dare say there's not a single megacorp which doesn't have a few fingers thrust deep into this particular pie-but you've been going for a long time and you have a good deal of expertise. If I were a bookmaker, I'd make you third favorite, after PicoCon and OmicronA, to come up with the next link in the chain that will eventually draw us into the wonderland of true emortality. Some day, someone like you is going to have to decide exactly how and when to let the good news out. Whoever makes that decision runs the risk of making enemies, don't you think?"

The remark about Ahasuerus being third favorite after the biggest players of all was pure flattery, but it didn't bring a smile to Rachel Trehaine's face. "I can assure you," the red-haired woman said, "that the Ahasuerus Foundation has no secrets of the kind you're suggesting. You've already admitted that this mysterious Operator is deliberately teasing you, trying to draw you into reckless action. If that's so, you ought to think very carefully about what you say, and to whom. If Operator one-oh-one has paranoid fantasies to indulge and lies to spread, it might be wise to let him be the one to do it."

Damon would have assured her that he agreed with her wholeheartedly, but before he could open his mouth her attention was distracted. One of her machines was beeping, presumably to inform her that urgent information was incoming. From where he was sitting Damon couldn't see the screen whose key-plate she was playing with, and he didn't try to sneak a peep.

"The Ahasuerus Foundation thanks you for bringing this matter to our attention," the red-haired woman

said, reading from the screen. "The Ahasuerus Foundation intends to cooperate fully with Interpol and suggests that you do the same. If the Ahasuerus Foundation can help in any way to locate and liberate Silas Arnett it will certainly do so."

Damon knew that he was being slyly rebuked for not taking the note straight to Him Yamanaka, but he couldn't guess whether the rebuke was sincere or not. He had no way of knowing whether coming here had made the general situation better or worse-or, for that matter, what might count as "better" or "worse." When he saw that she was finished, he rose to his feet.

"I'm afraid I have a plane to catch," he said. He knew perfectly well that he was about to be thrown out, but figured that he might as well seize whatever initiative remained to be seized. "If I hear any further mention of the foundation I'll be happy to pass the news on. I take it that my discretion wasn't necessary, and that you won't mind in the least if I simply use the phone in future?"

"We have nothing to hide," said Rachel Trehaine as she came to her feet, "but that doesn't mean that we don't appreciate your discretion, Mr. Hart. Privacy is a very precious commodity in today's world, and we value it as much as anyone."

Damon took that to mean that she would definitely prefer it if he exercised the utmost discretion in passing on any further information, but that she wasn't about to feed anyone's paranoid suspicions by saying so explicitly.

As soon as he got back to his car Damon checked into the net-board where Operator 101 had posted the notice Yamanaka had showed him, but there was nothing new. There were no messages from Madoc Tamlin or Eveline Hywood awaiting his attention. Having decided that everything else could wait, Damon sent the car forth into the traffic.

He had no doubt that his movements were being monitored by Interpol, and that the fact of his visit to Ahasuerus, if not its content, would be known to Yamanaka. His eastward expedition would also have been observed and noted, but Tamlin could be trusted to evade any surveillance to which he was subject as and when he wished.

While the car made its silent way along the city streets, observing the speed limit with mechanical precision, Damon took out the folded note yet again and scanned the tantalizing lines for the hundredth time. He had expected no more from Ahasuerus than he had got and he had no doubt that he would have got no more from Rachel Trehaine no matter what tack he had adopted in making conversation, but he couldn't help wondering whether he had concentrated on the wrong part of the puzzle. The most remarkable allegation it made was not that Eveline Hywood and the Ahasuerus Foundation knew something significantly shady about Conrad Helier's past but that Conrad Helier was still alive. How could that be, when so much solid evidence remained of his death?

Damon wondered whether the kind of reconstructive somatic engineering that had been used to make Rachel Trehaine look younger than she was could be used to alter a man's appearance out of all recognition. And if some more extravagant version of it did exist, if only as an experimental prototype, might it be applied to other applications? Specifically, might it transform the cells of one body in such a way that genetic analysis would conclude that they belonged to an entirely different person? In sum, how easy was it, in this day and age, for a man to fake his own death, even to the extent of providing a misidentifiable corpse? And if it were possible today, what was the likelihood that it had been equally possible fifty years ago?

"Paranoid fantasies," Damon muttered as the stream of unanswerable questions dwindled away. He

knew well enough that even if the matters of practicality were not insuperable the question of motive still remained-not to mention the matter of principle that he had quoted to Madoc Tamlin.

The car came gently to a standstill and Damon realized that the traffic stream in both directions had ground to a halt. A quick look around told him that every emergency light in sight was on red and he groaned. Some idiot saboteur had hacked into the control system and thrown a software spanner into the works. He sighed and tried hard to relax. Usually, such glitches only took a few minutes to clear-but one of the reasons they had become so common of late was that rival parties of smart and prideful kids were trying just as hard to set new records as the city was.

By the time the car got moving again, Damon was not finding it at all difficult-in spite of his own checkered history-to sympathize with the hypothetical proposition he had put to Rachel Trehaine. Anyone who did come up with an authentic emortality serum might well be tempted to reserve it for the socially conscientious, while allowing all the lonely and resentful individuals who had nothing better to do with their time than fuck things up to fade into oblivion.

Seven

"I'm sorry we couldn't bring flowers," Madoc Tamlin said to Lenny Garon, "but they reckon flowers compromise the sterile regime and promote nosocomial infections. It's bullshit, but what can you do?"

Lenny Garon made the effort to produce a polite smile. Madoc couldn't help contrasting the boy's stubbornly heroic attitude with that of Diana Caisson, who hadn't smiled all day and didn't seem likely to start now. He wouldn't have brought her along if he'd had any choice, but even though the hospital was nearly the last place in the world she wanted to be she'd insisted on tagging along. It seemed that what proverbial wisdom said about misery loving company was true-and when Diana was miserable, she certainly had enough to go around.

"I shouldn't be here," the novice streetfighter said, as if the hospital's insistence on keeping him in were a slur on his manhood. "The intestine's not leaking anymore and the nanotech's taking care of the peritonitis. I was just unlucky that the cut reached my spleen-it was nothing, really. They'll probably let me out in a couple of hours if I kick up a fuss."

"It would have been nothing if you'd had IT as good as Brady's," Madoc told him cynically. "Pretty soon, you will. You have talent. It's raw, but it's real. Just a couple more fights and you'll be ready to turn the tables. You hurt Brady too, you know-he might not be in the next bed, but he knows he was in a fight. One day, you'll go even further than he has-if you stick at it."

"Did you give the tapes to Damon Hart?"

Madoc couldn't help glancing at Diana to see what effect the mention of Damon's name had, and was unfortunate enough to catch her eye.

"Why should he give the tapes to Damon Hart?" she snapped at the boy, without taking her accusative eyes off Madoc.

"I thought that's why he came to the fight," Garon retorted innocently.

Madoc had a stoical expression all ready for display. He hadn't had a chance to warn the boy to be discreet, and it was inevitable that the cat would be let out of the bag. Now it was his turn to be stubbornly heroic in the face of adversity. He waited for the storm to break.

"You didn't tell me Damon was there," Diana said, far less frostily than Madoc had anticipated. "What did he want?"

Madoc realized that her anger had been deflected by a false assumption. She assumed that Damon had sought out Madoc in order to talk about her. She must be hopeful that he had been consumed by regret and wanted Madoc to act as an intermediary in arranging a reconciliation. Madoc had already divined from the rambling odysseys of complaint he'd been forced to endure that what she wanted above all else was for Damon to "see sense" and realize that life without her was hardly worth living. Unfortunately, Madoc's opinion was that Damon had been perfectly sensible in realizing that life without her was worth living. He considered lying about Damon's real purpose in visiting the fight scene, but figured that the web of deceit would probably grow so fast that it would end up strangling him. "He didn't actually come over to watch the fight, Lenny," he said, judiciously addressing the boy rather than Diana. "He doesn't do a lot of that kind of work anymore. He's busy with other things-customized VEs, mostly. You know the kind of thing- for phones, games, cable shows...."

"Pornotapes," Diana cut in acidly.

"Yeah ... well, it was just business."

"What kind of business?" Diana wanted to know. Now her resentment was building, as much because Madoc was avoiding her eye as because the news wasn't what she wanted to hear. Madoc could see that the boy was curious too, but Diana's curiosity was much sharper and it wasn't going to be easy to fob her off. He felt obliged to try, though, if only for form's sake.

He turned back to the boy and said: "How d'you feel now? The pain control working all right?"

"Oh sure," Lenny assured him. "It was never bad. I felt a little spaced out after the fight-floating, you know. Soon as I got here they shot me up with something real good. Don't even feel dreamy now. Sharp as a tack."

"What kind of business?" Diana repeated frostily.

"Come on, Di," Madoc said. "We're here to see Lenny. The boy took an awkward cut. We can talk about our own things later."

"No," said Lenny helpfully. "You go ahead. You can talk about Damon all you want-I got all his tapes, you know."

Of course I know, you stupid little shit, Madoc thought. Aloud, he said: "He just wanted me to ask around about some things. We're still friends-we do little favors for one another occasionally. It's..." He stopped himself saying a personal thing, because he knew that Diana would misinterpret it. She misinterpreted it anyhow.

"Little favors," she repeated. "Little favors of the kind that you weren't supposed to mention to me."

"No, Di," Madoc said with a contrived sigh. "Actually, it's not to do with you. Something's happened to one of his foster fathers, that's all. The Eliminators may be involved, although it seems to be a kidnap rather than a murder. He just asked me to ask around, see if anyone knew who might have made the snatch or why."

Madoc could see that Diana was having trouble remembering whether she'd ever been told who Damon's foster parents were, but Lenny Garon had no such difficulty. Lenny was a fan, and fans liked to know everything that could be known about their heroes.

"There's no public record of Damon's foster parents," the boy piped up. "I checked ... a while ago."

"That's because he didn't like to talk about them," Diana said, her wrath dying back into icy frustration. "Madoc is his friend, though. It's only natural that Madoc knows who they were."

"Can we talk about something else?" Madoc said, because he felt obliged to try. "This stuff is confidential, okay?"

"It's not okay," Diana said. "You're supposed to be my friend right now, and I don't like the idea of your going behind my back like this-seeing Damon and not even telling me. They were biotech people, weren't they? Damon's foster parents, that is. He fell out with them because they wanted him to go into the same line of work."

"That's right," Madoc said. "But it doesn't mean that he doesn't care what happens to them. I just have to make some inquiries, see what I can find out."

"Can I help?" Lenny wanted to know.

"No," said Madoc. "Nor can you, Diana. It's best if I handle it myself."

"Just because I fell out with him," Diana was quick to retort, with manifest sarcasm, "it doesn't mean that I don't care what happens to him. He's in some kind of trouble, isn't he?"

"No," Madoc said automatically.

"Is he?" Lenny asked curiously. It was obvious to Madoc that his blunt denial had been read as a tacit admission, even by the boy.

"Not exactly," Madoc said, immediately retreating to what he hoped was a tenable position. "It's just Eliminator shit. It means nothing. It's not even Damon they're after. Look, can we just let it drop, for now? Damon wouldn't want me to talk about it here. Hospital walls have more eyes and ears than most."

That argument was sufficient to make Lenny Garon back off, but it had the opposite effect on Diana.

"I want to know what's going on," she said ominously. "I have a right to know. You were the one who saved the news until we were here."

"If you hadn't walked out when you did," Madoc told her waspishly, "you would know what's going on. You'd still have been there when the cops came to call."

"All the more reason why you should have told me," she said. "All the more reason why you should tell me now."

Madoc raised his eyes to heaven. "Not here," he said. "Lenny, I'm really sorry about all this. I just wanted to make sure that you were okay."

"You just wanted to make sure that he wasn't about to quit on you when he realized how dangerous your little games can be," Diana came back maliciously. "You have to be careful choosing your so-called friends, Lenny. Some of them only want to jerk your strings. People die in those backstreets, you know-far more than Eliminators ever kill. Whatever kind of trouble Damon thinks he's in is nothing compared to the trouble you're in. Always remember-Damon got out of your line of work and took up making pornypops and phone link frippery. That's the example to bear in mind."

"She's right, Lenny," Madoc said, having been given ample time to replan his strategy while the vitriol was pouring out. "Damon got out, and you should aim to get out too-but Damon didn't get out until he'd made his mark. He went out a winner, not a quitter. You can be a winner too, Lenny, if you stick at it."

"I know that," the boy in the bed assured him. "I know I can."

"Let's get out of here," said Diana disgustedly. "You've checked your investment, and it seems to be in working order. They'll let him go home tonight, if he insists."

"I'm sorry, Lenny," Madoc said. "Diana's under a lot of strain just now. I shouldn't have brought her with me." Maybe I shouldn't have let her through the door, he added beneath his breath, and maybe I shouldn't let her in again-except that she might be more of a nuisance out of my sight than she will be where I can keep an eye on her. He followed her out of the room and along the corridor to the elevator.

Diana didn't say a word until they were back in the car, but she didn't waste any time thereafter. When he took the controls himself she actually lifted his hands from the keypad and switched on the AP, instructing it to take them home.

"What's going on?" she wanted to know.

"Damon got a visit from the cops after you left," he said. "Interpol, not his old friends from the LAPD. They wanted to know if he knew anything that could help them find his foster father. He didn't so he asked me if I could use my contacts to find out anything. I'm trying to do that. That's all."

"Where do the Eliminators come in? They don't do kidnappings."

"They may have done this one. About the time the foster father went missing some crazy posted a notice about Damon's biological father."

"I didn't know that Damon knew who his biological father was, or that he cared. I don't even know the name of mine- do you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do know my biological father's name, although it was never a matter of great interest to me. Damon's case is different-but he didn't like to talk about it. I guess he wanted to keep all that stuff from cluttering up his relationship with you."

"I guess he did," she said bitterly. "If he hadn't been so determined to keep his stupid secrets, maybe...."

"Maybe nothing," Madoc said wearily. "It's over-let it go."

"It's over when it's over," she told him, trading cliché for cliché. "So tell me-who was Damon's biological father? I can find out on my own, you know-I'm no Webwalker, but it has to be a matter of record, if only someone can be bothered to look hard enough. Interpol must have made the connection."

"It's not exactly a matter of public record," said Madoc unhappily. He knew, though, that even a rank amateur like Diana could probably turn up the information eventually, if she had motive enough to try. Damon's change of name wasn't likely to confuse her for long. Anything Interpol could find out, anyone could find out-given a reason to make the effort.

"I have friends too," she said firmly. "You know Webwalkers, I know Webwalkers. I bet you've asked that mad cow Tithonia to help out-but who needs her? Suppose Damon's fans were to find out that there's a mystery which needs solving?"

"One of them already did, thanks to you," Madoc pointed out.

"So tell me what's going on. Maybe I can help you-but I can only do that if you let me in."

"I already let you in," Madoc muttered. "When I opened the door, I didn't know all this was going to blow up, or ... well, given that it has blown up and that I did let you in ... Damon's original name was Helier. His father was Conrad Helier."

Diana thought about that for a full minute. "The Conrad Helier who invented the artificial womb?" she said eventually. "The one who made it possible for us all to be born? The man who saved the human race from extinction?"

"The very same. Except that he didn't exactly invent the artificial womb-he just perfected it. It isn't as if the sterility transformers would have put an end to the human race if Helier hadn't been around. One way or another, we'd all have been born. Given the urgency of the demand, someone else was bound to have come up with the answer within a matter of months. Some say that Helier was just the guy who beat the others in the race to the patent office, like Bell with the telephone. A guy named Surinder Nahal reckoned that he should have been there first, and I dare say he wasn't the only one."

"But Conrad Helier did get there first," said Diana, who was far from slow when it came to certain kinds of calculation. "Which means that he must have got rich as well as famous. Damon is his biological son-and knows that he's his biological son."

"That's right," said Madoc shortly-although he knew that it was useless to try to stop now.

"And he's your friend," Diana went on inexorably. "Just like that poor kid lying in the hospital. And he's still your friend, even though he doesn't even doctor tapes for you anymore."

"I do have friends!" Madoc protested. "Real friends. People who know they'll always be let in if they come knocking on my door."

The barbed comment didn't bother her at all. "You've already started digging, haven't you?" she said. "You must have been high as a kite when he asked you to do it. You think there's a game to be won here-a rich game."

"You don't know me at all, do you?" Madoc retorted bitterly. "You think I'm just a hustler, incapable of genuine loyalty-but you're wrong. Damon knows me better than that."

"Damon doesn't even know what day it is if there isn't someone there to remind him," she sneered. "Without me, he's just an innocent abroad. If I'd only known that he was about to get into trouble...."

If you'd only known that he had millions stashed away, Madoc thought-but he didn't dare say it aloud, and he knew that it would have been unfair. The fact that Diana hadn't known, and still felt bad about the split, proved that she loved him for himself, not his fortune. The fortune just added insult to injury.

"Damon knows I can be trusted," Madoc said. "He's known me a long time. He told me who he really was way back at the beginning. It never affected our friendship. I've always respected his privacy and his wishes. I never expected anything like this to come up, but now that it has I intend to play it straight. I'll do everything I can to find out what Damon wants to know, and I would have done the best I could even if he hadn't put up the money. So would the Old Lady, who isn't mad and isn't a cow. You don't understand this, Di. Just let me get on with it in my own way, will you?"

"I've known you longer than Damon has," she pointed out. "I probably know you better than you know yourself. I want to help. I'm entitled to help. I still have Damon's best interests at heart, you know. Just because he's a pigheaded fool who's impossible to live with, it doesn't mean I don't care."

Before Madoc had a chance to respond to this catalogue of half-truths the car came to an abrupt stop. When he looked around he saw that all the emergency lights in the street had come on, and that they were all blazing red. They were only a couple of hundred meters from home, and the foul-up wouldn't take more than ten minutes to sort out-a quarter of an hour if the crash was a really big one-but it somehow seemed like the very last straw.

"Oh shit," Madoc groaned, with feeling, "not again." "It's probably friends of yours," Diana opined, not needing sarcasm to ram home the irony of it. "Maybe even fans."

PART TWO

Trials and Tribulations

Eight

Silas Arnett dreamed that he was in a lab somewhere: a strange, dilapidated place full of obsolete equipment. He was hunched over a screen, squinting at meaningless data which scrolled by too fast to allow his eyes to keep up. He was working under pressure, desperately thirsty, with a head full of cotton wool, wishing that he were able to concentrate, and wishing also that he could remember what problem he had been put here to solve and why it was so urgent....

At first, when he realized that he was dreaming, he was relieved.

He was relieved because he felt that he could relax, because the problem-whatever it was-was unreal.

Unfortunately, he was wrong. The consciousness into which he descended by slow degrees was a more complex web of discomforts and restraints than the dream he had fled.

His internal technology was dulling all the nastiest sensations, but there was an awkward tangibility about its anesthetic efforts, as if the nanomachines were working under undue pressure with inadequate reserves of strength and ingenuity. He wondered whether it might be his IT that had been keeping him unconscious-there was only so much the most benevolent nanotech could do without suppressing awareness itself-and why, if so, it had released him to wakefulness now. If the nanomachines had done their work properly, he ought to have been feeling far better than he was and he ought to have been lying down in a comfortable bed.

Without opening his eyes he attempted to take census of the bad news.

His wrists and ankles were pinned by two pairs of plastic sheaths, each at least three centimeters broad, which clasped him more tightly when he struggled against them. There was another sheath lightly gripping the head of his prick and some kind of catheter stuck up his backside. He was in a sitting position but his head wasn't lolling to one side: it was held upright by some device which gently but firmly enfolded his entire skull.

There was light beyond his closed eyelids, but he knew that the device clasping his head had to be a VE hood. When he opened his eyes he would not be looking out upon the world, but into a counterfeit space synthesized from bits of digitized film and computer-generated images.

He supposed that he ought to be grateful that he wasn't dead, but no such gratitude could extricate itself as yet from the morass of his unease and anxiety.

He put out his tongue to test the limits of the thing enclosing his head, and found-as he had half expected-a pair of teats. He tested the left-hand one with his lips, then seized it in his teeth and teased cold liquid out of it. The thirst afflicting him in his dream had been real, and the orange-flavored juice, slightly syrupy with dissolved glucose, was very welcome.

When he finally consented to open his eyes Silas found himself looking out upon a courtroom. It was an impressionistic image, a mere cartoon rather than a sophisticated product of mimetic videosynthesis. The twelve jurors who were positioned to his left were barely sketched in, and the prosecuting attorney whose position was to the right had little more in the way of features than they did. Directly in front of him was a black-robed judge whose image was more detailed, although he didn't look any more real. The

judge's face had simply been more carefully drawn, presumably in order to allow for more effective animation.

The judge's platform was about a meter above the level of the dock whose caricaturish steel spikes rose in front of Arnett's viewpoint. This allowed its occupant to look down at the prisoner, mingling contempt with hostility.

Silas guessed that he and the "judge" were quite alone within the hypothetical space of the virtual environment. He could not believe that an actual prosecutor and a human jury were going to hook into the shared illusion at some later time. He knew that it must have required a conspiracy of at least four persons- perhaps including sweet, seemingly innocent Catherine-to arrange his abduction, but a real mock trial would require four times as many. There was no shortage of crazy people to be found in the meshes of the Web, but wherever a dozen forgathered in innerspace you could bet your last dose that two would be corspies and three others potential beanspillers.

For the time being, the counterfeit courtroom wasn't even under the aegis of an active program. Nothing moved except the judge, and that particular icon was almost certainly a mask, reproducing the facial expressions of a real person. Silas tried to take heart from that. Masks need not bear the slightest resemblance to the actual features of the people using them, but their echoes of tics and mannerisms could offer valuable clues to the identity of their users. If the slightly narrowed expression in those coal black eyes and the tension lines etched upon the raptorial face were the property of the user rather than the image, he might eventually be able to conjure up an image of the actual eyes and the actual mouth.

"Please state your name for the record," said the judge. His baritone voice wasn't obviously distorted but it was too stagey by half.

"Joan of Arc," said Silas weakly.

"Let the name Silas Arnett be entered in the record," said the sonorous voice. "I feel obliged to point out, Dr. Arnett, that there really "is a record. Every moment of your trial will be preserved for posterity, and any parts of your testimony may be broadcast as we see fit. My advice is that you should conduct yourself as though the whole world were watching. Given the nature of the charges which will be brought against you, that may well be the case."

"That's Arc with a c," Silas said, trying to sound laconic, "not a k." He wondered whether he ought to be speaking at all. No matter how mad this setup was, there had to be method in it. If he said too much, his words might be edited and recombined into any kind of statement at all. On the other hand, his voice was no secret; if these people could screw up his security systems efficiently enough to remove him from his own home they could certainly plunder the records in his phone hood. He was, in any case, an old man-there must be tens of thousands of recordings of his voice in existence, easily amassable into a database from which clever software could synthesize anything from the Gettysburg Address to a falsetto rendition of "To Be a Pilgrim."

"Perhaps I should begin by summarizing the procedure," said the judge calmly. "This is, of course, merely a preliminary hearing. Your trial will not begin until tomorrow, at which time you will be called upon to give evidence under oath. At that time, no refusal to answer the charges brought against you will be tolerated, nor will any dissimulation. The purpose of the present session is to offer you the opportunity to make an opening statement, free of any pressure or duress. Should you wish to make a full confession now, that would, of course, be taken into consideration when your sentence is determined."

Perhaps I should begin by summarizing the possibilities, Silas thought. The rhetoric suggests Eliminators,

but the only reason the Eliminators have remained a thorn in society's side for so long is that they have no organization. The sophistication of the operation suggests that it's a corp with real resources-but what kind of corp would snatch a retired playboy like me, and why?

It was not until he reached this impasse that the implications of what the voice had said sunk in. Tomorrow they would begin in earnest, at which time no refusal to answer would be tolerated. That formulation suggested that they could and would employ torture, if necessary. Three days would be the minimum interval required to flush out his internal technology and disable his nanotech defenses against pain, injury, and aging- which implied that he had already been unconscious for at least forty-eight hours.

"Why all the ceremony?" he asked, his voice hardly above a whisper.

"Silas Arnett," the voice intoned with a solemnity that had to be satirical, "the principal charge laid against you is that you were an accessory to the crimes of Conrad Helier, enemy of mankind. There is no need for you to plead, as your guilt has already been determined. The purpose of this trial is to determine the extent of that guilt, and to establish an appropriate means of expiation."

"An appropriate means of expiation?" Silas repeated wonderingly. "I thought you people only had one sentence to hand down to those deemed unworthy of immortality: death by any convenient means."

"Death is not the only means of Elimination," said the voice, with a sudden injection of apparent sincerity, "as you, Dr. Arnett, know very well." As the last phrase was intoned, the cartoonish face of the judge hardened considerably-presumably in response to a sudden tension in the features of the man or woman behind it.

Well, at least that tells me what it is they want me to confess, Silas thought, even if it doesn't tell me why. After all these years, he had actually thought that the matter was dead and buried, but in a world of long-lived people-no matter how expert they might become in the artistry of forgetfulness-nothing was ever comprehensively dead and buried. Expertise in forgetfulness, alas, was not the same as generosity in forgiveness.

There was, Silas supposed, a revealing dishonesty in the fact that the Eliminators were almost the only people who talked freely and openly about the expectation of immortality in a world in which everyone hoped-and almost everyone believed-that the breakthrough to real immortality would happen within his own lifetime. Serious people were required by reason to hedge the issue around in all sorts of ways, always speaking of emortality rather than immortality, always stressing that nobody could live forever even in a world without aging, always reminding their listeners that disease had not yet been entirely banished from human affairs and probably never could be, always restating that some injuries were simply too extreme to be repaired even by the cleverest imaginable internal technology, and always remembering-perhaps above all else-that the life of the body and the life of the person were not the same thing ... but all of that was just pedantry, bluff and bluster to cover up the raw force of underlying conviction that eternal life was truly within reach.

Silas realized that he was struggling reflexively against the straps that bound his wrists and ankles, even though the only effect his struggles had was to make his confinement even closer. Eternal life, it seemed, was no longer within his reach, and he was in the process of being cast out of the pain-free paradise of the New Utopia. He was not only mortal but punishable, and his guilt had already been determined.

He was tempted to declare that Conrad Helier had not been an enemy of humankind at all-that he had, in fact, been the savior of humankind-but he had a shrewd suspicion that that kind of defense would be seen by his captor, and perhaps by the larger audience to whom his captor intended eventually to speak,

as proof of his guilt.

"You have the right to remain silent, of course," the voice remarked, recovering all of its mocking pomposity. "It would, however, be far wiser to make a free and full confession of your involvement with Conrad Helier's conspiracy." The mask had relaxed again, but it was not unexpressive. Silas tried to concentrate his mind upon its subtle shifts in the faint hope that he might be able to penetrate the illusion.

"I've got twenty-four hours before the last of my protective nanotech is flushed away," Silas said, trying his utmost to keep his voice level. "A lot can happen in twenty-four hours. People must be searching for me. Even if Catherine was working for you the alarm will have been raised soon enough."

"You're right, of course," the judge informed him. "The police are searching for you with more than their usual diligence-Interpol has taken charge of the investigation, on the grounds that the Eliminators are a worldwide problem. Damon Hart's unsavory acquaintances are using their less orthodox methods to search for information as to your whereabouts. The Ahasuerus Foundation is also diverting considerable effort to their own investigation. Were all three to pool their resources they might actually stand a chance of finding you before the trial gets under way-but in a world where privacy is fatally compromised by technology, discretion becomes an instinct and secrecy a passion."

Silas was genuinely astonished by the list of people who were actively searching for him. "Damon?" he echoed suspiciously. "What's Damon got to do with this? Why on earth should the Ahasuerus Foundation be interested?"

"Damon Hart is involved because I took care to involve him," the voice replied with a casualness that was almost insulting. "The Ahasuerus Foundation is interested because I took care to interest them. I omitted to mention, of course, that Conrad Helier will also be doing his utmost to find you-but he is hardly in a position to pool his resources with anyone else."

"Conrad Helier's been dead for half a century," Silas said.

"That's not true," said the judge, with equal conviction. "Although I will admit to some slight doubt as to whether or not you know it to be untrue. How soon was he aware, do you suppose, that you would eventually desert his cause? Did he identify you as his Judas before he went to his carefully contrived crucifixion?"

"I only retired from the team ten years ago," Silas said.

"Of course. The burdens of parenthood served to resensitize you to your own old age. You developed a passion for the company of the authentically young: naive flesh, naive intelligence. In a way, they're all Conrad Helier's children, aren't they? All born from his womb-the womb he gifted to humankind after robbing them of all the wombs they already possessed. He appointed you to foster his son, but he surely considers your defection as a kind of betrayal."

Unable to help himself, Silas stared at his virtual adversary with a new intensity. He had not seen Conrad Helier for forty-six years, and his memories had faded as all memories did, but he was absolutely certain that Conrad Helier was one of the few people in the world who could come to him masked as artfully as any man could be masked and yet be recognizable.

Whoever his interrogator was, he swiftly decided, it could not possibly be Conrad Helier, or even his ghost.

"Torture can make a man say anything," Silas said, feeling that he ought to say something to cover his fearful confusion. "Anything at all. I know well enough how utterly unused to pain I've become. I know that as soon as your nanomech armies have smashed mine to smithereens I'll be utterly helpless. I'll say whatever you want me to say-but it will all be worthless, and worse than worthless. It won't be the truth, and it won't even look like the truth. No matter how cleverly you edit your tapes, people will know that it's a fake. Anybody with half a brain will see through the charade-and even if the police don't find you while I'm still alive, they'll find you once I'm dead. This is a farce, and you know it. You can't possibly gain anything from it."

Even as he made the speech, though, Silas realized that it couldn't be as simple as that. Whatever game his captor was playing, it wasn't just a matter of extorting a confession to post on some Eliminator billboard. Damon had been brought into it, and the Ahasuerus Foundation-and Silas honestly couldn't imagine why ... unless, perhaps, the sole purpose of the crime had been to prompt its investigation by parties sufficiently interested and sufficiently powerful to uncover real proof of its motive-proof that would be worth far more than any tricked-up tape of a confession....

"Who are you?" he asked, unable any longer to resist the temptation, although he knew that it would be a pointless admission of weakness. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm a judge," said the voice flatly. "I'm doing this because someone has to do it. If humankind is to be worthy of immortality, it ought to begin with a clean slate, don't you think? Our sins must be admitted, and expiated, if they are not to spoil our new adventure."

"Who appointed you my judge and executioner?" Silas retorted, miserably aware of the fact that he was still displaying weakness and terror, even though he had not yet been stripped of all his protective armor.

"The post was vacant," the judge said. "No one else seemed to be interested in taking it up."

Silas recognized the words and felt their parodic force. "Fuck off," he said, with feeling. It seemed, suddenly, to be a direly old-fashioned curse: a verbal formula he had brought with him out of Conrad Helier's ark; a spell which could not have any force at all in the modern world. The existential significance of sexual intercourse had altered since the old world died, and the dirty words connected with it had lost their warrant of obscenity. Shit and its derivatives still retained their repulsive connotations, but the expletives which had once been strongest of all had lost their fashionability along with their force. Habit might preserve them awhile longer, at least in the language of centenarians like himself, but for all the effect they had one might as well make reference to God's wounds or the Prophet's beard.

"The charges laid against you are these," said the machine-enhanced voice as the lips of the caricature face moved in perfect sync. "First, that between 2095 and 2120 you conspired with Eveline Hywood, Karol Kachellek, Mary Hallam, and others, under the supervision of Conrad Helier, to cause actual bodily harm to some seven billion individuals, that actual bodily harm consisting of the irreversible disabling of their reproductive organs. Second, that you collaborated with Eveline Hywood, Karol Kachellek, Mary Hallam, and others, under the supervision of Conrad Helier, in the design, manufacture, and distribution of the agents of that actual bodily harm, namely the various virus species collectively known as meiotic disrupters or chiasmalytic transformers. You are now formally invited to make a statement in response to these charges."

"If you had any real evidence," Silas said stiffly, "you could bring the charges in a real court of law. I don't have to answer any charges brought by a caricature judge in a cartoon court."

"You've had seventy years to submit yourself to trial by a legitimately constituted court," said the judge,

his mechanical voice dripping acid. "Those who prefer to evade the courts whose legitimacy they acknowledge ought not to protest too loudly when justice catches up with them. This court is the one which has found the means to bring you to trial; it is the one which will determine your fate. You will be given the opportunity to enter your defense before sentence is passed upon you."

"But you've already delivered your verdict, and I doubt that you have it in your power to determine any sentence but immediate execution-which will make you guilty of murder in the eyes of any authentic court in the world."

"Death is not such a harsh sentence for a man of your kind," opined the man behind the mask, "when one considers that you-like the vast majority of those previously condemned as unworthy of immortality-have already lived far longer than the natural human life span. One of the principles on which this court is founded is that whatever society bestows upon the individual through the medium of technology, society has every right to withdraw from those who betray their obligations to the commonweal."

"Eliminators aren't part of society. They're just an ill-assorted bunch of murderous maniacs. But you're not run-of-the-mill Eliminator, are you? You're something new, or something worse. Psychologically you're the same-in perfect harmony with the solitary spiders who get their kicks out of dumping malevolent garbage into the data stream in the hope that some other shithead will take it into his head to start blasting-but you've got an extra twist in you."

It was all bluster, but Silas took what comfort he could from its insincerity. Whoever had come to seize him had come well equipped, and however ridiculous this virtual court might be on the surface it was no joke, no merely amateur affair. Someone was taking this business very seriously-whatever the business in question really was. He had to try to figure that out, even if figuring it out couldn't save him from pain and death. If his sentence were already fixed, and if the police were unable to find him, the only meaningful thing he could do with what remained of his life was to find out who was doing this to him and why- and why now, when it had all happened so long ago.

"You still have time to make a clean breast of it," the voice informed him, refusing to respond to his insults. "No one can save you, Dr. Arnett, except yourself. Even if your trial were to be interrupted, you would still stand condemned. We are an idea and an ideal rather than an organization, and we can neither be defeated nor frustrated. When human beings live forever, no one will be able to evade justice, because there will be all the time in the world for their sins to find them out. We really do have to be worthy of immortality, Dr. Arnett. You, of all people, should understand that. This is, after all, a world which you helped to design-a world which could not have come into being had you not collaborated in the careful murder of the world which came before."

Silas didn't want to engage in philosophical argument. He wanted to stick to matters of fact. "Will you answer me one question?" he asked sharply.

"Of course I will," the judge replied, with silky insincerity. "We have no secrets to conceal."

"Did Catherine set me up? Did she rig the house's systems to let your people in?" He didn't imagine that he would be able to trust the answer, but he knew that it was a question that would gnaw away at him if he didn't voice it.

"As a matter of fact," the other replied, taking obvious pleasure in the reply, "she had no idea at all that she was carrying the centipedes which insinuated themselves into your domestic systems. We used her, but she is innocent of any responsibility. If anyone betrayed you, Dr. Arnett, it was someone who knew

you far better than she."

Silas hoped that he would be able to resist the lure offered by that answer, but he knew that he wouldn't. Someone had set him up for this, and he had to consider everyone a candidate- at least until the time came for him to play the traitor in his turn, when his trial by ordeal began in earnest.

Nine

Damon stood on the quay in Kaunakakai's main harbor and watched the oceanographic research vessel Kite sail smoothly toward the shore. The wind was light and her engines were silent but she was making good headway. Her sleek sails were patterned in red and yellow, shining brightly in the warm subtropical sunlight. The sun was so low in the western sky that the whole world, including the surface of the sea, seemed to be painted in shades of crimson and ocher.

Karol Kachellek didn't come up to the deck until the boat was coming about, carefully shedding speed so that she could drift to the quay under the gentle tutelage of her steersman. Kachellek saw Damon waiting but he didn't wave a greeting-and he took care to keep his unwelcome visitor waiting even longer while he supervised the unloading of a series of cases which presumably held samples or specimens; Two battered trucks with low-grade organic engines had already limped down to the quayside to pick up whatever the boat had brought in. Kachellek ostentatiously helped the brightly clad laborers load the cases onto the trucks. He was the kind of man who took pride in always doing his fair share of whatever labor needed to be done.

Eventually, though, Karol had no alternative but to condescend to come to his foster son and offer his hand to be shaken.

Damon took the hand readily enough and tried as best he could to import some real enthusiasm into the gesture. Karol Kachellek had always been distant; Silas Arnett had been the real foster father of the group to whose care Damon had been delivered in accordance with his father's will, just as poor Mary Hallam had been the real foster mother. If Silas was gone forever, leaving Damon no living parents except Karol and Eveline, then he had probably left it too late to restore any meaningful family relationships.

"This isn't a good time for visiting, Damon," Karol said. "We're very busy." At least he had the grace to look slightly guilty as he said it. He raised a hand to smooth back his unruly blond hair. "Let's walk along the shore while the light lasts," he went on awkwardly. "It'll be some time before the mud samples are ready for examination, and there won't be any more coming in today. Things might be easier in three or four weeks, if I can get more staff, but until then...."

"You're very busy," Damon finished for him. "You're not worried, then, by the news?"

"I haven't time to waste in worrying about Silas. I'm concerned for him, of course, but there's nothing I can do to help and I don't feel that I'm under any obligation to fret or to mourn. I understand that you're

bound to think of us as a pair, but he and I were never close."

"You worked together for more than eighty years," Damon pointed out, falling into step as the blond man settled into his long and economical stride.

"We certainly did," agreed the blond man, with a conspicuous lack of enthusiasm. "When you're my age you'll understand that close company can breed antipathy as easily as friendship, and that the passage of time smothers either with insulating layers of habit and indifference."

"I'm afraid I haven't formed those insulating layers yet," Damon said. "You're not worried about yourself either, then? If the Eliminators took Silas they might come after you next."

"Same thing-no time to waste. If we let Eliminators and their kin drive us to trepidation, they've won. I can't see why Interpol is so excited about a stupid message cooked up by some sick mind. It should be ignored, treated with the contempt it deserves. Even to acknowledge its existence is an encouragement to further idiocies of the same kind." While he talked Karol's stride echoed his sermon in becoming more positive and purposeful, but Damon had no difficulty keeping up. Damon remembered that Karol always acted as if he had an end firmly in mind and no time to spare in getting there-it was sometimes difficult to believe that he was a hundred and twenty-two years old. Perhaps, Damon thought, he had to maintain his sense of purpose at a high pitch lest he lose it completely-as Silas seemed to have lost his once Damon had flown the nest.

They quickly passed beyond the limits of the harbor and headed toward the outskirts of the port, with the red orb of the setting sun almost directly ahead of them.

Mauna Loa was visible in the distance, looming over the precipitous landscape, but the town itself was oddly and uncomfortably reminiscent of the parts of Los Angeles where Damon had spent the greater part of his adolescence. Molokai had been one of numerous bolt-holes whose inhabitants had successfully imposed quarantine during the Second Plague War, but when it had tried to repeat the trick in the Crisis it had failed. The new pestilence had arrived here as surely as it had arrived everywhere else. Artificial wombs had been imported on the scale which the islanders could afford, but the population of the whole chain had been dwindling ever since. The internal technologies which guaranteed longevity to those who could afford them would have to become even cheaper before that trend went into reverse, unless there was a sudden saving influx of immigrants. In the meantime, that part of the port which remained alive and active was surrounded by a ragged halo of concrete wastelands.

Because there was so little to see on the landward side save for the lingering legacy of human profligacy, Damon looked out to sea while he walked on Karol Kachellek's right-hand side. The ocean gave the impression of having always been the way it was: huge and serene. Where its waves lapped the shore they created their own dominion, shaping the sandy strand and discarding their own litter of wrack and rot-misshapen wood. He could just make out the shore of Lanai on the horizon, on the far side of the Kaiohi Channel.

"Why did you come out here, Damon?" Karol asked. "Are you scared of the Eliminators?"

"Should I be?" Damon countered-but his fosterer had no intention of rising to that one. "You wouldn't talk to me on the phone," Damon said after a pause. "Eveline hasn't replied in any way at all-as if it would somehow pollute her glorious isolation in the wilderness of space even to tap out a few words on a key-plate."

"She's working. She gets very engrossed, and this is a difficult time for her. She'll get back to you in her

own time."

"Sure. Unfortunately, the Eliminators seem to be keeping to their own timetable. Would it inconvenience her that much to take my call while Silas may still be alive?"

"She'll talk to you," Karol assured him. "I would have too, when I could find the time-no matter how much I hate that fancy VE you've got hooked up to your phone."

"If you'd taken the call," Damon pointed out, "we could have met in your VE instead of mine. That's not one of my designs. Even if you'd called me, we could have fixed that at a keystroke."

VEs weren't really an issue, and Karol didn't press the point. "Look, Damon," he said, "the long and the short of it is that I didn't call you back because I simply don't have anything to tell you. Your father's dead. He wasn't an enemy of mankind. I have no idea why Eliminators or anyone else should want to kidnap or murder Silas. Eveline would say exactly the same-and she probably hasn't called you because she doesn't see any real need. I think you should let the police take care of this. I don't think it serves any useful purpose for you to start stirring things up."

"Am I stirring things up?" Damon asked. "It's just a social visit."

"I'm not talking about your coming here. I'm talking about your unsubtle friend Madoc Tamlin and that stupid note you took to the Ahasuerus Foundation. What on earth possessed you to do something like that?"

Damon was startled by the news that Karol knew about his meeting with Rachel Trehaine, and even more startled by the blond man's seeming assumption that he had produced the note himself-but he took due note of the fact that Karol knew more about what was going on than his professed indifference had suggested. Was it possible, he wondered, that Karol and Eveline were trying to protect him? Were they refusing to talk to him because they were trying to keep him out of this weird affair? Karol had never been entirely at ease with him, so it was difficult for Damon to judge whether the blond man was any more unsettled than usual, but there was something about his manner which smacked of uncomfortable dishonesty.

I must be careful of seeing what I want to see, Damon thought. I must be careful of wanting to find a juicy mystery, or evidence that my paternal idol had feet of tawdry clay.

"Has Ahasuerus contacted you about the note?" he asked. "You weren't named in it-only Eveline."

"Eveline and I don't have any secrets from one another."

Damon wondered whether that meant that Ahasuerus had contacted Eveline and that Eveline had contacted Karol. "Don't you feel the same way about Eveline as you do about Silas?" he asked. "Isn't she just someone you worked with for so long that habit has bound up every last vestige of feeling? Why shouldn't you have secrets from one another?"

"I'm still working with her," Karol replied, again choosing to evade the real question.

"Not directly. She's off-planet, in L-Five."

"Modern communications make it easy enough to work in close association with people anywhere in the solar system. We're involved with the same problems, constantly exchanging information. In spite of the

hundreds of thousands of miles that lie between us, Eveline and I are close in a way that Silas and I never were. We're in harmony, dedicated to a common cause."

"A common cause which I deserted," Damon said, taking up the apparent thread of the argument, "in spite of all the grand plans which Conrad Helier had for me. Is that why you and Eveline are trying to freeze me out of this? Is that why you resent my trying to stir things up?"

"I'm trying to do what your father would have wanted," Karol told him awkwardly.

"He's dead, Karol. In any case, you're not him. You're your own man now. You and I are perfectly free to build a relationship of our own. Silas could see that-Mary too."

"Fostering you was a job your father asked me to do," Karol retorted bluntly. "I'd have continued doing it, if there had been anything more I could do. I will continue, if there's anything I can do in future-but you can't expect me to forget that what you wanted was to get away, to abandon everything your father tried to pass on to you in order to run wild. You ran away from us, Damon, and changed your name; you declared yourself irrelevant to our concerns. Maybe it's best if you stick to that course and let us stick to ours. I don't know why you're so interested in this Eliminator stuff, but I really do think it's best if you let it alone."

Damon didn't want to become sidetracked into discussions of his irresponsible adolescence, or his not-entirely-respectable present. "Why should anyone accuse Conrad Helier of being an enemy of mankind?" he asked bluntly.

"He's dead, Damon," Karol said softly. "Nobody can hurt him, whatever lies they make up."

"They can hurt you and Eveline. Proofs will follow, they say. Whatever they're planning to say about Conrad Helier will reflect on you too-and would even if he were just another colleague you happened to work with once upon a time, to whose fate you were now indifferent."

"Conrad never did anything that I would be ashamed of," Karol said, his voice becoming even softer.

Damon let a second or two go by for dramatic effect and then said: "What if he were alive, Karol?"

The blond man had sufficient sense of drama to match Damon's pregnant pause before saying: "If he were, he'd be able to work on the problem which faces us just now. That would be good. He's present in spirit, of course, in every logical move I make, every hypothesis I frame, and every experiment I design. He made me what I am, just as he made the whole world what it is. You and I are both his heirs, and we'll never be anything else, however hard we try to avoid the consequences of that fact." He tried to fix Damon with a stern gaze, but stern gazes weren't his forte.

The blond man paused before a rocky outcrop which was blocking their path, and knelt down as if to duck any further questions. Miming intense concentration, he scanned the tideline which ran along the wave-smoothed rock seven or eight centimeters above the ground. It was a performance far more suited to his natural inclinations than stern fatherly concern.

The wrack which clung to the rock was slowly drying out in the sun, but the incoming tide would return before it was desiccated. In the meantime, the limp tresses provided shelter for tiny crabs and whelks. Where the curtains of weed were drawn slightly apart barnacles had glued themselves to the stony faces and sea anemones nestled in crevices like blobs of purple jelly. The barer rock above the tide line was speckled with colored patches of lichen and tarry streaks which might-so far as Damon could tell-have

been anything at all.

Karol took a penknife from his pocket and scraped some of the tarry stuff from the rock into the palm of his hand, inspecting it carefully. Eventually, he tipped it into Damon's hand and said: "That's far more important than all this nonsense about Eliminators."

"What is it?" Damon asked.

"We don't have a name for the species yet-nor the genus, nor even the family. It's a colonial organism reminiscent in some ways of a slime mold. It has a motile form which wanders around by means of protoplasmic streaming, but the colonies can also set rock-hard, setting their molecular systems in sugar like sporulating bacteria or algae that have to withstand ultralow temperatures. In its dormant state it's as indestructible as any life-form can be, able to survive all kinds of extremes. Its genetic transactions are inordinately complicated and so far very mysterious- but that's not surprising, given that it's not DNA-based. Its methods of protein synthesis are quite different from ours, based in a radically different biochemical code."

Damon had given up genetics ten years before and had carefully set aside much of what his foster parents had tried so assiduously to teach him, but he understood the implications of what Kachellek was saying. "Is it new," he asked, "or just something we managed to overlook during the last couple of centuries?"

"We can't be absolutely certain," Karol admitted scrupulously. "But we're reasonably certain that it wasn't here before. It's a recent arrival in the littoral zone, and as of today it hasn't been reported anywhere outside these islands."

Damon wondered whether as of today meant that Karol had reason to expect a new report tomorrow or the day after, perhaps when the mud samples he'd loaded onto the lorry had been sieved and sorted. "So where did it come from?" he asked.

"We don't know yet. The obvious contenders are up, down...."

The blond man seemed to be on the point of adding a third alternative, but he didn't; instead he went on: "I'm looking downward; Eveline's investigating the other direction."

Damon knew that he was expected to rise to the challenge and follow the line of argument. The Kite had been dredging mud from the ocean bed, and Eveline Hywood was in the L-5 space colony. "You think it might have evolved way down in the deep trenches," Damon said. "Maybe it's been there all along, ever since DNA itself evolved-or maybe not. Perhaps it started off in one of those bizarre enclaves that surround the black smokers where the tectonic plates are pulling apart and has only just begun expanding its territory, the way DNA did a couple of billion years ago-or maybe it was our deep-sea probes that brought it out and gave it the vital shove.

"On the other hand, maybe it drifted into local space from elsewhere in the universe, the way the panspermists think that all life gets to planetary surfaces. We have probes out there too, don't we-little spaceships patiently trawling for Arrhenius spores and stirring things up as they go. Maybe it's been in the system for a long, long time, or maybe it arrived the day before yesterday ... in which case, there might be more to come, and soon. I can see why you're interested. How different from DNA is its replicatory system?"

"We're still trying to confirm a formula," Karol told him. "We've slipped into the habit of calling it

para-DNA, but it's a lousy name because it implies that it's a near chemical relative, and it's not. It coils like DNA-it's definitely a double helix of some kind-but its subunits are quite different. It seems highly unlikely that the two coding chemistries have a common ancestor, even at the most fundamental level of carbon-chain evolution. It's almost certainly a separate creation.

"That's not so surprising; whenever and wherever life first evolved there would surely have been several competing systems, and there's no reason to suppose that one of them would prove superior in every conceivable environment. The hot vents down in the ocean depths are a different world. Life down there is chemosynthetic and thermosynthetic rather than photosynthetic. Maybe there was always room down there for more than one chemistry of life. Perhaps there are other kinds still down there. That's what I'm trying to find out. In the meantime, Eveline's looking at dust samples brought in by probes from the outer solar system. The Oort Cloud is full of junk, and although it's very cold there now it's not beyond the bounds of possibility that life evolved in the outer regions of the solar system when the sun was a lot younger and hotter than it is now, or that spores of some kind could have drifted in from other secondary solar systems. We don't know-yet."

"You don't think this stuff poses any kind of threat, do you?" said Damon, intrigued in spite of himself. "It's not likely to start displacing DNA organisms, is it?"

"Until we know more about it," Karol said punctiliously, "it's difficult to know how far it might spread. It's not likely to pose any kind of threat to human beings or any of our associated species, given the kind of nanotech defenses we can now muster, but that's not why it's important. Its mere existence expands the horizons of the imagination by an order of magnitude. What are a few crazy slanderers, even if they're capable of inspiring a few crazy gunmen, compared with this?"

"If it is natural," said Damon, "it could be the basis of a whole new spectrum of organic nanomachines."

"It's not obvious that there'd be huge potential in that," Karol countered. "So far, this stuff hasn't done much in the way of duplicating the achievements of life as we know it, let alone doing things that life as we know it has never accomplished. It might be woefully conventional by comparison with DNA, capable of performing a limited repertoire of self-replicating tricks with no particular skill; if so, it would, probably be technologically useless, however interesting it might be in terms of pure science. We're not looking to make another fortune, Damon-when I say this is important, I don't mean commercially."

"I never doubted it for a moment," Damon said dryly-and turned abruptly to look at the man who was rapidly coming up behind them. For a moment, it crossed his mind that this might be an Eliminator foot soldier, mad and homicidal, and he tensed reflexively. In fact, the man was an islander-and Karol Kachellek obviously knew him well.

"You'd better come quick, Karol," the man said. "There's something you really need to see. You too, Mr. Hart. It's bad."

The package had been dumped into the Web in hypercondensed form, just like any other substantial item of mail, but once it had been downloaded and unraveled it played for a couple of hours of real time. It had been heavily edited, which meant that the claim with which it was prefaced-that nothing in it had been altered or falsified-couldn't be taken at all seriously.

The material was addressed To all lovers of justice, and it was titled Absolute Proof That Conrad Helier Is an Enemy of Mankind. It originated-or purported to originate-from the mysterious Operator 101. Karol Kachellek and Damon watched side by side, in anxious silence, as it played back on a wallscreen in Karol's living quarters.

The first few minutes of film showed a man bound to a huge, thronelike chair. His wrists and ankles were pinned by two pairs of plastic sheaths, each three centimeters broad, which clasped him more tightly if he struggled against them. He was in a sitting position, his head held upright by an elaborate VE hood which neatly enclosed the upper part of his skull. His eyes were covered, but his nose, mouth, and chin were visible. His pelvic region was concealed by a loincloth. There were two feeding tubes whose termini were close to the prisoner's mouth, and there was a third tube connected to a needle lodged in his left forearm, sealed in place by a strip of artificial flesh.

"This man," a voice-over announced, "is Silas Arnett, an intimate friend and close colleague of Conrad Helier. He has been imprisoned in this manner for seventy-two hours, during which time almost all of the protective nanomachinery has been eliminated from his body. He is no longer protected against injury, nor can he control pain."

Damon glanced sideways at Karol, whose face had set like stone. Damon didn't doubt that this was, indeed, Silas Arnett; nor did he doubt that Arnett had been stripped of the apparatus that normally protected him against injury, aging, and the effects of torture.

But if they intend to force some kind of confession out of him, Damon thought, everyone will know that it's worthless. Take away a man's ability to control pain and he can be made to say anything at all. What kind of "absolute proof" is that?

The image abruptly shifted to display a crude cartoon of a virtual courtroom. The accused man who stood in a wooden dock topped with spikes like spearheads was a caricature, but Damon had no difficulty in recognizing him as Silas Arnett. The twelve jurors who were positioned to his left were mere sketches, and the person whose position was directly opposite the camera's-presumably the prosecutor-had features no better defined than theirs. The black-robed judge who faced Arnett was drawn in greater detail, although his profile was subtly exaggerated.

"Please state your name for the record," said the judge. His voice was deep and obviously synthetic.

"I'll do no such thing," said the figure in the dock. Damon recognized Silas Arnett's voice, but in the circumstances he couldn't be sure that the words hadn't been synthesized by a program that had analyzed recordings and isolated the differentiating features of the original.

"Let the name Silas Arnett be entered in the record," said the judge. "I am obliged to point out, Dr. Arnett, that there really is a record. Every moment of this trial will be preserved for posterity. Any and all of your testimony may be broadcast, so you should conduct yourself as though the whole world were watching. Given the nature of the charges which will be brought against you, that may well be the case."

"I didn't think you people bothered with interrogations and trials," Arnett said. It seemed to Damon that

Silas-or the software speaking in his stead-was injecting as much contempt into his voice as he could. "I thought you operated strictly on a sentence first, verdict afterwards basis."

"It sometimes happens," said the judge, "that we are certain of one man's guilt, but do not know the extent to which his collaborators and accomplices were involved in his crime. In such cases we are obliged to undertake further inquiries."

"Like the witch-hunters of old," said Arnett grimly. "I suppose it would make it easier to select future victims if the people you select out for murder were forced to denounce others before they die. Any testimony you get by such means is worse than worthless; this is a farce, and you know it."

"We know the truth," said the judge flatly. "Your role is merely to confirm what we know."

"Fuck you," Arnett said with apparent feeling. The obsolete expletive sounded curiously old-fashioned.

"The charges laid against you are these," the judge recited portentously. "First, that between 2095 and 2120 you conspired with Eveline Hywood, Karol Kachellek, Mary Hallam, and others, under the supervision of Conrad Helier, to cause actual bodily harm to some seven billion individuals, that actual bodily harm consisting of the irreversible disabling of their reproductive organs. Second, that you collaborated with Eveline Hywood, Karol Kachellek, Mary Hallam, and others, under the supervision of Conrad Helier, in the design, manufacture, and distribution of the agents of that actual bodily harm, namely the various virus species collectively known as meiotic disrupters or chiasmalytic transformers. You are now formally invited to make a statement in response to these charges."

Damon was astonished by his own reaction, which was more extreme than he could have anticipated. He was seized by an actual physical shock which jolted him and left him trembling. He turned to look at Karol Kachellek, but the blond man wouldn't meet his eye. Karol seemed remarkably unperturbed, considering that he had just been accused of manufacturing and spreading the great plague of sterility whose dire effects he and his collaborators had so magnificently subverted.

"Karol...?"

Karol cut Damon off with a swift gesture. "Listen!" he hissed "If you had any real evidence," the cartoon Arnett said, while the face of his simulacrum took on a strangely haunted look, "you'd have brought these charges in a real court of law. The simple fact that I'm here demonstrates the absurdity and falseness of any charges you might bring."

"You've had seventy years to surrender yourself to judgment by another court," said the judge sourly. "This court is the one which has found the means to bring you to trial; it is the one which will judge you now. You will be given every opportunity to enter a defense before sentence is passed upon you."

"I refuse to pander to your delusions. I've nothing to say." Damon found it easy enough to believe that it was Silas Arnett speaking; the crudely drawn figure had his attitude as well as his voice.

"Our investigations will be scrupulous nevertheless," the judge said. "They must be, given that the charges, if true, require sentence of death to be passed upon you."

"You have no right to do that!"

"On the contrary. We hold that what society bestows upon the individual, through the medium of technology, society has every right to withdraw from those who betray their obligations to the

commonweal. This court intends to investigate the charges laid against you as fully as it can, and when they are proven it will invite any and all interested parties to pursue those who ought to be standing beside you in the dock. None will escape, no matter what lengths they may have gone to in the hope of evading judgment. There is no station of civilization distant enough, no hiding place buried deeply enough, no deception clever enough, to place a suspect beyond our reach."

What's that supposed to mean? Damon wondered. Where do they think Conrad Helier is, if he's still alive? Living under the farside of the moon? Or are they talking about Eveline? Are there Eliminators in the Lagrange colonies too?

The people you've named are entirely innocent of any crime," Arnett said anxiously. "You're insane if you think otherwise."

Damon tried to judge from the timbre of the voice the extent to which Silas's pain-control system might have been dismantled. So far, he gave no real indication of having been forced to suffer dire distress. If there were indeed a reality behind this charade Silas Arnett's body must by now be an empire at war, and he must be feeling all the violence of the conflict. The tireless molecular agents which benignly regulated the cellular commerce of his emortality must have gone down beneath the onslaught of custom-designed assassins: Eliminators in miniature, which had exterminated his careful symbiotes and left their detritus to be flushed out by his kidneys. Even if Silas had not yet been subjected to actual torture he must have felt the returning grip of his own mortality, and the deadly cargo of terror which came with it. Had the terror been carefully expurgated from his voice-or was all this mere sham?

The picture dissolved and was replaced by an image of Conrad Helier, which Damon immediately recognized as a famous section of archive footage.

"We must regard this new plague not as a catastrophe but as a challenge," Helier stated in ringing tones. "It is not, as the Gaian Mystics would have us believe, the vengeance of Mother Earth upon her rapists and polluters, and no matter how fast and how far it spreads it cannot and will not destroy the species. Its advent requires a monumental effort from us, but we are capable of making that effort. We have, at least in their early stages, technologies which are capable of rendering us immune to aging, and we are rapidly developing technologies which will allow us to achieve in the laboratory what fewer and fewer women are capable of doing outside it: conceive and bear children. Within twenty or thirty years we will have what our ancestors never achieved: democratic control over human fertility, based in a new reproductive system. We have been forced to this pass by evil circumstance, but let us not undervalue it; it is a crucial step forward in the evolution of the species, without which the gifts of longevity and perpetual youth might have proved a double-edged sword...."

The speech faded out. It was easy enough for Damon to figure out why the clip had been inserted. Recontextualized by the accusations which the anonymous judge had brought against Silas Arnett, it implied that Conrad Helier had thought of the transformer plagues as a good thing: an opportunity rather than a curse.

Damon had no alternative but to ask himself the questions demanded by the mysterious Operator. Had Conrad Helier been capable of designing the agents of the plague as well as the instruments which had blunted its effects? If capable, might he have been of a mind to do it?

The answer to the first question, he was certain in his own mind, was yes. He was not nearly as certain that the answer to the second question was no-but he remained uncomfortably aware of the fact that he had never actually known his biological father; all he had ever known was the oppressive force of his father's plans for him and his father's hopes for him. He had rebelled against those, but his rebellion

couldn't possibly commit him to believing this. In any case, he did know the other people named by the judge. Karol was awkward and diffident; Eveline haughty and high-handed, but Silas and Mary had been everything he could have required of them. Surely it was unimaginable that they could have done what they now stood accused of doing?

The image cut back to the courtroom, but the moment Damon heard Silas Arnett speak he knew that a lot of time had elapsed. The alteration in the quality of the prisoner's voice left no doubt that a substantial section had been cut from the tape.

"What do you want from me?" Arnett hissed, in a voice full of pain and exhaustion. "What the fuck do you want?"

It was not the virtual judge who replied this time, although there was no reason to think that the second synthesized voice issued from a different source. "We want to know whose idea it was to launch the Third Plague War," said the figure to Silas Arnett's right-the figure who had always occupied center stage but had never claimed it. "We want to know where we can find incontrovertible evidence of the extent of the conspiracy. We want to know the names of everyone who was involved. We want to know where Conrad Helier is now, and what name he is currently using."

"Conrad's dead. I saw him die! It's all on tape. All you have to do is look it up!" Silas's voice was almost hysterical, but he seemed to be making Herculean efforts to control himself. Damon had to remind himself that everything on the tape could be the product of clever artifice. He could have forged this confrontation himself, without ever requiring Silas Arnett to be present.

"You did not see Conrad Helier die," said the accusing voice, without the slightest hint of doubt. "The tape entered into the public record is a forgery, and someone switched the DNA samples in order to confuse the medical examiner who carried out the postmortem. Was that you, Dr. Arnett?"

There was no immediate reply. The tape was interrupted again; there was no attempt to conceal the cut. When it resumed, Silas looked even more haggard; he was silent now, but he gave the impression of having exhausted his capacity for protest. Damon could imagine the sound of Silas's excised screams easily enough. Only the day before he had listened to poor Lenny Garon recording a tape which it might yet be his privilege to edit and doctor and convert into a peculiar kind of art. Were he to offer to take on that job Lenny Garon would probably be delighted-and would probably be equally delighted to hear his own screams, carefully intensified, on the final cut.

"It was my idea," Silas said in a hollow, grating voice saturated with defeat. "Mine. I did it. The others never knew. I used them, but they never knew."

"They all knew," said the inquisitor firmly.

"No they didn't," Silas insisted. "They trusted me, absolutely. They never knew. They still don't-the ones who are still alive, that is. I did it on my own. I designed the plague and set it free, so that Conrad could do what he had to do. He never knew that the transformers weren't natural. He died not knowing. He really did die not knowing."

"It's very noble of you to take all the guilt upon yourself," said the other in a voice dripping with sarcasm. "But it's not true, is it?"

"Yes," said Silas Arnett.

This time, the editor left in the sound of screaming. Damon shivered, even though he knew that he and everyone else who had managed to download the tape before Interpol deleted it was being manipulated for effect. This was melodrama, not news-but how many people, in today's world, could tell the difference? How many people would be able to say: It's just some third-rate pornotape stitched together by an engineer. It's just a sequence of ones and zeros, like any other cataract of code. It doesn't mean a thing.

Suddenly, Diana Caisson's reaction to the discovery that Damon was using her template as a base for the sex tape he had been commissioned to make didn't seem quite so unreasonable. In using Silas Arnett as the basis of this elaborate fiction the people behind the cartoon judge were not merely exploiting him but destroying him. Silas would never be the same, even if they restored his internal technology. Even if all of this were shown to be a pack of lies, he would never be the same in the eyes of other men-which was where everyone had to live in the world of the Net, no matter how reclusive they chose to be.

The prosecutor spoke again. "The truth, Dr. Arnett, is that at least five persons held a secret conference in May 2095, when Conrad Helier laid out his plan for the so-called salvation of the world. The first experiments with the perfected viruses were carried out in the winter of 2098-99, using rats, mice, and human tissue cultures. When one of his collaborators-was it you, Dr. Arnett?-asked Conrad Helier whether he had the right to play God, his reply was 'The post is vacant. No one else seems to be interested in taking it up. If we don't, who will?' That's the truth, Dr. Arnett, isn't it? Isn't that exactly what he said?"

The cartoon Arnett's reply to that was unexpected. "Who are you?" he asked, his pain seemingly mingled with suspicion. "I know you, don't I? If I saw your real face, I'd recognize it, wouldn't I?"

The answer was equally surprising. "Of course you would," the other said with transparently false gentleness. "And I know you, Silas Arnett. I know more about you than you can possibly imagine. That's why you can't hide what you know."

At this point, without any warning, the picture cut out. It was replaced by a text display which said:

CONRAD HELIER IS AN ENEMY OF MANKIND

FIND AND IDENTIFY CONRAD HELIER

MORE PROOFS WILL FOLLOW

-OPERATOR 101

Damon stared numbly at the words; their crimson letters glowed eerily against a black background, as if they had been written in fire across the face of an infinite and starless void.

Eleven

Damon's first thought was that he had to get in touch with Madoc Tamlin, and that he had to do so privately. He was spared the need to apologize to Karol Kachellek because Karol obviously had calls of his own to make and he too wanted to make them without being overheard. Instead of having to cover his own retreat, Damon found himself being bundled out of the room. He ran all the way back to his hotel, but he went to one of the public booths rather than using the unit in his room.

He checked his incoming mail in case there was anything important awaiting his attention, although he had set alarms to sound if Madoc or Eveline Hywood had called. The only name that caused him to pause as he scanned the list was Lenny Garon. He almost took a look at that message, just in case Madoc had decided to send some item of information by a roundabout route for security reasons, but it seemed more sensible to go directly to the source if it were feasible.

Unfortunately, Madoc seemed to be lying low. Tamlin's personal number should have reached his backpack, but it didn't; the call was rerouted to Madoc's apartment, where Diana Caisson fielded the call. She didn't take it in the VE that Damon had designed, though; she must have had the machine set up so that any call would automatically be switched to the caller's VE. The booth had set the image of Damon's head and shoulders against a simple block pattern—one of the most primitive still in use in the USNA.

"Going back to the basics, Damon?" Diana asked, although she must have had a readout to inform her that he was calling from a public phone in Kaunakakai. After she'd finished the contrived sneer she looked him defiantly in the eye, as if to say that it was about time he made a start on his apologies.

"Never mind the smart remarks, Diana," Damon said. "I need to get hold of Madoc as soon as possible."

"He's out," she said sourly. Her face blurred slightly as she moved back from her own unit's camera, reflexively trying to cover her realization that he hadn't called to talk to her.

"I know that. I also know that he doesn't want to be located, even by me—but I need to get a message to him with the least possible delay. Will you do that for me, please?"

Damon could see that Diana was tempted to tell him where to put his message, but she thought better of it.

"What message?" she asked curiously.

"Can you tell him that in view of recent developments I really need that package we discussed. He'll understand what I mean and why. I've authorized him to draw more cash on the card I gave him, so that he can pull out all the stops. I'll be flying back tonight or early tomorrow, and I need to know what he's dug up as soon as I land. If he can meet me at the airport that would be good, but not if it takes him away from significant investigations. Have you got all that?"

"Of course I've got it," she snapped back. "Do you think I'm stupid or something? What's all this shit about recent developments and the package we discussed? Why are you trying to hide things from me? We had a row, that's all!"

Damon had to suppress an impulse to react in kind, but he knew that matching wrath with wrath would only escalate the conversation into a shouting match. Instead, he found the most soothing tone he could and said: "I'm sorry, Di-I'm a bit wound up. I'm not trying to keep secrets from you, but this is a public booth. Just ask Madoc to do what he can, and tell him he has extra resources if he needs them to speed things along. I really need you to do this for me, Diana. In a couple of days, if you want to, we can talk-but right now Silas Arnett is in bad trouble, and I have to do everything I possibly can to help find him. Bear with me, please. I have to go now."

"I know what's going on," she said quickly. She didn't want him to cut the connection.

"That's okay, Di," he said reassuringly. "It's no big secret-but it's not something I want broadcast, certainly not in the direction of the news tapes. If you're keeping up with the news, you'll realize why I'm in a hurry."

Her perplexed expression told him that she hadn't been monitoring the Web for new information regarding Silas Arnett, although Madoc must have been alerted to the new Operator 101 package at least as quickly as Karol Kachellek's assistants. Perhaps Madoc had deliberately killed the alarms in the apartment because Diana was there-although it was careless of him, if so, to have allowed his calls to be automatically diverted from his backpack to his home phone.

"Why didn't you tell me that your father was Conrad Helier?" Diana demanded, still trying to stop him from breaking the connection.

"I was trying to forget it," Damon told her tersely. "It wasn't relevant."

"It seems to be relevant now," she said.

"It's Silas Arnett's kidnapping that's relevant to me," he retorted. "I've got to go, Di. I have to talk to my foster father-my other foster father. I'll call again, when I can. We will talk, if that's what you want."

"I might not be here," she informed him without much conviction. "I have better things to do than provide Madoc's answering service."

"Good-bye, Di," Damon said-and cut the connection before she could string the exchange out any further.

He reached out to the door of the booth, but then thought better of it. He called up the message that Lenny Garon had left for him. It was a simple request for him to call. Still figuring that it might be Madoc's way of steering information around Diana's inquisitive presence in his apartment, Damon made the call.

Lenny answered his own phone, but his machine was also rigged to use the caller's VE-presumably because the boy didn't like to advertise the fact that he didn't have a customized VE of his own. The block-patterned VE didn't bother him at all, though-when his image formed, his eyes were still fixed on the virtual readout telling him where the call was coming from.

"Damon!" he said, as if Damon were someone he'd known all his life. "What are you doing in Kaunakakai?" He stumbled over the pronunciation of the last word, but that was probably because he was excited rather than because he didn't have a clue where Kaunakakai might be.

"Personal business," Damon said. "Why did you want me to call, Lenny?"

"Yeah. Personal business. Sure ... yeah, about that."

"About what?"

"About personal business. Madoc came to see me in hospital today-I got carved up a bit in the fight . . . internal damage. Nothing serious, but . . . well, anyhow, Madoc mentioned you were worried about a snatch-your foster father."

"Did Madoc give you a message?" Damon put in impatiently.

"No, of course not," the boy said. "He didn't want to talk about it at all-but that woman with him wouldn't let up. He wasn't talking about you, Damon, honestly-he just let slip that your foster parents were biotech people. When I got back here a little while ago, it wasn't difficult to put snatch and biotech together and come up with Silas Arnett's name. I'm not trying to interfere or anything ... it's just that being a fan and all... I had no idea that I'd find anything I knew something about... but when I did I thought you'd want to know. It may be nothing. Probably is."

"What are you talking about, Lenny?" Damon said as patiently and as politely as he could.

"Cathy Prail," the boy replied, coming abruptly to the point.

It took Damon a second or two to remember that Catherine Prail was the young woman who'd been with Silas when he was abducted.

"What about her?" he asked.

"Well, like I say, nothing really. It's just that I know her. Sort of."

"How?"

"Silly, really. It's just that we're the same age-both seventeen, although I guess she's nearer eighteen than I am, probably past her birthday by now. Kids the same age, even approximately, are pretty thin on the ground. Foster parents tend to shop around their acquaintances making contacts, so that the kids can get together occasionally. You know the sort of thing-a couple of hundred adults getting together for a big party so that a dozen kids can socialize with their peers."

Damon did know, but only vaguely. It wasn't the sort of thing his own foster parents had ever gone in for. They'd never worried about his social isolation and lack of peer-group interaction because they thought of him as one of a kind. In their eyes- even Mary's eyes and Silas's eyes-Heliers had no peers. Most groups of foster parents these days, at least in California, were ten or twelve strong, and they usually did their parenting strictly by the book. They took care to ensure that their children had other children to interact and bond with. It was possible that Lenny Garon had at some stage in his brief life made contact with every other person of his own age within a hundred miles.

"How well do you know her?" Damon asked.

"Not that well," Lenny admitted. "It must be two years since I actually saw her-but she was still posting to the Birthdate 2175 Webcore when I dropped out of all that."

She was only just eighteen, Damon thought. Silas was a hundred and ten years older than she was. What on earth was the point...? He strangled the thought. It was obvious what the point was. The fact

that they were a hundred and ten years apart was the point. "Get to the bottom line, Lenny," he said aloud. "Exactly what have you got to tell me about Catherine Prail?"

"Nothing definite-but I tried to get in touch with her. I tried hard, Damon. I talked to some of the others-other Birthdate 2175 people, that is. Interpol had already talked to a couple of them, the ones who were her closest friends. Damon, it's not on the news and I can't be absolutely sure, but I think she's disappeared too. She's not at home, and she's not anywhere else she'd be likely to be. Her foster parents are covering, but it's obvious they're worried. The other Birthdaters said that she couldn't possibly have had anything to do with Arnett being taken by the Eliminators, but they're as certain as I am that her foster parents don't have the slightest idea where she is-and it isn't because she left home to run with the gangs, like I did."

"Does Madoc know this?" Damon asked.

"Probably-but I can't get through to him. I didn't want to say too much to that woman. She doesn't seem to be on your side, even though she says she's your girlfriend."

"That's okay. Keep trying to get through to Madoc, though. He must be in some place where he can't take calls right now, but he's bound to move on. Give him what you can when you can- and thanks for your help. I have to go now."

"Wait!" The boy's expression was suddenly urgent-as if he feared that this would probably be the last chance he ever had to talk to his hero, or at least his last chance to have the advantage of just having done his hero a small favor.

Damon didn't have the heart to cut him off. "Make it quick, Lenny," he said, with a slight sigh.

"I just want to know," the boy said. "Madoc says that I can be good at it-that I show promise, even though Brady cut me up so easily. He says that if I keep at it... but he would, wouldn't he? He gets the tapes whether I win or lose, to him it's just raw material-but you're a real fighter and you don't have any reason to lie. Just tell me straight, Damon. Am I good enough? Can I make it, if I give it everything I've got?"

Damon suppressed a groan. Even though Lenny had given him little or nothing he felt that he really did owe the boy an answer. In any case, this might be one of the few instances in his life when what he said could make a real difference.

"I can only tell you what I think, Lenny," he said, in what he hoped was a man-to-man fashion. "However good you are, or might become, fighting is a fool's game. I'm sorry that I ever got involved in it. It was just a way of signaling to the world and my foster parents that I was my own person, and that I didn't have to live according to their priorities. It was the clearest signal I could send, but it was a stupid signal. There are other ways, Lenny. I know you think the money looks good, and that the IT it buys will more than compensate for the cuts you take, but it's a false economy-a bad bet.

"If Madoc's given you the same spiel he gave me he'll have told you that the human body renews itself every eight years or so-that all the cells are continually being replaced, on a piecemeal basis, to the extent that there's hardly an atom inside you now that was there when you were nine years old, and hardly an atom that will be still with you when you're twenty-five. That's true-but the inference he intends you to take, which is that it doesn't matter what you do to your body now because you'll have a brand-new one in ten years' time is false and dangerous. That constant process of reproduction isn't perfect. It's like taking a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy-every time an error or flaw creeps in it's reproduced,

and gradually exaggerated.

"Your internal technology will increase the number of times you can photocopy yourself and still be viable, but the errors and flaws will still accumulate-and everything you do to create more flaws will cost you at the far end of your life. In a few days' time you won't be able to see the scars that Brady's knife left, but you should never make the mistake of thinking that you've been fixed up as good as new. There's no such thing. If you want my advice, Lenny, give it up now. It doesn't matter how good you might become-it's just not worth it."

The expression on the boy's face said that this wasn't the kind of judgment he had expected. He had braced himself against the possibility of being told that he might not be good enough to make the grade, but he hadn't braced himself against this. He opened his mouth, but Damon didn't want to know what he was going to say.

"Don't blow your chance to ride the escalator all the way to true emortality, Lenny," he said. "The ten-year advantage you have over me could be vital-but not nearly as vital as looking after your tender flesh. Maybe neither of us will get there, and maybe both of us will die in some freak accident long before we get to our full term, but it makes sense to do the best we can. Getting the IT a little bit sooner won't do you any good at all if you give it less to work with when it's installed. Nanotechnology is only expensive because PicoCon takes so much profit; in essence, it's dirt cheap. It uses hardly any materials and hardly any energy. Everything goes to the rich first, but after that the price comes tumbling down. The best bet is to look after yourself and be patient-that's what I'm doing now, and it's what I'll be doing the rest of my life, which I hope will be a very long time."

Damon knew that the lecture was rushed, but he didn't have time to fill in all the details and he didn't have time to take questions. Lenny understood that; his face had become more and more miserable while Damon spoke, but he was still determined to play it tough. The boy waited for Damon to close the conversation.

"I really have to go, Lenny," Damon said as softly as he could. "I'm sorry. Maybe we can talk again, about this and other things, but not now." He broke the connection. Then he got out of the booth and went in search of Karol Kachellek.

Twelve

Karol Kachellek was still in the workroom where he and Damon had watched the tape of Silas Arnett's mock trial. When Damon came back he was under the phone hood and the room was unlit, but he came out as soon as he realized that he wasn't alone and brushed the light-switch on his console. Damon hadn't managed to catch the last few words Karol had spoken before signing off but he blushed slightly anyway, as if walking into a darkened room were an infallible sign of stealthy intent.

Damon was all set for more verbal fencing, but the bioscientist was in a very different state of mind now.

"I'm sorry, Damon," Kachellek said, with unaccustomed humility. "You were right. This business is far more complicated than I thought-and it couldn't have come at a worse time."

"What's it all about, Karol?" Damon asked quietly. "You do know, don't you?"

"I only wish I did." The unprecedented plaintiveness in his foster father's voice made Damon want to believe that he was sincere. "You mustn't worry, Damon. It will all be sorted out. I don't know who's doing this, or why, but...." As the blond man trailed off, Damon stared at him intently, wondering whether the red flush about his brow and neck was significant of anger, anxiety, embarrassment, or some synergistic combination of all three.

Karol reddened even more deeply under his foster son's steady gaze. "It's all lies, Damon," he said awkwardly. "You can't possibly believe any of that stuff. They forced Silas to say what he did, if he said it at all. We can't even be sure that it really was his voice. It could all have been synthesized."

"It doesn't much matter whether it's all lies or not," Damon told him grimly. "It's going to be talked about the world over. Whoever made that tape is cashing in on the newsworthiness of the Eliminators, using their crazy crusade to ensure maximum publicity for those accusations. The tape doctor didn't even try to make them sound convincing. He settled for crude melodrama instead, but that might well be effective enough for his purposes if all he wants is to kick up a scandal. Why put in those last few lines, though? Why take the trouble to include a section of tape whose sole purpose is to establish the possibility that Silas might have known his captor? What are we supposed to infer from that?"

"I don't know," Karol said emphatically. His manner was defensive, but he really did sound sincere. "I really don't understand what's happening. Who would want to do this to us, Damon? Why-and why now?"

Damon wished that he had a few answers to offer; he had never seen any of his foster parents in such a state of disarray. He felt obliged to wonder whether the tape could have been quite as discomfiting if there had been no truth at all in its allegations, but he was certain that Karol's blustering couldn't all be bluff. He really didn't understand what was happening or who was behind it, or why they'd chosen to unleash the whirlwind at this particular time. Maybe, given time, he could work it all out-but for the moment he was helpless, to the extent that he was even prepared to accept guidance from Damon the prodigal, Damon the betrayer.

"Tell me about Surinder Nahal," Damon said abruptly. "Does he have motive enough to be behind all this?" He was avid to seize the chance to ask some of the questions he'd been storing up, hoping that for once he might get an honest reply, and that seemed to be the best item with which to begin. Karol was far more likely to know something useful about a rival gene-tweaker than the disappearance of an eighteen-year-old girl.

However far Karol was from recovering his usual icy calm, though, he still had ingrained habit to come to his aid. "Why him?" he parried unhelpfully.

"Come on, Karol, think," Damon said urgently. "Silas isn't the only one who's gone missing, is he? If nothing was wrong, Madoc would have found Nahal by now and let me know. If he isn't part of the problem, he must be part of the solution. Maybe his turn in the hot seat is coming next-or maybe he's the one feeding questions to the judge. How bad is the grudge he's nursing?"

"Surinder Nahal was a bioengineer back in the old days," Kachellek said, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "His field of endeavor overlapped ours-he was working on artificial wombs too, and there was

a difference of opinion regarding patents."

"How strong a difference of opinion? Do you mean that he accused Conrad Helier of obtaining patents that ought to have been his?"

"You don't know what it was like back then, Damon. The queue outside the patent office was always five miles long, and every time a significant patent was granted there were cries of Foul! all along the line-not that it mattered much, the way the corps were always rushing to produce copycat processes just beyond the reach of the patents and throwing lawsuits around like confetti. The Crash put an end to all that madness-it focused people's minds on matters of real importance. There's nothing like a manifest threat to the future of the species to bring people together. In 2099 the world was in chaos, on the brink of a war of all against all. By 2110 peace had broken out just about everywhere, and we were all on the same side again.

"Sure, back in ninety-nine Surinder Nahal was hopping mad with us because we were ten places ahead of him in the big queue-but it didn't last. Ten years later we were practically side by side in the struggle to put the New Reproductive System in place. There was a little residual bad feeling because he thought he hadn't been given his fair share of credit for the ectogenetic technology that was finally put in place, but nothing serious. I haven't heard of him in fifty years; if I'd ever thought about him at all I'd have presumed that he was retired, like Silas. I can't believe that a man like him could be responsible for all this-he was a scientist, like us. It makes no sense. It must be someone from..." He stopped as soon as he had fully formulated the thought in his own mind.

"Someone from what?" Damon asked sharply-but it was too late. The moment of his foster father's vulnerability had passed, killed by the lengthy development of his judgment of Surinder Nahal. Karol had no intention of finishing his broken sentence; he deliberately turned away so that he didn't have to answer Damon's demanding stare. Whatever conclusion he had suddenly and belatedly jumped to, he clearly intended to act on it himself, in secret. Damon tried to make the charitable assumption that Karol had only stopped dead because he was standing in a room whose walls might easily be host to a dozen curious eyes and ears, but he couldn't help feeling that it was a personal slight nevertheless: a deliberate act of exclusion.

"Is it possible," Damon said, trying not to sound too hostile, "that the viruses which caused the plague of sterility really were manufactured, by someone? Was it really a Third Plague War, as the judge said? Could the Crash have been deliberately caused?" He didn't expect an honest answer, but he figured that if a man like Hiru Yamanaka could set such store by eye-to-eye interrogation, there must be something in the theory.

Karol met his eye again, pugnaciously. "Of course it could," he snapped, as if it ought to have been perfectly obvious. "History simplifies. There weren't two plague wars, or even three-there was only one, and it involved more battles than anyone ever acknowledged. All that stuff about one war launched by the rich against the poor and another by the poor against the rich is just news-tape PR, calculated to imply that the final score was even. It wasn't."

Damon wasn't at all surprised by this judgment, although he hadn't expected to hear it voiced by a man like Karol Kachellek. He was familiar with the thesis that all wars were waged by the rich, with the poor playing the part of cannon fodder.

"Are you saying that all the new and resurgent diseases were deliberately released?" Damon asked incredulously. "All the way back to AIDS and the superbacs?"

"No, of course I'm not," Karol said, scrupulously reining in his cynicism. "There were real problems. Species crossovers, antibiotic-immune strains, new mutations. There really was a backlash against early medical triumphs, generated by natural selection. I don't doubt that there were accidental releases of engineered organisms too. There's no doubt that the first free transformers were spontaneous mutations that allowed gene-therapy treatments to slip the leash of their control systems and start a whole new side branch in the evolutionary tree. Maybe ninety-nine out of every hundred of the bugs that followed in their wake were products of natural selection-and nine out of ten were perfectly harmless, even benign-but the people who made good transformers by the score were perfectly capable of making not-so-good ones too."

"And they could get paid to do it, I suppose? They weren't too proud to take defense funding."

"Everybody took defense funding in the twenty-first century, Damon. Purely for the good of science, you understand-for the sake of the sacred cause of progress. There must have been thousands who wrung their hands and howled their lamentations all the way to the bank-but they took the money anyway. That's not the point. The point is that nobody knows for sure where any of the bad bugs came from-not even the ones whose depredations were confidently labeled the First and Second Plague Wars. The principal reason why the Crash wasn't called a plague war at the time was that nobody was excluded from it. No one seemed to have any defense ready; everybody seemed to be a victim. That doesn't mean that no one had any reason to release viruses of that type. As Conrad said in that clip the Eliminator dropped into his little comedy, it forced us to do what we'd needed to do for a hundred years but never contrived to do-to bring human fertility under careful control."

"Not so much a war of the rich against the poor, then, as a war of the few against the many."

"No. If it was any kind of plague war at all it was a war to end that kind of warfare. It was humankind against the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse-the last stand against the negative Malthusian checks."

"So if it was deliberate, the people responsible would have had your wholehearted support?"

"You don't understand, Damon," Karol said, in a tone of voice that Damon had heard many times before. "People don't talk about it nowadays, of course, because it's not considered a fit topic for polite conversation, but the world before the Crash was very different from the one in which you grew up. There were a lot of people prepared to say that the population explosion had to be damped down one way or another-that if the sum of individual choices didn't add up to voluntary restraint, then war, famine, and disease would remain necessary factors in human affairs. People were already living considerably longer, as a matter of routine, than their immediate ancestors. PicoCon and OmicronA were only embryos themselves in those days, but their mothercorps were already promising a more dramatic extension of the life span by courtesy of internal technology. It was easy enough to see that matters would get very fraught indeed as those nanotechnologies became cheaper and more efficient."

"The world was full of new viruses. A lot of them were arising naturally-more than ten billion people crammed into polluted supercities constitute a wonderland of opportunity for virus evolution-and a lot more were being tailored in labs for use as transgenic vectors, pest controllers, so-called beneficial fevers, and so on. All kinds of things came out of that cauldron, far more of them by accident than by design. It really doesn't matter a damn, and didn't then, how the Crash was started; the brute fact of it forced us all to concentrate our attention and energies on the problem of how to respond to it."

"We came through it, and we got the world moving again. It's a changed world and it's a better world, and Conrad Helier was one of its chief architects. Maybe you think we made a lot of money out of the world's misfortune, but by comparison with PicoCon, OmicronA, and the other cosmicorps we've

always been paupers. What we did, we did for the common good. Conrad was a fine man-a great man-and this crazy attempt to blacken his name is the product of a sick mind."

Damon reminded himself that Karol Kachellek had been born in 2071, only four years after Silas Arnett but fifteen years after Conrad Helier. Karol was only thirty years short of the current world record for longevity, but he still thought of Conrad Helier as the product of an earlier generation: a generation that was now lost to history. Conrad Helier had been a more powerful father figure to Karol Kachellek than he ever could have been to Damon.

"Were you actually present when my father died, Karol?" Damon asked quietly.

"Yes I was. I was by the side of his hospital bed, watching the monitors. His nanomachines were at full stretch, trying to repair the internal damage. They were PicoCon's best, but they just weren't up to it. He'd suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage and there were more complications than I could count. We like to think of ourselves as potential emortals, but we're not even authentically immune to disease and injury, let alone the effects of extreme violence. There are dozens of potential physiological accidents with which the very best of today's internal technology is impotent to deal. Kids of your generation, who feel free to take delight in savage violence because its effects are mostly reparable, are stupidly playing with fire. The proximal cause of your father's death was a massive stroke-but if the lunatic who made that tape intends to build a case on the seeming implausibility of that cause of death he's barking up the wrong tree. If Conrad had wanted to fake his death, he'd have chosen something far more spectacular."

"How did you know he was dead?" Damon asked. He couldn't help comparing the lecture that Karol had just given him with the one he'd given Lenny Garon; the depth of his estrangement from his foster parents didn't seem quite so abyssal now.

"I told you," Kachellek replied, with ostentatious patience. "I was watching the monitors. I also watched the doctors trying to resuscitate him. I wasn't actually present at the postmortem, but I can assure you that there was no mistake."

Damon didn't press the point. If Conrad Helier had faked his death, Karol Kachellek would surely have been in on the conspiracy, and he was hardly likely to relent in his insistence now.

"I'm going back to Los Angeles as soon as I can," Damon said quietly. "Maybe you ought to come with me. The people who took Silas might have designs on you too. Interpol can offer you far better protection on the mainland than they can in a desolate and underpoliced spot like this."

"I can't possibly go to Los Angeles," Karol said mulishly. "I've got important work to do here."

I have work to do too, Damon thought. I know what skills it took to put that tape together, technically and in terms of its narrative implications. Through Madoc I have access to some first-rate outlaw Webwalkers, including Old Lady Tithonia herself. I can get to the bottom of this, if I try hard enough, no matter how insistent Karol and Eveline are in trying to keep me out of it. Maybe I can get to the bottom of it sooner than Interpol. Maybe I can get to the bottom of it quickly enough to take a hand in the game myself.

That bold and positive thought was, however, quickly followed by a host of shadowy doubts. Perhaps he could get to the bottom of the matter faster than Interpol-but might that not be exactly what Operator 101 wanted? Why would the mysterious Operator bother to push a note under his door unless he was intended to take a hand in the game? What, exactly, did the writer of that note want him to do? Might he not be lending unwitting assistance to the persecutor of his foster parents, collaborating in the

assassination of his biological father's reputation? Rebel though he certainly was, did he really want to take his rebellion to the point of joining forces with his family's enemies-and if not, how could he be sure that he wouldn't do so simply by uncovering the truth?

The night air was surprisingly cold, given that the day had been so hot. The wind was brisker than it had been earlier, and it had reversed its direction now that the sea was warmer than the land. The palm trees planted in a neat row in the forecourt of the hotel were waving their fronds murmuringly.

Once he was back in his room Damon tried to book a seat to Honolulu on the first flight out in the morning, but it wasn't scheduled to leave until eleven and he didn't want to wait that long. He called Karol to ask about the possibility of arranging a charter.

"No problem," Karol said, showing evident relief at the thought that he wouldn't have to face any more of Damon's questions. "Name your time."

Damon was tempted to name first light, but he was too tired. His IT was supposed to have the capacity to keep him going for seventy-two hours without sleep, if necessary, but when he'd tried to use the facility in the past it had brought home to him the truth of the adage that the flesh was not the person. His mind needed rest, even if his body could be persuaded that it didn't. Whatever faced him tomorrow, he wanted to be fully alert and mentally agile.

"Make it eighty-thirty," he said.

"It'll be waiting," Karol promised-and then added: "It will be all right, Damon. Silas will be okay. We all will."

Even though he knew full well that the promises were empty, Damon was glad that Karol had taken the trouble to make them.

Eveline Hywood wouldn't have bothered-or, if she had, would certainly have affected an infinitely more patronizing tone.

"Sure," Damon said. "Thanks. I'm sorry I got under your feet-but I'm glad I came."

"So am I," said Karol-and he might even have meant it.

Thirteen

Karol Kachellek took time out from his busy schedule to drive Damon out to a small private airstrip near the southeastern tip of the island. Damon couldn't help thinking, churlishly, that the gesture had less to do with courtesy than a keen desire to see the back of him, but there was no hostility in his foster

father's manner now. The Eliminator broadcast had knocked all the stiffness out of the bioscientist, who was visibly anxious as he bounced his jeep over the potholes in the makeshift road. Damon had never seen him so obviously distressed.

"Bloody road," Karol complained. "All it needs is a man with a shovel and a bucketful of gantzing baccs. He could take the dirt from the side of the road-there's plenty of it. Nobody ever admits responsibility without a fight, and when they have to, it's always going to be done tomorrow-the kind of tomorrow that never comes."

"Wouldn't be tolerated in Los Angeles," Damon agreed, with a slight smile. "If the city couldn't take care of it immediately the corps would race one another to get a man out there. OmicronA would be determined to win, in order to demonstrate that PicoCon's ownership of the patents is merely an economic technicality. The staff in the California offices pride themselves on being hands-on people, always willing to get involved in local issues."

"I bet they do," Karol muttered tersely. "Nanotech hands by the trillion, at work in every last nook and cranny of the great showcase of the global village-it's different here, of course. No Silicon Valley-type monuments to the Third Industrial Revolution, no social cachet. We're still the backwoods-the kind of wilderness that isn't even photogenic. Nobody gives a damn about what happens out here, especially the people who live here."

"You live here," Damon pointed out. He refrained from adding an observation to the effect that Karol could have packed his own bucket and spade, pausing to repair the potholes on his way back to the lab. After all, Karol was very busy just now.

"Here and hereabouts," Karol admitted grimly.

Damon relented slightly. "Actually," he said, "the corps are selectively blind even on their own doorstep. Until the deconstructionists move into the LA badlands in earnest nobody's going to tidy them up. Filling in a hole downtown counts as an ad-filling one in where the gangs have their playgrounds wouldn't win a nod of approval from anyone. You know how corpthink goes: no approval, no effort."

"If only the world were as simple as that," Karol said sadly. "The real problem is that too many people spend their entire lives sweating blood for the best possible causes and end up being denounced as enemies of mankind."

That was more like the Karol he knew of old, and Damon was perversely glad to see the real man surfacing again, filling in his psychological potholes with great globs of biotech-cemented mud. Karol wasn't sweating yet because the sun was too low in the eastern sky, but Damon knew that he'd be sweating by noon-not blood, to be sure, but beads of good, honest toil. Para-DNA had no chance of keeping its secrets, no matter how fervently it clung to the fugitive backwoods of the global village, and no matter how hard it tried to disguise itself as the detritus of a twentieth-century oil spill. Moves like that couldn't possibly divert the curiosity of a true scientist.

As the jeep lurched onto the lawn beside the strip a flock of brightly colored birds grudgingly flew away, mewling their objections. Damon couldn't put a name to the species but he had no doubt that Karol could have enlightened him had he cared to ask.

The two of them said their good-byes brusquely, as if to make sure that they both understood that their mutual mistrust had been fully restored, but there was a manifest awkwardness in their lack of warmth. Damon suspected that if he'd only known exactly what to say, he might have made a better beginning of

the process of reconciliation, but he wasn't certain that he wanted to try. Karol might be showing belated signs of quasi-parental affection, but he hadn't actually told Damon anything significant. Whatever suspicions Karol had about the identity and motives of Silas Arnett's kidnappers he was keeping to himself.

Damon would rather have sat up front in the cockpit of the plane, but he wasn't given the choice. He was ushered into one of the eight passenger seats by the pilot, who introduced himself as Steve Grayson. Grayson was a stocky man with graying temples and a broad Australian accent. Maybe he thought the gray made him look more dignified, or maybe it was a joke reflecting his surname; at any rate, he was certainly no centenarian and he could have had his hair color reunified without recourse to the new generation of rejuvenation techniques. Damon took an immediate dislike to the pilot when Grayson insisted on reaching down to fasten his safety harness for him-an ostensible courtesy which seemed to Damon to be an insulting invasion of privacy.

"We'll be up and down in no time at all," Grayson told Damon before taking his own seat and fastening his own belt. "Might be a little rough in the wind, though-I hope your IT can cope with motion sickness."

"I'll be fine," Damon assured him, taking further insult from the implication that in the absence of his IT he'd be the kind of person who couldn't take a few routine aerial lurches without losing his breakfast.

While the plane taxied onto the runway Damon watched Karol Kachellek jump back into the jeep and drive away, presumably hastening back to the puzzle of para-DNA. Damon had a puzzle of his own to play with, and he had no trouble immersing himself within it, taking up the work of trying to figure out whether there might be something in what Karol had said to him that might lead to a fuller understanding of the game that Operator 101 was playing.

He was so deep in contemplation that he took no notice of the plane's banking as it climbed. He watched the island diminish in size until it was no more than a mere map, but even then it did not occur to him that there was anything strange in the course they were taking. Ten or twelve minutes had elapsed before it finally occurred to him that the glaring light which had forced him to raise his left hand to shield his face should not have been so troublesome. Once Grayson had settled the plane on its intended course the sun ought to have been almost directly behind them, but it was actually way over to port.

"Hey!" he called to the pilot. "What's our course?"

Grayson made no reply.

"Isn't Honolulu due west of Molokai, away to the right?" Damon asked. He was beginning to doubt his knowledge of geography-but when Grayson again failed to turn around and look him in the eye, he knew that something was amiss.

He tested his safety harness and found that it was locked tight. The belt which Grayson had advised him to keep locked couldn't be unlocked; he was a prisoner.

"Hey!" he shouted, determined not to be ignored. "What's going on? What are you doing? Answer me, you bastard."

At last, the pilot condescended to turn his head. Grayson's expression was slightly apologetic-but only slightly.

"Sorry, son," he said. "Just take it easy-when there's nothing to be done, that's what you might as well

do."

The homespun philosophy was a further annoyance, but Damon still couldn't unfasten the seat belt. Like Silas Arnett before him-and possibly Surinder Nahal, not to mention Catherine Prail-he was being kidnapped. But why? And by whom? The mystery briefly overwhelmed the enormity of the realization, but the brute fact of what was happening soon fought back, insistently informing him that whoever was responsible, he was in danger. Whether he was in the hands of Eliminators or not, he was being carried off into the unknown, where any fate at all might be waiting for him.

His years of experience on the streets were supposed to have hardened him against fear and dread, but all that seemed futile now. However mean the streets were-and however one might try to dignify them with titles like "the badlands"-they were only a half hour away from the nearest hospital. As he had explained to Lenny Garon, people did die in knife fights-but if one drew back to consider life less narrow-mindedly, there were still a thousand other ways a man might die, even in the New Utopia. It didn't require a bullet or a bomb, or any act of violence at all. A man might drown, or choke, or....

He abandoned the train of thought abruptly. What did it matter what might happen to him? The real question was what he intended to do about the ugly turn of events.

"Who are you working for?" he called to the pilot.

"Just doing a job," Grayson called back. "Delivering a package. You want explanations, I don't have them-I dare say the man on the ground will have plenty."

"Where are you taking me?"

Grayson laughed, as if he were taking what pleasure he could in holding on to his petty secrets. "You'll see soon enough," he promised.

Damon abandoned the fruitless inquisition for the time being, instructing himself to take more careful stock of his situation.

He could see Maui away to port, and he assumed that if he were seated on the other side of the plane he'd be able to see Lanai as well, but there was nothing directly below but the Pacific. Damon's knowledge of the local geography was annoyingly vague, but he figured that on their present heading-which seemed to be slightly east of south-they'd be over Kahoolawe at much the same time that they ought to have been coming down at Honolulu. If they kept going twice as long they might eventually hit the west coast of Hawaii. How many other islands there might be to which they might be headed Damon had no idea, but there were probably several tiny ones and the plane was small enough to land on any kind of strip.

He tried to make a list of the possibilities. Who might want him out of the way badly enough to bribe Grayson? Surely not Operator 101, who had sent him a note inviting him to investigate-nor Rachel Trehaine, who presumably thought of him as an irrelevance. There was, of course, another and more obvious possibility. Karol Kachellek had hired the pilot-it was most probable, therefore, that he had decided that Damon ought to be removed from the field of play until the game was over. Grayson might well have been instructed to take Damon to a place of safety, not merely to keep him from harm but also to keep him from asking any more awkward and embarrassing questions.

Damon had to admit that this was not an unattractive hypothesis, insofar as it suggested that no one was intending to flush out his IT and force him to confess that he was an enemy of humankind, but he felt no

relief. To the contrary, as soon as he had convinced himself of its likelihood he felt exceedingly annoyed. The fact that his foster father might think that he had the right, and also the responsibility, to do such a thing was a terrible slur on his adulthood and his ability to look after himself.

"Whatever Karol's paying you," he shouted to Grayson, "I'll double it if you take me to Honolulu."

"Too late, mate," Grayson shouted back. "I'm on the wrong side of the law now-once you cross the border you have to keep on going. Don't worry-nobody's going to hurt you."

"This is for my own good, is it?"

"We all have to lend one another a helping hand," Grayson told him, perhaps faking his malicious cheerfulness in order to cover up his anxiety at the thought that he was indeed beyond the bounds of the law. "If things work out with the IT fountain of youth, we could all be neighbors for a long, long time."

It was difficult to be patient, or even to try, but Damon had no alternative.

It turned out that the journey wasn't that much longer than it would have been had Grayson actually gone to Honolulu, but the plane eventually passed beyond the southern tip of Lanai and missed Kahoolawe too. The pilot headed for a much smaller and more densely forested island top to the west of Kahoolawe. It was dominated by what appeared to be a single volcanic peak, but Damon wasn't convinced that it was genuine.

Back in the early twenty-first century the precursors of today's self-styled continental engineers had enjoyed a honeymoon of fashionability by virtue of the greenhouse effect and the perceived threat of a significant rise in the world's sea level. When global warming hadn't produced a new Deluge, even in Shanghai and the South Seas, they'd deflected the results of their research into building artificial islands aimed at the tourist trade. Such islands had initially had to be anchored to subsurface structures by mechanical holdfasts because Leon Gantz's techniques of biotech cementation hadn't been around in those days, but anyone who cared to employ gantzers on a sufficiently lavish scale could now make better provision. Building mountains underwater was just as easy as building them anywhere else. The ocean hereabouts was full of deep trenches but it wasn't uniformly deep, and even if it were it would only make the task of securing new land more expensive, not more difficult in technical terms.

Even natural islands, Damon knew, had often been personal property back in the buccaneering days of classical capitalism- but all the artificial islands had been owned by the corps or individuals who had put them in place, and probably still were. That didn't exclude them from the Net, and hence from the global village, but it made them relatively easy to protect from spy eyes and the like. If there was anywhere on Earth that secrets could be kept in reasonable safety, this was probably one of them.

The plane came down on an airstrip even tinier than the one from which it had taken off, gantzed out of dark earth in a narrow clearing between dense tropical thickets.

When Steve Grayson came back to release Damon from the trick harness he was carrying a gun: a wide-barreled pepperbox. If it was loaded with orthodox shot it would be capable of inflicting widespread but superficial injuries, but it couldn't be classed as a lethal weapon. Were it to go off, Damon would lose a lot of blood very quickly, and it would certainly put him out of action for a while, but his nanomachines would be able to seal off the wounds without any mortal damage being done.

"No need to worry, Mr. Hart," the stout man said. "You'll be safe here until the carnival's over."

"Safe from whom?" Damon asked as politely as he could. "What exactly is the carnival? Who's doing all this?"

He wasn't surprised when he received no answers to any of these questions-but the expression which flitted across Grayson's face suggested that the pilot wasn't just tormenting him. Damon wondered whether Grayson had any more idea than he did why he had been paid to bring his prisoner here, or what might be going on.

Damon wondered whether his streetfighting skills might be up to the task of knocking the gun out of the Australian's hand and then kicking the shit out of his corpulent form, but he decided not to try. He didn't know how to activate and instruct the plane's automatic systems, let alone fly it himself, so he had no way of escaping the island even if he could disarm and disable the man.

The air outside the plane was oppressively humid. Damon allowed himself to be guided across the landing strip. A jeep, very similar to the one Karol had used to drive him to the airstrip on Molokai, was parked in the shadow of a thick clump of trees.

A man was waiting in the driving seat of the jeep. He was as short as the pilot but he was much slimmer and-if appearances could be trusted-much older. His skin was the kind of dark coffee color which most people who lived in tropical regions preferred. He didn't have a gun in his hand, but Damon wasn't prepared to assume that he didn't have one at all.

"I'm truly sorry about this, Mr. Hart," the man in the jeep said, in what seemed to Damon to be an overly punctilious English accent, "but we weren't sure that we could persuade you to come here of your own accord and the matter is urgent. Until we can get to the people who have Arnett everyone connected with your family may be in danger." Turning to the pilot he added: "You'd better go quickly, Mr. Grayson. Take the plane to Hilo- then make yourself scarce, just in case."

"Who are you?" Damon demanded as the Australian obediently turned away and headed back to his cockpit.

"Get in, Mr. Hart," the thin man said. "My name is Rajuder Singh. I've known your foster parents for a long time, but I doubt that any of them ever mentioned me. I'm only support staff."

"Did Karol Kachellek arrange this?"

"It's for your own protection. I know how you must feel about it, but it really is a necessary precaution. Please get in, Mr. Hart."

Damon climbed into the passenger seat of the vehicle and settled himself, suppressing his reflexive urge to offer violent resistance to what was being done to him. The jeep glided into a narrow gap in the trees and was soon deep in a ragged forest of neocycads, thin-boled mock conifers, and a dozen other species that Damon couldn't classify at all. The road was narrow but it didn't seem to have any potholes. The island was presumably equipped with a ready supply of men with shovels and buckets, although none was in evidence now.

The forest was quiet, after the fashion of artificially regenerated forests everywhere; the trees, genetically engineered for rapid growth in the unhelpful soil, were not fitted as yet to play host to the overelaborate fauna which ancient tropical forests had entertained before the logger holocaust. A few tiny insects

splashed on the windshield of the jeep as it moved through the gathering night, but the only birds whose cries could be heard were seabirds.

"You mustn't blame Dr. Kachellek, Mr. Hart," Rajuder Singh told him blandly. "He had to make a decision in a hurry. He didn't expect you to come to Molokai. Our people should be able to bring the situation under control, given time, but we don't yet know who we're up against and things have moved a little too fast for comfort. He was right to do what he did-I'm afraid that you're in more danger than you know, and it might not have been a good idea for you to arrive in Los Angeles on a scheduled flight. I'll show you why in a few minutes' time."

"Who, exactly, are our people?" Damon wanted to know.

Rajuder Singh smiled. "Friends and allies," he said unhelpfully. "There aren't so many of us left, nowadays, but we still keep the faith."

"Conrad Helier's faith?"

"That's right, Mr. Hart. You'd be one of us yourself, I suppose, if you hadn't chosen to digress."

"To digress? That assumes that I'll be back on track, someday."

Rajuder Singh's only answer to that was a gleaming smile.

"Are you saying that there's some kind of conspiracy involving my foster parents?" Damon asked, unable to keep the aggression from filtering back into his voice. "Some kind of grand plan in which you and Karol and Eveline are all involved?"

"We're just a group of friends and coworkers," the dark-skinned man replied lightly. "No more than that-but someone seems to be attacking us, and we have to protect our interests."

"Might Surinder Nahal be involved with the people attacking you?"

"It's difficult to believe that, but we really don't know yet. Until we do know, it's necessary to be careful. This is a very bad time-but that's presumably why our unknown adversaries chose this particular moment for their assault."

Damon remembered that Karol Kachellek had been equally insistent that this was a "very bad time." Why, he wondered again, was the present moment any worse than any other time?

The sun had climbed high into the clear blue sky and Damon was finding its heat horribly oppressive by the time the vehicle reached its destination. The destination in question was a sizable bungalow surrounded by a flower garden. Damon was oddly relieved to observe that the roof was topped by an unusually large satellite dish. However remote this place might be it was an integral part of the Web; all human civilization was its neighborhood. The flowers were reassuring too, by virtue of the orderly layout of their beds and the sweet odors they secreted. There were insects aplenty here, including domestic bees.

Rajuder Singh showed Damon through the double door of the bungalow into a spacious living room. When Damon opened his mouth to speak, though, the slim man held up his hand. He swiftly crossed the room to a wall-mounted display screen, beckoning Damon to follow.

"This is the same netboard which carried Operator one-oh-one's earlier messages," Rajuder Singh said while his nimble fingers brought the screen to life.

Damon stared dumbly at the crimson words which appeared there, reading them three times before he accepted, reluctantly, that they really did say what they seemed to say.

He had not known what to expect, but he could never have expected this. It was as terrible as it was absurd.

The message read:

CONRAD HELIER IS NOT DEAD

CONRAD HELIER NOW USES THE NAME "DAMON HART"

"DAMON HART" IS NAMED AN ENEMY OF MANKIND

FIND AND DESTROY "DAMON HART"

-OPERATOR 101

Fourteen

Madoc Tamlin had had no alternative but to return to his apartment to gather the equipment he needed for his expedition, but he had known that the necessity was unfortunate.

"I want to go with you," said Diana Caisson, in a tone which suggested that she intended to have what she wanted no matter what objections Madoc Tamlin might raise. "You owe me that. Damon owes me that."

"I really need someone here to man the phone," Madoc lied. "This business is moving too fast and it's getting seriously weird. If you want to help Damon, here's where you'd be most useful."

"I've been manning your stupid phone for two solid days," Diana told him. "What's the point if you're always out of touch? This is the first time I've clapped eyes on you since we went to visit that idiot boy in the hospital, and I don't intend letting you out of my sight until I get an explanation of what's going on and a chance to help. You owe-"

"I don't owe you anything!" Madoc protested, appalled by her temerity. "Not even explanations. I only let you stay here for old time's sake-you were supposed to be gone by now. You don't have any claim on me at all."

Diana wasn't impressed. "Damon Hart owes me explanations. I lived with him for nearly two years. I never knew that he was Conrad Helier's son, and I certainly never knew that he was Conrad Helier himself, and an enemy of mankind. The day after I gave up trying to make our relationship work I found out I'd been living with a trunkful of mysteries, and they've been getting stranger and stranger with every hour that passes. Two years, Madoc! I want to know what I wasted my two years on, and if you're Damon's legman in Los Angeles you're the one who has to start paying me off. Wherever you go, I want to go-and whatever you find out, I want to know."

"This wasn't part of the deal," Madoc told her. "I let you stay for a couple of nights when you walked out on Damon-that's not the same as taking you into partnership. One of the things Damon is paying me for is discretion. He doesn't want anyone knowing what I find out, and he'd certainly include you in that company."

"It's okay for me to carry his messages," she pointed out. "It's okay for me to pass on messages from your pet streetfighter. What's not okay for me to know? What is it that your apprentice Webwalkers have turned up that even Interpol isn't supposed to know?"

The problem, Madoc knew, was time. What Interpol didn't know yet, they might very soon find out-and they'd find out all the sooner if he were fool enough to start blabbing to Diana Caisson, even in the privacy of his apartment or his car. It was easier for him to turn up evidence of work done through illegal channels than it was for officers of the law, but this case was now a triple disappearance, with a rich icing of crazier-than-usual Eliminator antics. The police would be making a very big effort now, even if they hadn't before. Whoever had stirred up this hornet's nest had done a thorough job. He had no time to argue with Diana, and the only way to shut her up was to give in on something.

Anyway, he rationalized, if he forced her to stay behind that would only increase the danger that she might do something really inconvenient by way of getting her own back-like calling up the LAPD and sending them after him.

"It could be dangerous," he said, knowing that it wouldn't serve as a deterrent.

"It'll probably be less dangerous," she countered, "if we both know exactly what we're trying to do. What have you found?"

Before answering, Madoc collected the last of the crude mechanical tools he'd come back to gather. The men who had broken into Silas Arnett's house hadn't needed cutting gear and crowbars, but Madoc hadn't got the kind of technical backup they must have had, and he was heading for a different kind of house. If it was a fortress, it was likely to be a brute fortress, not a sophisticated affair of anxious eyes, clever locks, and mazy software. He was able to shut Diana up with a gesture-but only because the gesture implied that he'd pick up the conversation later.

Finally, he led her to the door of the apartment and let her follow him out. He signaled once again that he couldn't speak, for fear of the eyes and ears with which the walls were undoubtedly sown, and she had perforce to wait until they got into the car. Even then, he insisted on bringing the vehicle out into the street before relaxing slightly.

It was midmorning and the traffic was well below its daytime peak, but it didn't matter-he wasn't headed downtown.

When Diana was certain that he had run out of excuses she repeated her last question, richly salted with

seething impatience.

"An address way out east," he told her. "It's not a million miles away from the alleys, but it's not gang turf. Above the ground it still looks derelict, but the word is that some heavy gantzing's been done underneath by way of excavation. The hole's been set up for use as a black-box drop site, supposedly untraceable. Nothing's authentically untraceable, but no one's had a reason yet to send hooks into this one. Harriet's boys tipped her off that something was on, though, and she dug up some background on it, working back from the cowboy contractors who did the gantzing."

"I thought the idea of gantzing was to raise buildings up," Diana objected, "not to dig holes."

"The neobacteria that cement walls together are only part of the gantzing set," Madoc told her wearily. "You have to have others that can unstick things, else you wouldn't be able to shape the product. Moleminers use the unstickers to burrow through solid rock. It's not the ideal way to dig out a permanent cellar or tunnel but it does the trick-and you can use the cementers to harden the walls and ceilings, making sure they'll bear the load. Anyway, that's not the point. Even moonlight labor has to be paid for. The title deeds to the property are locked up tight, but there's a trail leading back from the people who worked on it to one of the people Damon told me to ask about: the one who can't be located in San Diego, Surinder Nahal."

"You think these underground workings might be where Silas Arnett's being held? The Praill girl too?"

"Maybe. Maybe it's something else entirely. All I know is that I need to take a look, and there aren't any spy eyes I can use. The Old Lady dug up some information about the security they installed, but being gantzers rather than silicon men it's mostly solid. Not much of a challenge to a man of my talents, but I guess they didn't want to bring in state-of-the-art stuff because putting a top-quality electronic fence around a supposedly derelict building would look suspicious in itself."

"So we're going to break in and look around?" Diana said, stressing the we to make sure that he understood that she had no intention of waiting in the car.

"If we can."

"Suppose we get into trouble? Is anybody going to come looking for us? Will anyone know where to look?"

"It's not that kind of deal, Di-but if we were to vanish from human ken, the Old Lady would put two and two together. She'd tell Damon."

"Damon? Not the police."

"He's the man who's paying us-and one of the things he's paying for is discretion."

"What else have you found out?"

"Like I said," Madoc retorted obstinately, "one of the things he's paying for is discretion."

"If he'd been discreet enough not to use my body in his pornotapes, I wouldn't be here," Diana said, "but he did and I am. When he talked to me he said it was no big secret, but that was probably a lie. Is Damon really Conrad Helier, like the last notice said?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Madoc said. "I knew him when he was barely starting to shave and I nursed him practically day by day from his first fight to his last. Believe me, I've seen enough of him over the last ten years to know that he isn't a hundred and thirty-seven years old trying to pass for twenty-six. He's exactly what he appears to be-and that includes the fact that he's Damon Hart and not Damon Helier anymore. If Operator one-oh-one wants some lunatic to take a shot at Damon, it's not because anyone thinks he's an enemy of mankind unworthy of immortality-it's because Operator one-oh-one now thinks Damon may be dangerous to him. Maybe he knows that the Old Lady and I have been sniffing around-maybe he thinks that I'm getting too close for comfort."

"If he thinks that," Diana pointed out, suffering a sudden attack of logic, "we're probably riding straight into a trap."

"Do you want to get out?" Madoc asked. "If you do, better do it now. The badlands start at the end of the street."

"I'm sticking to you like gantzing glue," she told him stiffly. She didn't believe what he'd said about the Operator getting spooked because he and the Old Lady had got too close. Neither did he-but he'd had to say something, to cover up the fact that he hadn't the slightest idea why anyone would draw Damon into the game and then make a show of setting him up for target practice.

As they passed from the well-tended streets into an unreclaimed district Madoc slowed down slightly and checked for signs of pursuit-but when he found none he speeded up again. If Damon hadn't sent an e-mail canceling the instruction that Madoc should meet him at the airport Madoc would have been in a quandary about whether to delay the adventure, but since Damon had decided to stay away for a while longer Madoc felt that the whole burden of action was on his shoulders, and that he had to press on as quickly as possible.

"I'm here because I care, you know," Diana said defensively. "I walked out on Damon because he hurt me, but it was as much for his good as for mine-to make him see what's happening to him. I still love him."

"I'd never have guessed," Madoc muttered, with savage irony.

"You don't understand," she said flatly.

"That's a matter of opinion. I should have left you tied and gagged at my place. If I had any sense..."

"If you had any sense, Maddie," she told him, "you'd have a nice safe job with PicoCon-an honest job, with prospects. There's no real profit in living on the edge, you know. It might be more fun, but it won't take you anywhere in the long run. The day of the buccaneers is long gone."

This new argumentative tack was even more irritating than the one she'd set aside. "Did Damon tell you that?" Madoc said acidly. "Did you consider the possibility that he might have been trying to convince himself? There's always scope for buccaneers. Rumor has it that the best and boldest of the old ones are still alive, if not exactly kicking. Adam Zimmerman never died, so they say-and if Conrad Helier didn't, my bet is that he's sleeping right next door." He realized, belatedly, that he had been so concerned to score the debating point-off Damon rather than Diana-that he had let discretion slip a little.

Diana didn't seem to realize that she'd just got a partial answer to her question about what else he'd found out while digging on Damon's behalf. "Who's Adam Zimmerman?" she asked, attacking the more basic question.

"The guy who set up the Ahasuerus Foundation. Known in his own day-or shortly thereafter-as the Man Who Cornered the Future or the Man Who Stole the World. Born some time before the turn of the millennium, vanished some time after."

"But he'd be more than two hundred years old," Diana objected. "The oldest man alive only passed a hundred and sixty a year or two back-the news tapes are always harping on about the record being broken."

"The record only applies to those alive and kicking," Madoc told her. "Back in the twentieth century, people who wanted to live forever knew they weren't going to make it to the foot of the escalator. Some elected to be put in the freezer as soon as they were dead, looking forward to the day when it would be possible to resurrect them and give them back their youth. Multimillionaires who couldn't take it with them sometimes spent their dotage pouring money into longevity research, stone-age rejuve technologies and susan-that's short for suspended animation. Long-term freezing did a lot of damage, you see-very difficult to thaw out tissues without mangling all or most of the cells. The tale they tell is that Zimmerman tried to ride a susan escalator to the foot of the emortality escalator, commissioning the foundation he established to keep him alive and ageless by whatever means they could, until the time becomes ripe for him to wake up and drink from the fount of youth. Now that's bold buccaneering, wouldn't you say."

"And you think Conrad Helier went to Ahasuerus in search of a similar deal?" Diana said, picking up the point which he shouldn't have let fall. "You think he might be still alive, and that if he is, that's where Ahasuerus comes in."

"I don't think anything," Madoc said, wishing that he could sound more convincing, "but if there's some kind of interesting link between Ahasuerus and Helier, that would be a candidate. It's impossible to say-Ahasuerus is stitched up very tight indeed. They're very keen on privacy. It's partly a hangover from the days when they faced a lot of hostility because of their founder's reputation, but it's more than just a habit. Who knows how many famous men might be lurking in the vaults, sleeping their way to immortality because they were born too early to make it while awake? I'd be willing to bet that there wouldn't be one in ten that the Eliminators would consider worthy of immortality."

For once, Diana had no reply ready. She seemed to be thinking over the implications of this intriguing item of urban folklore, which obviously hadn't come her way before. It hadn't come Madoc's way either, but the Old Lady had a long memory.

It was perhaps as well, Madoc thought, that Diana had finally fallen silent. There was work to be done, and if she intended to play her part she'd need to keep her head.

Madoc stopped the car, then checked the deserted street and its glassless windows very carefully, searching for signs of movement or occupation. There was no sign that anything was amiss. At night there would have been rats, cats, and dogs roaming around, but at noonday those kinds of scavengers stayed out of sight.

He reached under his seat to pick up the bag he'd brought from the apartment, opening it briefly to pull out a couple of the items he'd stashed within it.

"Are we here?" Diana asked-and then, without waiting for an answer, added: "Is that a crowbar?" Obviously she'd had her mind on higher things while he'd been getting the stuff together.

"No," he said, "and yes. That is, no, we still have a couple of blocks to walk, on tiptoe-and yes, it's a

crowbar. Sometimes scanners and slashcards are second best to brute force. You do know how to tiptoe, don't you?"

"I can be as quiet as you," she assured him, "but it seems silly to tiptoe in broad daylight."

"Just go carefully," Madoc said, with a slight sigh, "and carry this." He gave her a flamecutter, refusing to listen to her protest that it was at least three times as heavy as the crowbar and twice as heavy as whatever remained in the bag.

Madoc got out of the car and closed the door quietly. Diana did likewise. He set off along the rubble-littered pavement, treading as carefully as he could. She followed, matching his studied quietness.

When they got to the particular ruin that he was looking for, Madoc set about examining its interior with scrupulous patience. There were no obvious signs of recent gantzing on the crumbling walls, but a host of tiny details inside the shell revealed to Madoc's forewarned eye that this was not the rubble heap it pretended to be. In a corner of the room that was furthest away from the street he found the head of a flight of stone steps leading down into what had been a cellar, and once he'd eased aside the charred planks that were blocking the way down it was easy enough to see that the door at the bottom was perfectly solid. When he'd tiptoed down to it he found that it had two locks, one of which was electronic and one of which was crudely mechanical. Madoc put the crowbar aside for the moment and set to work with a scanner.

It took two minutes of wizardry to release the electronic lock, and five of patient leverage to dislodge the screws holding the mechanical lock. Madoc eased the door open and stepped gingerly inside, checking the corridor within before letting Diana in behind him. No attempt had been made to conceal the fact that the walls had been recently gantzed.

When Diana had pulled the door closed behind her Madoc plucked a flashlight from his satchel and switched it on. The flashlight showed him that the corridor was at least twenty meters long, and that it had another door at the further end. There were several alcoves let into the walls, which might or might not hide further doors. Fixing the field of illumination on the floor ahead of him, Madoc began to move deeper into what now seemed to him to be an unexpectedly complex network of cellars. He figured that all the inner doors would be locked at least as securely as the one through which they'd come, and that it might require considerable effort to locate the one behind which the excavation's real treasures were concealed. As things turned out, however, the first shadowy covert let into the corridor wall turned out to have no door within it-it was simply a portal giving uninterrupted access to a room about three meters by four.

The floor of the room was even more glittery than the sand-gantzed exterior of the PicoCon building; it looked almost as if it had been compounded out of broken glass. Stretched out on the gleaming surface, with both arms awkwardly outstretched, was a blackened humanoid shape which Madoc mistook at first for some kind of weird sculpture. It was, in fact, Diana who first leaped to the more ominous conclusion, which Madoc deduced when her sharp intake of breath hissed in his right ear.

"Oh shit," he said. He had seen dead bodies before-he had even seen burned bodies before-but he had never seen human remains as badly charred as these. A little of the ash that had once been flesh had dusted onto the floor, as if the pitch-dipped skeleton had shed an eerie shadow. On the corpse's tarry breast, however, was something innocent of any fire damage: a VE pak, placed atop the dead man's heart. If it had been resting on a tabletop, Madoc would have whisked it away into an inside pocket without a moment's delay, but he hesitated to take it from where it had been so carefully set. It looked uncomfortably like bait in a trap.

"Do you think that's Silas Arnett?" Diana asked. Her voice fractured as she spoke the words, so that the whisper became louder than she had intended.

"I hope not," Madoc said-but he had no idea who to hope it might be instead. He might have hoped that it was an ancient corpse which had lain undiscovered for years, but his nose would have told him otherwise even if the floor on which it lay and the object set upon it had not been products of contemporary technology.

They were both still hovering in the doorless entrance, uncertain as to whether they dared to approach and crouch down to examine the body, when the door at the far end of the corridor opened with a considerable crash. Madoc instantly stepped back, using the flashlight to see what was happening.

Two men had come through the door: men with guns in their hands.

By the time he heard their warnings and recognized the weapons they were holding out before them, Madoc's panic had already been leavened by a certain relief. It could have been worse. It could have been the people who had killed the poor bastard stretched out on the floor and torched his corpse. Compared with men capable of such an act as that, the police could only seem gentle. Madoc had been under arrest a dozen times before, and had survived every time.

Obediently, he dropped the flashlight on the floor of the corridor, and the tool kit too. He even raised his hands before stepping back into the room from which he'd just emerged.

"Well," he muttered to Diana, who was trying to see over his shoulder, "you wanted in, and you're in. I only hope you can talk your way out again."

The two cops moved confidently forward to complete the arrest. As soon as they had relaxed, Madoc grabbed Diana, maneuvered her through the empty doorway, and shoved her with all the force he could muster along the corridor toward the oncoming cops. She had raised her own arms, and her hands grappled for purchase as she cannoned into the two men and tried to stop herself falling.

While the cops tried to catch her, and to save themselves from being bowled over, Madoc plucked the VE pak off the chest of the blackened corpse with his left hand while the right groped for the crowbar. Once he had both items securely within his grip he moved forward with a ruthless determination befitting the trainer and master of the best streetfighters in the city.

As he had told Diana, gentler methods were sometimes second best to simple brute force. He hoped that this would prove to be one of those times.

PART THREE

Brute Force and Gentler Methods

Fifteen

During the hours when the last vestiges of his internal technology had tried their damndest to maintain some semblance of function Silas Arnett had felt like a turtle floating beneath the surface of a stagnant pond. It was as if his self-consciousness had been immersed in murky, cloying depths which lay upon him like a horrid dead weight, compacting his bodily mass.

In the meantime, his weary and leaden eyes had looked out into a very different world: a world that was all light and color and action where there seemed to be no weight at all.

Now, he felt that he was the same turtle rudely stripped of its shell. His frontier with the outer world was exposed to all manner of assaults and horribly sensitive. He could hardly believe that thousands of generations of human beings had lived their entire lives becalmed in flesh as awkward and as vulnerable as this. The novelty of the experience had already worn off-and the process of psychological readaptation was neither as radical nor as difficult as he had feared-but the sensitivity remained.

No matter how still Silas sat, simple existence had become a torrent of discomforts. The straps at his wrists and ankles chafed his skin, but that was not the worst of it. The worst of it was that he could not scratch his itches, although the fact that he could not alter his position save by imperceptible shifts of weight and strain was almost as bad.

It was torture of a kind, but the wonder of it was that it was not real torture. No pincers had been applied to his nipples, no electric shocks to his genitals, no hot irons to his belly, no slivers of bamboo to his fingernails. It was as if he had been prepared for the operating theater only to discover that the surgeon had been called away ... and had left no word as to the likely time of his return. He had been thoroughly insulted, in body and in mind, but no dire injury had as yet been added to the insult.

What made this all the more puzzling was the tape he had been shown of his "trial," whose maker had taken the trouble to include one very audible-and rather realistic-scream, and had made some effort to imply that others had been edited out of the package.

The trial scene was gone now, and Silas was in a very different virtual environment-one which mimicked the texture of visual reality reasonably faithfully. The room in which his prison chair now seemed to be standing was also mostly white. It had white walls and a cream carpet, and its ceiling was uniformly lit by a gentle artificial bioluminescence which had very little color in it.

Silas knew that the universe of virtual reality was overabundantly well-equipped with white rooms. Far too many of the people who specialized in VE design cultivated a thorough understanding of the

hardware and software they were using while neglecting the development of their own creative imagination and aesthetic sensitivity. It was becoming routine for software engineers and "interior decorators" to form up into "renaissance teams," although youngsters like Damon Hart always figured that they could do everything themselves. Silas did not assume, however, that this particular white room was a convenient fiction. Life always imitated art, and he could easily believe that the place of his confinement had been decorated in imitation of an elementary VE.

The man who stood before Silas in the white room was not a judge. He was wearing Conrad Helier's face, but any halfway competent VE engineer could have contrived that there was a vast reservoir of archive film which could be plundered for the purpose of making a template. "Conrad" was wearing a white lab coat, but that seemed blatantly incongruous to Silas. Conrad had never been a man for white coats.

"I don't understand," Silas said. "The trial tape even looks like a fake. You didn't need me at all. You could have put that farce together without any of the snippets of actual speech that you borrowed. If you already knew what you were going to put in my so-called confession, why did you bother throwing all those questions at me?"

He knew, even as he made this speech, that it was ridiculously optimistic to suppose that the fact that he had not been hurt yet meant that he was not going to be hurt at all, but he was telling the simple truth when he said that he didn't understand.

"It's useful to have some authentic footage on which to build," said the man in the Conrad Helier mask, in Conrad Helier's voice, "but the only thing I really needed from you was your absence from the world for the three days which it would take to flush out your IT and reduce you to the common clay of unaugmented human flesh."

"Why have you bothered to do that," Silas wanted to know, "if you didn't intend to use real screams in your little melodrama? Do you intend to interrogate me under torture, or are you just making the point that you could have if you'd wanted to?"

"There you are," said the man who was not Conrad Helier. "You are beginning to understand. I knew you could. If only you'd been able to understand a little earlier, all this might not have been necessary. The world has changed, you see—a whole century has passed since 2093. It may have been unlike any other century in history, by virtue of the fact that many of the people who really mattered in 2093 are still alive in 2193, but it still packed in more extravagant changes than any previous century. Whatever the future brings, it will never produce such sweeping changes again. You've changed too, Silas. You probably seem to yourself to be exactly the same person you were at twenty-six, but that's an understandable illusion. If you could only look at yourself from a detached viewpoint, the changes would be obvious."

"So what?"

The fake Conrad Helier was already standing at ease, but now he put his hands into his pockets. In the sixty years that he had known him, Silas had never seen Conrad Helier put his hands into his pockets.

"It used to be reckoned that people inevitably became more conservative as they got older," the man in the white coat said, with only the faintest hint of irony in his earnest expression. "Young men with virile bodies and idealistic minds, it was said, easily embraced Utopian schemes for the radical transformation of society. Old men, by contrast, only wanted to hang on to the things they already had; even those who hadn't made fortunes wanted to hang on to the things they were used to, because they were creatures of

habit. The people who spoke out against technologies of longevity-and there were people like that, as I'm sure you can remember-often argued that a world ruled by the very old would become stagnant and sterile, fearful of further change. They prophesied that a society of old people would be utterly lacking in potency and progressive zeal, devoid of any sense of adventure.

"They were wrong, of course. Their mistake was to equate getting older with nearing the end. The old became conservative not because of the increasing number of the years they'd lived but because of the dwindling number of the years that still lay before them. The young, whose futures were still to be made, had a strong vested interest in trying to make the world better as quickly as was humanly possible; the old, who had little or no future left, only wanted to preserve what they could of their old and comfortable selves. Things are very different now. Now, the prospect of true emortality lies before us, like the light at the end of a long dark tunnel. Not everyone will make it all the way to the light, but many of us will and we all live in hope. The old, in fact, understand that far better than the young.

"The young used to outnumber the old, but they don't now and never will again; the young are rare now, a protected species. Although the future which stretches before them seems limitless, it doesn't seem to them to be theirs. Even if they can still envisage themselves as the inevitable inheritors of the earth, the age at which they will come into their inheritance seems a very long way off and likely to be subject to further delays. It's hardly surprising, therefore, that the young are more resentful now than they have ever been before. It is the old who now have the more enthusiastic and more constructive attitude to the future; they expect not only to live in it, but also to own it, to be masters of its infinite estates."

"I know all this," Silas said sullenly, wishing that his itches were not so defiantly unscratchable.

"You know it," said the man masked as Conrad Helier, "but you haven't understood it. How, if you understood it, could you ever have thought of retirement? How, if you understood it, could you waste your time in pointless and undignified sexual encounters with the authentically young?"

"I can live my own life any way I choose," Silas told his accuser coldly. "I'm not just old-I'm also free."

"That's the point," said the ersatz Helier. "That's why you're here. You're not free. Nobody is, who hopes and wants to live forever. Because, you see, if we're to live forever, we have to live together. We're dependent on one another, not just in the vulgar sense that the division of labor makes it possible to produce all the necessities of life but in the higher sense that human life consists primarily of communication with others, augmented, organized, and made artful by all the media we can devise. We're social beings, Silas-not because we have some kind of inbuilt gregarious instinct but because we simply can't do anything worthwhile or be anything worthwhile outside of society. That's why our one and only objective in life-all the more so for everyone who's a hundred and fifty going on a hundred and fifty thousand-ought to be the Herculean task of making a society as rich and as complex and as rewarding as we possibly can."

"The only reason I'm not free," Silas replied tersely, "is that I've been strapped to a fucking chair by a fucking maniac."

Conrad Helier's face registered great disappointment. "Your attitude is as stupidly anachronistic as your language," he said- and went out like a switched-off light, along with the virtual environment of which he was a part. Silas was left entirely to himself.

Silas was stubbornly glad that he had had an effect on his interrogator, but the effect itself was far from rewarding. In the darkness and the silence he was alone with his discomforts, and his discomforts were further magnified by lack of distraction. He was also acutely aware of the fact that he had failed to obtain

answers to any of the questions which confronted him-most urgently of all, what would happen to him now that Operator 101 had released his slanders onto the Web?

Mercifully-although mercy may not have been the motive- he was not left in the dark and the silence for long.

His senses of sight and hearing were now engaged by a kaleidoscopic patchwork of fragments excerpted from old and nearly new VE tapes, both documentary and drama. If there was any pattern of relevance in the order in which they were presented to him, he could not discern it-but he became interested in spite of that, not merely in the individual snatches that had been edited together but in the aesthetic experience of the sequence.

He "walked" on the surface of Mars, surveying the roseate desert and looking up into the tinted sky at the glaring daystars. He saw the rounded domes where the human Martians lived and watched the glass facets sparkle and glint as he changed his position. Then, on the horizon, he "saw" the crazy-tale castles of the Mars of obsolete dreams, the skycars riding the imagination-thickened air-and dramatic music crashed through the brief, golden silence....

He saw earth-moving machines on the fringe of the Australian superdesert, laying out the great green starter plane which would begin the business of soil manufacture, bridging the desiccation gap which had deadened the land in spite of all life's earlier attempts to reclaim it. A sonorous voice-over pumped out relentless adspcak about the technical expertise behind the project: glory, glory, glory to the heroes of the genetic revolution....

He saw a gang fight in the derelict suburban wasteland of a city he couldn't name: young men costumed and painted like crazy fetishists, wielding knives and razors, eyes wild with adrenalin and synthetic ecstasy, living on and by the edge. He watched the vivid blood spurt from wounds, and he winced with sympathy because he knew full well that these would-be savages must be equipped with relatively primitive internal technology, which provided elementary protection against permanent injury but left them horribly vulnerable to pain and the risk of death. He heard their bestial cries, their wordless celebration of their defiance of civilization and all its comforts, all its protective guarantees....

It was as if the virtual aspect of the life of modern man were being condensed into a stream of images. Silas couldn't help but feel annoyed about the fact that his captors seemed hell-bent on educating him, but the process had a curious fascination of its own. Much of the imagery was, of course, "reality-based"-videotapes of actual events reformatted for VE playback, sometimes in 2-D, sometimes in 3-D-but even in the documentary material, reformatted footage was juxtaposed and mingled with synthesized material produced by programmers. Today's programmers were almost good enough to synthesize lifelike fictions, especially when they used templates borrowed from reality-based footage which could be mechanically animated and subtly changed without losing their photographic appearance.

With only a hood at his disposal, Silas couldn't obtain the full benefit of such illusions, most of which were designed to provide tactile sensations with the aid of a full-body synthesis suit, but the detachment that was heir to limitation made it all the more difficult to tell the reformatted real from the ersatz.

Silas saw himself standing by Conrad Helier's side, listening to the older man saying: "We must regard this new plague not as a catastrophe but as a challenge. It is not, as the Gaian Mystics would have us believe, the vengeance of Mother Earth upon her rapists and polluters, and no matter how fast and how far it spreads it cannot and will not destroy the species. Its advent requires a monumental effort from us, but we are capable of making that effort...."

He saw two women, naked and oiled, caressing one another sinuously, engaged in carefully choreographed mutual masturbation, first with fingers and then with tongues, moving ceaselessly, putting on an ingeniously artful and tantalizing display for voyeurs. The soundtrack was soft music, overlaid by heavy breathing and gasps of simulated ecstasy, and the flesh of the two women seemed to be taking on a life of its own, a strange glow. Their faces were changing, exchanging features; they seemed to flow and merge, as though the two were becoming one as the carefully faked climax approached....

Silas recognized this as one of his foster son's compositions, as crudely and garishly libidinous as one might expect of a young man's imagination. He was glad when it was replaced by scenes from a food factory, where tissue cultures were harvested and processed with mechanical efficiency and hygiene by robot knives and robot packagers.

After that there was more Conrad Helier, this time in close-up-which meant that it was probably faked. "We must be sure," the probably fake Conrad was saying, "that our motives are pure. We must do this not to secure an advantage for ourselves, but for the sake of the world. It is time, to set aside, for the last time, the logic of the selfish gene, and to proclaim the triumph of altruistic self-awareness. The first children of the New Utopia must be not the children of an elite; they must be the children of everyman. If we ourselves are to have children we must allocate ourselves the lowest priority, not the highest."

The viewpoint swung around to bring Eveline Hywood's face into embarrassingly intimate focus. "It's the privilege of gods to move in mysterious ways," she said laconically. "Let's not tie ourselves down with self-administered commandments that we'll surely have occasion to break and break again."

Conrad Helier's disciples had, in fact, bound themselves with edicts and promises-and had kept them, after a fashion. Silas believed that he had kept them better than most, in spite of the heresies which had crept upon his mind and condemned him, in the end, to confusion. He had kept almost all his promises, if only in order to ensure that whatever else he lost, he would have clean hands.

Now he was looking out at the factory again, at the robot butchers working clinically, tirelessly, and altruistically for the greater good of ambitious humankind. He presumed that the image was meant to be symbolic, but he refused to try to figure out exactly what it was symbolic of, and why it had been laid before him now.

The robot butchers tirelessly plied their gleaming instruments for a few seconds more, and then dissolved into a vision of cars racing through city streets, speeded up until they were little more than colored blurs, racing ceaselessly past.

But it is true, he reflected, that some of those of us who are left over from the old world remain anchored to that world by our habits of mind. Some of the old haven't yet become accustomed to the new outlook, and perhaps I'm one of them-but we can't be expected to shed the superficialities of our heritage as easily as a snake sheds its skin. We do evolve-but we can't do it overnight. Conrad would have understood that. Whoever is using his face must be younger than Conrad, and younger than me-but not as young as Damon. He surely belongs to the new old, not to the true old.

The scene changed again; this time it was an episode of some popular soap opera, but the characters were mercifully silent. As they exchanged insults and bared their overwrought souls they were rendered impotent and absurd by silence. A girl slapped a man across the face; without the sound track there was no telling why, but the blow wasn't halfhearted. These days, blows rarely were. Nobody pulled their punches for fear of hurting people, because everybody knew that people couldn't be hurt-even "primitives" had some degree of artificial insulation from actual bodily harm. Hardly anyone went entirely unaugmented in the world, and the prevailing view was that if they wanted to do so, they had to accept

the risks.

All the old inhibitions were dying, Silas reminded himself, in an appropriately grim fashion. A radically different spectrum of dos and don'ts was establishing itself in the cities of what would soon be the twenty-third century.

Silas's head, isolated within its own private pocket universe, took off from the cape, mounted atop a huge sleek rocket. His eyes were looking up into the deepening sky, and the sound which filled his ears was a vast, angry, undeniable roar of pure power, pure might.

It went on, and on, and on....

In the end, Silas couldn't help but call out to his tormentors, to beg them to answer his questions, even to lecture him like a recalcitrant schoolboy if they felt the need. He knew as he did it that he was proving them right, demonstrating that the limits of his freedom extended far beyond the straps binding him to his ignominy, but he no longer cared. He wanted and needed to know what they were doing to him, and why, and how long it would last.

He wanted, and needed, to understand, no matter what price he had to pay in patience and humility and craven politeness.

Sixteen

The message was dumped shortly after you boarded the plane at Kaunakakai," Rajuder Singh told Damon, when the import of the words displayed on the screen had had time to sink in. "When Karol decided to send you here instead of Los Angeles he couldn't have foreseen anything as outrageous as this, but it's better proof than any he could have imagined that his instincts were right."

"If he had such faith in his instincts," Damon said sourly, "why didn't he do me the courtesy of explaining what he wanted me to do, and why?"

"He thought that telling you his plan would make it impossible to carry through. He seems to be of the opinion that you always do the opposite of anything he suggests, simply because it's his suggestion."

Damon could understand how Karol Kachellek might have formed that impression over the years, but he felt that it was an injustice nevertheless. The matters on which he had habitually defied Karol in his younger days had all been trivial; he was now an adult and this was not a trivial matter. "It's crazy," he said, referring to the message. "It's completely crazy."

"Yes it is," said the dark-skinned man. "Denials are going out, of course-not just from our people but from Interpol and the doctors who attended the womb in which your embryo developed. Your progress from egg to adult has been mapped as scrupulously as that of any individual in the history of the world. The lie is astonishingly blatant-but that only makes it all the more peculiar. It's attracting public attention

and public discussion, I'm afraid. Together with Silas Arnett's supposed confession, it's getting coverage on the worst kinds of current affairs and talk shows. I suppose any man who lives a hundred and twenty years might expect to make a few enemies, but I can't understand why anyone would want to attack you in this bizarre way. Can you?"

It occurred to Damon that some of the people he had ordered Madoc Tamlin to investigate might have resented the fact-and might possibly be anxious that the buying-power of Conrad Helier's inheritance might pose as great a threat to their plan as Interpol or the friends and allies of Silas Arnett. All he said to Rajuder Singh, however, was: "No, I can't."

"It'll be a nine-day wonder, of course," Singh observed, "if it even lasts that long. Unfortunately, such slanders sometimes linger in the mind even after convincing rebuttals have been put forward. It really was the best course of action to remove you from harm's way as quickly as possible. We're truly sorry that you've been caught up in all this-it really has nothing to do with you."

"What has it to do with?" Damon asked, his voice taut with frustration. "What are you people up to and who wants to stop you? Why is this such a bad time for all this to blow up?"

"I can't tell you what we're doing," Singh said, with a note of apology in his voice that almost sounded sincere, "and we honestly don't know why we're being attacked in this fashion. All I can say is that we're doing everything we can to calm the situation. It can only be a matter of time before Silas is found, and then...."

"I'm not so sure of that," Damon said, cutting short the string of platitudes. "Maybe he will be found and maybe he won't, but finding him and catching the people who took him are two different things. This whole thing may look amateurish and stupid-just typical Eliminator nonsense taken to a new extreme- but it's not. That tape of Silas could have been edited to look real but it was edited to look fake. All the artlessness in this seems to have much subtler thought behind it-and real power too. The kidnapping itself is a case in point-a confusing compound of the brutal and the clever. The same is true of my involvement: one day I'm getting sly messages pushed under my door, the next I'm being publicly denounced in an incredible fashion. In between times, the girl Silas was entertaining is spirited away-but not until after the police have questioned her, investigated her thoroughly, and decided that she's not involved. To add even further to the sum of dissimulation, while Karol Kachellek is busy insisting that there's absolutely nothing for me to worry about he's actually planning to have me bundled up and sent to some stupid mock-volcanic island in the middle of nowhere where even the local ecology is a blatant fake."

"I really am sorry," Rajuder Singh assured him. "Alas, it's not for me to explain matters even if I could. I think that Eveline Hywood might be willing to take your call, though, once we've gone down."

"Down where?"

Damon had so far been under the impression that the room he was in had only three doors, one of them part of a pair. Singh had closed the double doors through which they had entered but two others stood half-open, one offering a glimpse of a bedroom while the other gave access to a narrow corridor leading to a kitchen. Singh now demonstrated the error of Damon's assumption by going to the wall alongside the kitchen door and pressing a hidden switch of some kind. A section of "wall" slid aside to reveal an empty space-presumably an elevator.

"So the mountain's hollow as well as fake," Damon said incredulously. "Down where the magma ought to be there's some kind of secret laboratory, where my father's old research team is laboring away on some project too delicate to be divulged to the world."

"It's not a laboratory," Singh told him. "It's just a hiding place.

There isn't any legion of white-coated workers conducting secret experiments-although I suppose it's possible that someone thinks there's more going on here than there is. The original setup was built more than a hundred and fifty years ago-long before we acquired it, of course-as a nuclear bunker. It was a rich man's fantasy: a hidey-hole where he and a few friends could wait out the coming holocaust. The plague wars were running riot at the time and the fear of escalation was acute. A hundred years after the bunker was built-still some little time before the island came into our hands-someone equally rich and equally paranoid expanded it with the aid of primitive gantzers. I presume that he was more anxious about an asteroid strike or some other natural disaster than about nuclear war, but I don't know for sure. I suppose it would still be capable of fulfilling any of those functions, were the need to arise."

"But you aren't interested in anything as absurdly melodramatic as that, of course," Damon said sarcastically.

Singh was standing beside the open door, politely indicating that Damon should precede him into the empty space. Damon stayed where he was, waiting for more answers.

"We're interested in privacy," Singh told him brusquely. "It's an increasingly rare commodity in a world of rampant nanotechnology. We're interested in independence-not political independence, just creative independence."

"And this we, I suppose, comprises Karol Kachellek and Eveline Hywood-if she should ever return to Earth-and other old chums of Conrad Helier. Maybe you even have Conrad Helier himself hidden away down there, dead to the world but still slaving away at all the labor of creation that God somehow left undone? Perhaps that's what Operator one-oh-one believes, at any rate."

"Please, Mr. Hart," the thin man said plaintively.

"I'll find out what this is all about eventually," Damon told him, "one way or another." He was wary enough not to let bravado lead him to give too much away, though. It might be inadvisable to boast about Madoc Tamlin's capabilities to people who might be just as reluctant to be found out as the mysterious Operator 101 was.

The words displayed on Singh's screen suddenly disappeared, to be replaced by an urgently flashing message which simply said: READ NOW. The system had presumably been programmed with nets set to trawl the cyberspatial sea for items of a particular kind, and one of them had just made contact.

"You'd better come look at this," Damon said.

Singh was reluctant to come away from the open elevator, but he did come. When he saw the message, though, his suspicious expression cleared. "Excuse me," he murmured, as he moved to obey the flashing injunction.

When the thin man's skeletal fingers brushed the keypad beneath the screen the flashing words were replaced by an image of a man sitting on a perfectly ordinary chair. Damon was not in the least surprised to recognize Silas Arnett. Silas was no longer under any obvious restraint, but there was a curious expression in his eyes, and both of his hands were heavily bandaged. He began speaking in a flat monotone.

Damon knew immediately that the image and the voice were both fakes, derived with calculated crudity from the kind of template he used routinely in his own work.

"The situation was out of hand," the false Arnett said dully. "All attempts to limit environmental spoliation by legislation had failed, and all hope that the population would stabilize or begin to decline as a result of individual choice was gone. We were still winning the battle to provide enough food for everyone, even though the distribution system left seven or eight billions lacking, but we couldn't cope with the sheer physical presence of so many people in the world. Internal technology was developing so rapidly that it was obvious to anyone with half a brain that off-the-shelf emortality was less than a lifetime away, and that it would revolutionize the economics of medicine. Wars over lebensraum were being fought on every continent, with all kinds of weapons, including real plagues: killing plagues.

"When Conrad first put it to us that what the world needed more desperately than anything else was a full stop to reproduction-an end to the whole question of individual choice in matters of fecundity-nobody said 'No! That's horrible!' We all said 'Yes, of course-but can it be done?' When Conrad said 'There's always a way,' no one challenged him on the grounds of propriety.

"I couldn't see how we might go about designing a plague of sterility, because there were no appropriate models in nature- how could there be, when the logic of natural selection demands fertility and fecundity?-and I couldn't envisage a plausible physiology, let alone a plausible biochemistry, but Conrad's way of thinking was quite different from mine. Even in those days, all but a few of the genes we claimed to have 'manufactured' were actually simple modifications of existing genes or the chance products of lab-assisted mutation. We had little or no idea how to go about creating genes from scratch which would have entirely novel effects-but Conrad had a weird kind of genius for that kind of thing. He knew that he could figure out a way, using the somatic transformer packages that were then routinely used to treat genetic deficiency diseases.

"I wonder, sometimes, how many other groups must have had conversations very like ours. 'Wouldn't it be great if we could design a virus that would sterilize almost everyone on earth without the kinds of side effects that accompany pollution-induced sterility?' . . . 'Yes, wouldn't it-what a shame there's no obvious place to start.' Was there anywhere in the world in the 2070s where bioengineers gathered where such conversations didn't take place? Maybe some of the others took it further; maybe they even followed the same thread of possibility that Conrad pointed out to us. Maybe Conrad wasn't the only one who could have done it, merely the one who hit the target first. I don't know-but I do know that if you'd put that kind of loaded pistol into the hand of any bioengineer of the period the overwhelming probability is that the trigger would have been squeezed.

"We had no desire to discriminate: we set out to sterilize everybody in the world-and we succeeded. That's what saved the world from irredeemable ecocatastrophe. If the population had continued to increase, so that nanotech emortality spread like wildfire through a world which was still vomiting babies from billions of wombs, nothing could have restrained the negative Malthusian checks. The so-called plague wars had already proved themselves inadequate to cut population drastically in a world of advanced medical care, but there were plenty more and even nastier weapons to hand. The world really was set to go bad in a big way; all that remained for sane men to do was exercise the least worst option, and that's what Conrad Helier did.

"What happened in the last decade of the twenty-first century and the first decades of the twenty-second wasn't a tragedy at all-but the fact that it was seen as a tragedy, and a terrible threat to the future of the species, increased its beneficial effects. The Crash was a common enemy, and it created such a sense of common cause, focused on the development of artificial wombs and the securing of adequate supplies of sperms and ova, that for the first time in history the members of the human race

were all on the same side.

"We're still living on the legacy of that break in history, in spite of attempts made by madmen like the Eliminators to set us all at one another's throats again. We're still all on the same side, all engaged in the same ongoing quest-and we have Conrad Helier to thank for that. You have no conception of the debt which the world owes to that man."

"You don't regret what you did, then?" asked a whispery voice from off-stage.

"No," said Arnett's simulacrum dispiritedly. "If you're looking for some sign of repentance, forget it. What we did was necessary, and right."

"And yet you've kept it secret all these years," the voice observed. "When you were first accused of having done this, you denied it. When you realized that further denial was useless, you attempted to take sole responsibility-not out of pride, but out of a desire to protect your collaborators. The truth had, in the end, to be extracted from you. Why is that, if you aren't ashamed of what you did?"

"Because there are people in the world like you," the ersatz Silas countered unenthusiastically. "Because PicoCon and the other purveyors of cheap longevity have ensured that the world is still overfull of people whose moral horizons are absurdly narrow and horribly bleak. For every person alive in 2095 who would have understood our reasons, there were half a hundred who would have said 'How dare you do this to me? How dare you take away my freedom of self-determination, even for the good of the world?' Too many people would have seen sterilization as a theft, as a loss of power.

"Many young people nowadays, born into a world of artificial wombs, find it frankly repulsive that women ever had to give birth like wild animals-but too many members of the older generations still feel that they were robbed, changed without their consent. Karol Kachellek and Eveline Hywood are still doing important work; they never wanted to be sidetracked by the kind of publicity the revelations which you've forced out of me would generate-will generate, I suppose."

"What right did you have to make decisions for all mankind?" the second synthetic voice asked, still maintaining its stage-whisper tone. "What right did you have to play God?"

"What gave us the right," Arnett's image replied, the voice as relentlessly dull as it had been throughout, "was our understanding. Conrad had the vision, and the artistry required to develop the means. The responsibility fell to him-you might as well ask what right he had to surrender it to others, given that those others were mostly ill-educated egomaniacs whose principal short-term aim was to slaughter their neighbors. Someone had to be prepared to take control, or the world was doomed. When you know that people won't accept the gift of their own salvation, you have only two choices: to force it on them, or to leave them to destruction. It was better for the world to be saved-and it was better for the world to believe that it had been saved by a fortunate combination of miracles rather than by means of a conspiracy of scientists. Conrad always wanted to do what was best for the world, and keeping our actions secret was simply a continuation of that policy."

"What of the unhappiness caused by the frustration of maternal instinct?" asked the interrogative voice, in a tone devoid of any real indignation. "What of the misery generated by the brutal wrench which you administered to human nature? There are many-and not merely those who survived the Crash-who would argue that ours is now a perverted society, and that the reckless fascination with violence which is increasingly manifest in younger generations is a result of the perversion of human nature occasioned by universal sterilization."

"The empire of nature ended with the development of language," the fake Arnett replied. "Ever since then, human beings have been the product of their technology. All talk of human nature is misguided romantic claptrap. The history of human progress has been the history of our transcendence and suppression of the last vestiges of instinctive behavior. If there was any maternal instinct left in 2070, its annihilation was a thoroughly good thing. To blame any present unhappiness or violence on the loss or frustration of any kind of genetic heritage is both stupid and ridiculous."

There was an obvious cut at this point. The next thing Arnett's image said was: "Who told you about all this? It can't have been Karol or Eveline. Somebody must have put the pieces together-somebody with expert knowledge and a cunning turn of mind. Who?"

"That's of no importance," the other voice said. "There's only one more matter which needs to be determined, and that's the identity which Conrad Helier adopted after faking his death. We have reason to believe that he reappeared in the world after an interval of some twenty-five years, having undergone extensive reconstructive somatic engineering. We have reason to believe that he now uses the name Damon Hart. Is that true, Dr. Arnett?"

"Yes," said the voice which sounded like Arnett's, ringing false because his head was bowed and his lips hardly moved. "The person who calls himself Damon Hart is really Conrad Helier. It's true."

The tape ended there.

"I wonder how many other installments there are to come," Damon said.

Singh's lips moved as if he intended to reply, but he choked off the sound of the first syllable as his ears caught another sound, faint and distant.

Damon cocked his own ear, straining to catch and identify the sound. "Helicopters," he said, when he had leaped to that conclusion. Singh, who was evidently a more cautious man than he, had not yet made the same leap-but when Damon said it he was ready to believe it.

"We have to go down," Singh said. "There's no time to lose!"

"They're only little helicopters," Damon said, using expertise gained from hours spent watching sportsmen whizz over the beaches of California. "The kind you can fold up and store away in the back of a van. They must be local-they wouldn't have the range to get here from Lanai." Instead of obeying Rajuder Singh's urgent request to go to the elevator he moved toward the window that looked out in the direction from which the noise was coming.

"It doesn't matter how small they are," Singh complained, becoming increasingly agitated. "What matters is that they're not ours. I don't know how they got here, but they're not here on any kind of routine business-and if they're after somebody, it has to be you."

Damon knew, deep down, that he ought to do as Rajuder Singh said. The sensible thing to do was to move to the elevator and let it carry him down to the hidey-hole beneath the fake volcano, not merely because that was the way that safety lay, but also because he might find answers down there to some of his most urgent questions. He also knew, however, that Karol Kachellek's estimation of his reflexive perversity had a good deal of truth in it. Obedience had never been his strong suit.

"There's plenty of time," he said to Rajuder Singh, although he knew that there wasn't.

He peered out of the window, looking up at the crowns of the trees that fringed the flower garden. The thick foliage blocked out the greater part of the sky and anything that might be flying there-but not for long.

When the first tiny helicopter finally came into view, zooming over the topmost branches of the nearest trees, Damon's first reaction was to relax. The machine wasn't big enough to carry human passengers, or even a human pilot. The sound of its whining motor was like the buzz of a worker bee, and he knew that the AI guiding it could not be any more intelligent than a worker bee. As it passed rapidly out of sight again, wheeling above the roof of the bungalow, Damon turned back to Rajuder Singh, intending to reassure him-but the expression on the other man's face told him that Singh was not about to be reassured, and his own composure began to dissolve. In a world of rampant nanotech, small did not mean harmless-far from it.

It occurred to Damon then to wonder where the tiny machine-and its partner, which was already visible-had come from. Such toys had insufficient range to have been launched from Lanai or Kahoolawe, but if they had not come from another island, they must have come from the deck of a ship. What ship? How had it come to be here so soon after his own arrival-unless that arrival had somehow been anticipated?

"Please, Mr. Hart," said the desperate Rajuder Singh, coming forward as he spoke and reaching for a pouch suspended beside his backpack. Damon guessed immediately what it was the thin man was reaching for, and was struck by the sudden thought that he didn't know for sure whose side Rajuder Singh was on. Everything the man had told him had seemed plausible enough-but the fact remained that Steve Grayson had kidnapped him and brought him here against his will. What if it had not been Karol Kachellek who had given the order? What if Karol Kachellek had sent the helicopters in hot pursuit from the deck of the Kite?

As the miniature gun came out of its hiding place Damon reacted with a streetfighter's instinct. He hadn't been able to do anything about Grayson's weapon, but the situation was different now. The blow he aimed with the edge of his right hand was delivered with practiced efficiency, knocking the hand which held the gun aside. That left Singh's midriff wide open, and Damon lashed out with his right foot, ploughing his heel into the thin man's solar plexus. The sudden shock put Singh down, as it would have put anyone down, no matter how efficient his internal technology was. Singh's mouth had been open as he prepared to speak, but all that came out now was a sharp gasp of surprise. Damon pinned the thin man's right arm to the floor with his foot and knelt down in order to pluck the weapon out of his hand.

The gun was a darter, even less powerful than Grayson's pepperbox. It was incapable of inflicting any lethal injury, although its darts were presumably capable of inducing paralysis for several minutes, until his internal technology could rally itself to cancel out the effects of the toxin.

Singh pried his right arm loose and tried to grab the gun, wailing: "You don't understand!"

Damon lifted the weapon out of his captive's reach but didn't hit him again. "Nor do you," he muttered through clenched teeth.

The noise of the whining helicopters was louder now; both machines were hovering close to the house, perhaps coming in to land. They were descending slowly, presumably because the machines were delicate and the available space between the flower beds was by no means generous.

Now there was another sound audible beyond and beneath the whine of the toys: a much deeper drone, of the kind a real helicopter might make. There was no possibility that a real helicopter could have been launched from the deck of the Kite-but there was a possibility that the big machine was in pursuit of the little ones rather than complementing their mission. All was confusion, and confusion heaped upon confusion-and Damon had not the slightest idea what he ought to do next. He only knew that he had to make up his mind very quickly.

Under more relaxed circumstances, Damon might have been able to take advantage of Rajuder Singh's obvious distress. He felt that if he were to demand answers to his questions under the threat of further violence, he would probably get them. The thin man's eyes were flickering wildly from side to side, as if he expected to be shot at any moment-but there was no time for questions. Damon had to make his move, and there were only two ways to go: inside or outside.

As he moved toward the double door that would let him out into the tangled forest, the window at which he had been standing mere moments before imploded with a deafening roar. One of the tiny helicopters had shot it out. While Damon and Singh were still ducking away from the blast, arms raised against flying shards, two objects flew through the broken window. As they bounced across the carpet they began pumping out smoke.

Thanks to his misspent youth, Damon was able to recognize the objects and the belching smoke. He knew that he hadn't time to get through both the doors that stood between him and fresh air-but the elevator door was still wide open, less than three meters away. Singh was already headed for it, without even bothering to come to his feet.

Damon couldn't beat the dark-skinned man to the open door but he managed a tie. He couldn't pull the other man back but he hauled him to his feet so that he could reach out a slender finger and punch the button that would close the door behind them.

They had beaten the smoke, although a little of its stench lingered in the trapped air as the elevator began its descent.

Damon still had hold of Singh, and he shoved him up against the back wall of the elevator before pressing the barrel of the darter to his neck. "Don't ever threaten me again, Mr. Singh," he growled theatrically. "I really don't like it."

"I'm s-sorry," the slender man gasped, desperate to spit the words out. "I only wanted...."

"I know what you wanted," Damon said, releasing his hold and lifting his hand reflexively to his face, as if to shield his nose and mouth from the few smoke particles that had accompanied them into the elevator. "You'd already told me what you wanted."

Singh breathed a deep sigh of relief as he realized that no further violence would be done to him, and that he had achieved his object in spite of all the difficulties. Damon didn't want him relaxing too much, so

he made a show of pointing the gun at him.

"You're not out of the woods yet," he said grimly. "If there's anything I don't like waiting for us down below, you could still end up with a belly full of needles."

"It's all right," the thin man said quickly. "There's nothing down below but a safe place to hide. I haven't lied to you, Mr. Hart! I just had to get you down below, before you were hurt."

Now that there was time to make the play, Damon pointed the gun at his companion's face and tried to make his own expression as fearsome as he could. "Who are you really working for?" he demanded.

"Karol Kachellek," the other said plaintively, with tiny tears at the corners of his frightened eyes. "It's all true! I swear it. You'll see in a minute! You'll..."

The agitated stream of words died with the elevator light. The descent stopped with an abrupt lurch.

"Oh shit!" Damon murmured reflexively. This was a development he had not expected. He had assumed-as Singh clearly had-that once the elevator doors had closed they were safe from all pursuit.

"It's impossible," Singh croaked, although it clearly wasn't.

"Is there anyone down below at all?" Damon asked, abruptly revising his opinion as to the desirability of finding a reception committee awaiting his arrival.

"No," said Singh. "It's just..."

"A safe place to hide," Damon finished for him. "Apparently, it isn't."

"But the systems are secure! They're supposed to be tamper-proof!"

"They might have been tamperproof when they were put in," Damon pointed out, belatedly realizing the obvious, "but this is the age of rampant nanotechnology. PicoCon's current products can get into nooks and crannies nobody would even have noticed twenty years ago. They got to Silas, remember-this is mere child's play to people who could do that. The only question worth asking is how they knew I was here-if it is me they've come for. If they have a ship, it must have been here or hereabouts before Grayson took off from Molokai."

The lights came back on again, and the elevator lurched into motion. Unfortunately, it began to rise. Damon immediately began to regret the delay caused by his stubborn perversity. If he'd only come into the elevator when Singh had first invited him, they'd surely have been able to get all the way to the bottom before his pursuers could stop them. Whether that would have qualified as safety or not he couldn't tell, but he was certain that he was anything but safe now.

Rajuder Singh must have reached the same conclusion, but he didn't bother to complain, or even to say "I told you so."

Damon ostentatiously turned the gun away from Rajuder Singh, pointing it at what would soon be the open space left by the sliding door. He knew that the room would still be filled with poisonous smoke, and that anyone who had got to the console in the middle of the room in order to send a return signal to the elevator would have to be wearing a gas mask, but that didn't mean that they'd be armored against darts. One shot might be enough, if only he could see a target-and even the larger helicopter which had

followed the two miniatures couldn't have been carrying more than a couple of men. If he could hold his breath long enough, there might still be a chance of getting outside and into the welcoming jungle. It was a one in a million chance, but a chance nevertheless.

"They must have been waiting," he muttered to Rajuder Singh. "But they couldn't have known what Karol would do, even if they figured that I'd fly to Molokai. They must have been here because they were keeping watch on you, waiting to take action against you."

"That's impossible," Rajuder Singh said again. "I'm just support staff."

"But you're sitting on a secret hidey-hole," Damon pointed out. "Maybe there isn't anything down there to interest them- but they don't know that. Maybe they really do think that Conrad Helier's there, directing Karol's operation. Maybe this was always part of their plan, and my presence here is just an unfortunate coincidence. Maybe they don't give a damn about you or me, and only want access to the bunker...."

Damon could have gone on. His imagination hadn't even come near to the limit of its inventiveness-but he didn't have time.

The elevator stopped again, although the lights stayed on this time.

Bitter experience had told Damon to take a long deep breath, and that was what he did. As the doors began to open, before the gas could flood in, he filled his lungs to capacity. Then he threw himself out into the smoky room, diving and rolling as he did so but keeping his stinging eyes wide open while he searched for a target to shoot at.

There was no target waiting; the room was devoid of human presence.

His ill-formed plan was to get to the doors that led outside, and get through them with all possible expedition. He managed to make it to the inner door easily enough and brought himself upright without difficulty-but the door was locked tight. He seized the grip and hauled with all his might, but it wouldn't budge. He was fairly certain that Singh hadn't locked it, and he knew that it wouldn't matter whether the thin man was carrying a swipecard capable of releasing the lock. There wouldn't have been time, even if the other had been right behind him-which he wasn't.

Damon immediately turned for the window, even though he knew full well that it wouldn't be easy to exit past the jagged shards of glass that still clung to the frame. His long stride carried him across the room with the least possible delay, but his eyes wouldn't stay open any longer and his nose was stinging too. By the time he reached the window he felt that he couldn't hold on any longer-but he knew that there was fresh air outside.

Damon grasped the window frame with his free hand, steadying himself as he let out his breath explosively. Then he stuck his head out into the open, in the hope of gathering in a double lungful of untainted air, while the hand that held the gun groped for a resting place on the outer sill.

Someone standing outside plucked the dart gun neatly out of his hand. Damon tried his utmost to force his stinging eyes open, but his reflexes wouldn't let go. He never saw who it was that turned the darter against him and shot him in the chest.

The impact would probably have hurt a good deal worse if Damon hadn't sucked in just enough smoke to make him gag and befuddle his senses. As it was, he felt almost completely numb as he reeled

backward.

The next breath he took was so fully impregnated with smoke that he must have passed out immediately—or so, at least, it seemed when he woke up with a sick headache and found himself lying prone on a ledge, looking down the sheer slope of an incredibly high mountain.

Eighteen

Damon was no more sensitive to heights than the average man, but the sight confronting him would have shocked anyone into instant acrophobia. He looked downward at a face of bare gray rock that plummeted for miles. The bottom of the chasm was visible because it was lit up like the face of a full moon on a clear night, but it seemed so very far away that the notion of it's being connected to his present station by an actual wall of rock was so incredible as to be horrible.

He felt cold sweat break out on his face as terror grabbed him, and he recoiled convulsively, squeezing his eyes shut and pulling his head back from the rim. He rolled over without even caring what might be behind him, but when he was supine he opened his eyes again to look up, and gasped once again in alarm.

The steep slope extending upward from the left-hand edge of the narrow ledge on which he lay was not as extensive as the chasm that lay to his right, and it posed no threat, but there was a certain sinister malignity in its frank impossibility. The mountain was topped by a building that was lit as brightly and as strangely as the chasm floor, so that every detail of its construction stood out sharp and clear against a cloudless and starless sky.

It was a castle of sorts, with clustered towers and winding battlements, but it was compounded out of crystals, as if it had been gantzed from tiny shards of glass and the litter of a jeweler's workshop. The walls were not transparent, nor were they even straightforwardly translucent; they were shining brightly, but the manner of their shining was an outrage to logic which played tricks with his mind's procedures of visual analysis. As he stared at the amazing structure he saw that its towers were linked by crisscrossing bridges whose spans were impossibly knotted, and that its ramparts were decorated with ascending and descending staircases which faded into one another in perspective-defying fashion. It was magnificent—all the more so because it was so far above him, separated by a slope so sheer and forbidding.

There was no path up the mountain—no way the castle could be approached without climbing several kilometers of hostile rock face. Its existence was no more plausible than that awful abyss, which would have plunged halfway to Earth's molten core had it been in the world he knew: the real world.

Damon shut his eyes again. Safe in that darkness, he pulled himself together.

It's just a VE, he assured himself. It's clever, but it's just a VE full of optical illusions.

Carefully, he began to run his fingers over his limbs. His fingers registered the texture of his suitskinned

flesh; the muscles of his belly and his thighs registered the passage of his fingers. He assumed that the suitskin must be an illusion and that he must really be wearing a synthesuit delicately wired to reproduce the sensations of touch. It was obviously state-of-the-art, given that the movement of his fingers seemed so very natural, but all such suits had limitations of which he was very well aware.

He put his right forefinger into his mouth, running it back and forth over his teeth and tongue. Then he touched his closed eye and gently depressed the eyeball. Then he passed his hand back over the crown of his head, feeling the texture of his hair and the vertebrae of his neck. Finally, he put his hand inside the collar of the virtual suitskin and shoved his hand into his armpit; when he withdrew it he sniffed his fingers.

None of these sensations were capable of synthesuit duplication, at least in theory. Taste and odor were beyond the present limits of synthesuit sensoria; eyeballs were reserved for confrontation with the screen and couldn't be touched; every synthesuit required input cabling, which was usually situated at the rear of the head or the back of the neck. All four tests had failed to reveal any deception; according to their verdict; everything he had seen was real.

And yet, he told himself, it must be a virtual environment, because no such real environment exists. However improbable it seems, this is a charade. I don't know who has the equipment to play such a trick, or how they're doing it, or why, but it's a trick and nothing more. It's just a trick.

"You can open your eyes, Damon. It's perfectly safe." Damon didn't recognize the voice.

He opened his eyes, hoping that the VE into which he'd woken might have changed into something far more accommodating.

It hadn't. The impossible building still sat atop the impossible mountain, against the backdrop of the impossible sky. He knew that he was safe, but it was extremely difficult to believe it. Damon's reflexes fought to shut his eyes again, but his consciousness fought to keep them open. It was a hard fight, but reason won.

During the last five years Damon had spent a great deal of time in VEs of every marketed and marketable kind, searching for better illusions of reality in order that he might become a better architect of artificial spaces. He needed to be able to cope with this—indeed, he needed to come to terms with it, to master it, and, if possible, to find out how it was done and how he could do likewise.

When he was sure that he could keep his eyes open he deliberately moved back to the rim of the ledge and extended his head into the position it had been in when he first opened his eyes. He wanted to look down again. He needed to look down again, in order to sustain his credentials as an artist in virtual realities, a virtuoso of illusion.

Vertigo seized him like a vice, but he fought it. Knowledge conquered sensation. He looked into the abyss and knew that he would not fall.

Only then did he move again, coming back from the rim and scrambling into a sitting position. He set his back against the upper cliff face and extended his legs so that his ankles were balanced on the lip he had just vacated. Then he turned, to look at the person who had spoken to him.

The figure was as strange as the world which contained him. His shape was human, and recognizably male, but his body was literally mercurial, formed as if from liquid metal. He shone with reflected radiance, but the light which flowed across his contours as he moved was as deceptive as the light which flowed through the walls and spires of the crystal castle, defying all the experience of Damon's educated

eyes.

For a moment or two, Damon wondered whether this gleaming silver exterior might be a new kind of synthesuit—a kind which extended into the mouth and nasal cavities as well as covering the eyeball, and which needed no input cable. Could it be a monomolecular film of some kind, as perfectly reflective as a mirror or chrome-plated steel? It was just about plausible, although meetings in VEs usually hid the equipment required to produce and perpetuate the illusion. When he worked on his illusions from within, Damon typed his instructions on a virtual keyplate.

He looked down at his own body, half expecting to see that he too had turned to mercury, but he hadn't. He recognized the blue-and-gray suitskin he seemed to be wearing as one of his own, but it was not the one he had been wearing when Steve Grayson had carried him away to Rajuder Singh's island.

"Who are you?" Damon demanded of the mercury man. The shape of the apparition's face did not seem familiar, although he was not sure that he could have recognized someone he knew reasonably well were their features to be transformed to a fluid mirror in this remarkable fashion.

"I think you can probably figure that out," the other replied.

"My name doesn't matter. It's what I am and where we are that counts. You did very well. Not everyone can learn to cope with worlds like this, and few can adapt so quickly—but the real test will come when you try to fly. That requires genuine artistry and limitless self-confidence."

"So what are you?" Damon demanded, determined to take matters one at a time and to follow his own agenda.

"I like to think of this as Mount Olympus," the mercury man told him, ignoring the question. "Up there, the palace of Zeus—impossible, of course, for mere human eyes to figure—where Apollo, Aphrodite, Ares, and Athena have their separate apartments. Down there, the earth, unquiet even by night with the artificially-lit labor and the radiant dreams of billions of men."

"The illusion's magnificent," Damon conceded. "Far better than anything I ever thought I could make—but you'll spoil it all if you insist on talking nonsense. You went to a great deal of trouble to bring me here. Why not tell me what it is that you want?"

"Fair enough," said the mirror man agreeably. "I'd like you to get a message to your father. We can't find him, you see—and while we can't find him, it's rather difficult to negotiate with him. We've tried talking to his underlings, but they simply aren't licensed to be flexible. We rather hoped he might be hiding out on that artificial island, but he isn't; all we found was you."

"Conrad Helier's dead," Damon said wearily.

"We're almost ready to believe that," the apparition conceded, "but not quite. It is conceivable that it's only his spirit that lives on and that Eveline Hywood is pulling the strings herself, but you'll understand our skepticism. We live in a world of deceptive appearances, Damon. You only have to look at me to realize why we aren't prepared to take anything on trust."

Damon didn't have any ready answer to that.

"It's the same with the people at Ahasuerus," the mercury man continued. "They're obsessed with the continuation of Adam Zimmerman's plan, and they refuse to see that all plans have to adapt to changes in

the world's circumstances. That's why we sent you to them—we figured that we might as well trap both wayward birds with a single net, if we can. There's always the possibility, of course, that the foundation has your father salted away in the same cold place as Adam Zimmerman, but we don't think it's likely. Your father isn't the kind of man to settle for an easy ride to Ultima Thule via suspended animation."

By this time, Damon had found his answer. "If Conrad Helier isn't dead," he said, "he's certainly not disposed to let me know it. Karol doesn't trust me, and neither does Eveline. Even Silas never gave me the slightest reason to think that Conrad Helier is alive. Anyhow, if you think he's still guiding Eveline and Karol, you only have to leave your message on their answerphones."

"It's not as easy as that, as you know very well. When I say that we want you to get a message to him, I mean that we want you to get through to him. We want him to listen. We think that you might be the person to do that for us. Karol and Eveline are only his hirelings, and they'll be dead within thirty or forty years. You're his son, and he must at least hope, if he doesn't actually believe, that you might live for a thousand years. I know that he poses as a lover of all mankind, making no discrimination between rich and poor, worthy and unworthy, but he took the trouble to have a son and to deliver that son into the patient care of his most trusted confidants. Doesn't that suggest to you that the plans he makes for the future of mankind are really plans for your future—or at least that he imagines you as a central figure, somehow symbolic of the race as a whole?"

"If he did, and if he were alive, I'd be a great disappointment to him," Damon said shortly. "I've my own life to lead. I'm not interested in delivering messages for you."

"It's a little late to make that decision," the mirror man observed.

Damon could see what he meant. What his captors wanted, apparently, was to get through to whoever was running Conrad Helier's operation—and Damon had obligingly hopped on a plane to Molokai, calling in on the Ahasuerus Foundation en route. He'd also unleashed Madoc Tamlin—and thus, in all likelihood, every outlaw Webwalker on the West Coast. He'd already collaborated as fully as anyone could have desired in the mission of getting through to Karol Kachellek. The only person he hadn't quite got through to, yet, was Eveline Hywood.

"None of this makes sense," Damon complained. "None of it was necessary. You're just playing games."

"Perhaps we are," the mirror man admitted, "but we aren't the only ones. Your father started this, Damon—our moves have been made in response to his, and he's still responding to ours. He should have come to the conference table the night we took Silas Arnett hostage, but he called our bluff. I suppose you realize that the second tape of his supposed confessions was theirs, not ours? It was a move we hadn't anticipated—a sacrifice we thought he wouldn't be prepared to make. We didn't anticipate that Karol Kachellek would send you off to the island either, but that may have worked out to our advantage. Naming you was a rather crude response, but the Operator one-oh-one pseudonym was about to become useless and it seemed politic to increase the general confusion. We're suitably impressed by your father's initiative and his fighting spirit, but it doesn't alter the situation. He shouldn't try to keep us out. He mustn't try to keep us out, Damon. It's not that we want to stop what he's doing—but we can't let him do it alone. The world has changed, Damon. We can't tolerate loose cannons. The day of little conspiracies, like your father's and Adam Zimmerman's, is long gone. Now they have to submit to the same discipline as the rest of us."

"I don't have the least idea what you're talking about," Damon said, "and I still believe that Conrad Helier's been dead for nearly fifty years." The latter statement was a straightforward stalling move,

intended to slow things down while he tried to fathom the implications of what the mirror man was saying.

"We have confidence in your ability to figure it out," the apparition told him. "We also have confidence in your ability to see reason. You're fully entitled to resent the way we've used you, but we hope that you might be prepared to forgive us."

"I'm not the forgiving type," Damon retorted, although he knew that it wasn't the diplomatic thing to say.

The mirror man ignored the futile threat. "What do you think of the quality of the VE?" he asked.

"It's forced me to revise my estimate of what can and can't be done," Damon admitted. "I didn't think any kind of bodysuit would ever get this close to reproducing the minutiae of tactile experience. It makes the kind of work I do seem rather childish."

"It's next-generation technology. Now that you know it can be done, can you guess how?"

"Not exactly. I suppose it has to be done with some kind of new nanotech, using a synthesuit that's even thinner than a suitskin."

"It's an interesting idea, but it's headed in the wrong direction. You're not in any kind of bodysuit. You're lying down on a perfectly ordinary bed, fast asleep. This is a lucid dream."

Damon quelled a reflexive response to deny the possibility. He knew that research into the mechanisms of dreaming had been going on for more than a hundred years, attended all the while by speculations about taped dreams that would one day be bought off the supermarket shelf just like VE paks, but he'd always believed the skeptics who said that such speculations were unreasonably wild, and that the plausibility of the notion was just an accountable illusion, like the plausibility of telepathy. "You're right about one thing," he said dryly. "If you can do that, I ought to be able to work out who you are. There can't be more than a handful of research teams who've got within a light-year of that kind of device."

"It's all done by IT," the mercury man told him equably. "It's easy enough to operate the switch in the hypothalamus which prevents instructions to the motor nerves generated in dreams getting through to the body, while preserving the illusion that you're acting and reacting as you would in everyday life. Sensory information is filtered through a similar junction whose functions can be just as easily usurped. It doesn't require millions of nanomachines to colonize the entire structure of the brain-it only requires a few thousand to stand in for the neuronal gatekeepers that are already in place. The whole set up isn't that much more complicated than a synthesuit-but it's so much neater to wear the suit inside instead of out, and it saves a small fortune on your electricity bill. As you can see, it gives the VE a texture much more like reality, even if the information is incredible. It also allows the programmers to build in facilities which reproduce things you can sometimes do in dreams but never in real life. As I told you earlier, the real test of your psychological adaptability is whether you can step off that ledge believing that you can fly."

Damon was uncomfortably aware of the fact that his chosen career-the design of virtual environments for use with ordinary commercial hoods and synthesuits-had just been revealed to be a blind alley. Unless he could adapt his skills to the coming regime of manufactured dreams, everything he'd ever done and everything he currently planned to do would be consigned to the scrap heap of obsolescence.

"When will this hit the market?" he whispered.

"That's an interesting question," said the mirror man. "In fact, it's a question which cuts to the heart of the emergent philosophy of the new world order. For hundreds of years, people have been developing

products for the market: for the purposes of getting rich. Even artists got sucked into it, although the motive forces involved in their creativity-as I'm sure you understand very well-usually went far beyond the vulgar necessity of making a living. The sole raison d'etre of the so-called mothercorps was to make as much money as possible as rapidly as possible. The defining feature of the Age of Capital was that money became an end instead of a means. The richest of men became so very rich that they couldn't possibly spend what they had, but that didn't stop them trying to make more and more. Money ceased to be mere purchasing power and became a measuring device-a way of keeping score of the position and prestige of individuals within the great competition that was the world. Every new discovery was weighed in the balance of the market, assessed according to its power to make money. Do you understand why that age is now over, Damon? Do you understand why everything has changed?"

"Has it changed?" Damon asked sceptically. "Maybe the people you know are so rich they no longer bother keeping score, but everyone I know needs all the money they can lay their hands on, because the purchasing power of money is their only hope of staying one step ahead of the Grim Reaper and riding the escalator to eternity."

"Exactly," said the mirror man, as if Damon were agreeing with him rather than disputing what he'd said. "That's exactly the point. Money has retained its power because the ultimate product isn't yet on the market. Until we have authentic emortality at a fixed price, the pursuit goes on and on-and while even the richest of men knew full well that he couldn't take his money with him when he died, all the money in the world could be nothing to him but a means of keeping score. But that's no longer the case, as Adam Zimmerman was the first to understand and demonstrate.

"Now every rich man-perhaps every man of moderate means-understands perfectly well that if he can only hang around long enough for the appropriate technologies to arrive, he will have the chance to live forever. That becomes the end, and money merely the means. We're already living in a postcapitalist society, Damon-it's just that many of our fellows haven't yet noticed the fact or fully understood its significance. Your father understood the fundamental point long ago, of course- which makes it all the more frustrating that he doesn't seem to be able to grasp its corollaries. I suppose it's because he prides himself on being a scientist, too fine a man to dirty his hands with mere matters of economics. We have to make him take those blinkers off, Damon. We can't let him go ahead with what he's doing while he's still wearing them."

"What is he doing?" Damon wanted to know.

"I'd rather not be the one to fill you in on the details," the mirror man told him blithely. "As long as you're curious, I know you'll keep niggling away at Kachellek and Hywood. We might need you to do that if our latest moves don't do the trick. If Helier still won't come to the conference table we'll need you to keep nagging away on our behalf until he does."

"And if I won't?"

"You won't be able to help yourself," the mirror man told him, with insulting confidence. "You can't kill curiosity-it has nine lives. In any case, your father will have to take you back into the fold. He can't leave you alone and exposed after all that's happened. We've called attention to you-whatever they believe or don't believe, the Eliminators are interested in you now. Your worthiness is under examination. We don't approve of the Eliminators, of course-not officially-but we like the fact that they take things seriously. We like the fact that they raise the important question: who is worthy of immortality? That's what this is all about, you see. What kind of people ought to inherit the earth, in perpetuity? What kind of people must we become, if we intend to live forever? Eliminator violence is just childish jealousy, of course-but the question remains to be answered. We don't want to eliminate Conrad Helier, or the Ahasuerus

Foundation, but we do want them to understand that if they want to play games they have to play by the rules. If we're going to live forever, we all have to play as a team."

Damon had found it so uncomfortable to stare into the apparition's reflective face that he had spent most of the conversation staring into space or at his own hands, but now he looked directly at the convex mirrors which were the mercurial man's robotic eyes.

"You don't seem to me to be much of a team player," he said. "You seem to me to be trying to play God, just as you've accused Conrad Helier of doing. 'As flies to wanton boys-' "

"We haven't killed anyone," the mirror man said, cutting him off in midquote. "Like Conrad Helier, we take a certain pride in that. As for playing God-well, there was a time when your father could say 'If we don't who will?' but that time is over. This is Olympus, Damon-the place is positively lousy with would-be gods, and that's why we all have to work together. That's what your father has to understand. You have to persuade him that it's true, if no one else will."

"I can't."

The mirror man dismissed his stubbornness with a casual gesture. He stood up, his movement impossibly fluid and graceful. No real body could have moved like that. "Are you ready to fly?" he asked, implying with his tone that Damon wasn't.

Damon hesitated, but he stood up without taking the helping hand that the mirror man had extended toward him.

"This is just a VE," he said. "No matter how clever it is, it's just a VE. I can step over that ledge, if I want to. No harm can come to me, if I do none to myself."

"That's right," the mirror man told him. "In this world, all your dreams can come true. In this world, you can do anything you have a mind to do." His hand was still extended, but Damon still refused to take it. Had he done so, it would have been a gesture of forgiveness, and he wasn't the forgiving type.

Damon remembered the sermon he'd preached to Lenny Garon, about the danger of believing that all injuries could be mended, and the wisdom of not taking too many risks in life lest one miss the escalator to emortality. He didn't think of himself as a hypocrite, but he knew full well that he hadn't ever practiced what he'd preached-and he hoped that his long practice would come to his rescue now. He wasn't about to let the mirror man's challenge pass unmet, and he wasn't about to accept the mock-paternal helping hand. If he were to fly, he would fly alone.

He stepped to the very edge of the abyss, spread his arms wide as if they were wings, and jumped.

Perhaps he could have flown, if he'd only known how, or even if he'd only had enough faith in himself-but he didn't.

Damon fell into the awful abyss, and terror swallowed him up.

He lost consciousness long before he reached the bottom, and was glad to be received by the merciful darkness.

Nineteen

When Damon awoke he was not in pain, but his mind seemed clouded, as if his brain were afflicted by a warm and clammy mist. He had endured such sensations before, when his internal technology had been required to deal with the aftermath of drink or drugs. In such circumstances, even the most vivid dream should easily have drifted into oblivion, but the unnaturally lucid dream of the mirror man clung tight to memory, and the legacy of that final fall was with him still.

When he finally forced his eyes open he found that he was, as the mirror man had insisted, lying on a bed, wearing neither a hood nor a bodysuit. He looked down at himself to find that he was dressed in the same suitskin he had been wearing when he stepped into the elevator with Rajuder Singh. It was not noticeably dirtier than it had been then, but there was a ragged tear in the middle of his chest that hadn't had time to heal.

He sat up. The bed on which he was lying had a heavy iron frame that gave it the appearance of a genuine antique, although it was presumably there for utility's rather than art's sake. His right wrist was handcuffed to one of the uprights.

It took him a few seconds to realize that his was not the only bed in the room, and that he was not the only prisoner it held. He blinked away the mucus that was still obscuring his vision slightly and met the inquisitive gaze of his companion. She was not as tall as recent fashion prescribed, but he judged that she was nevertheless authentically young. Her blond hair was in some disarray, and she was handcuffed just as he was, but she didn't seem to be in dire distress.

"Who are you?" he asked dully.

"Catherine Prail," she told him. "Who are you?"

"Damon Hart," he replied reflexively-a second or two before the significance of what she had said sunk in. He reached up with his free hand to rub the sleep from his eyes. His hand was trembling slightly.

"Are you all right?" the girl asked. She seemed a little tremulous herself-understandably, if she too had been kidnapped by the man of mercury and his associates.

"Just confused," he assured her. "Do you know where we are?"

"No," she answered. Then, as if fearing that her bluntness might seem impolite, she added: "I've heard of you. Silas mentioned your name."

Damon inferred that she hadn't been in a position to keep tabs on the Eliminator boards, or she'd surely have mentioned Operator 101's last message before recalling that Silas Arnett had "mentioned his name."

"I've heard of you too," he said. "Lenny Garon told me you'd disappeared."

"Lenny?" She was genuinely astonished by the introduction of that name. "How did he know? I hardly

know him. Didn't he leave home or something?"

"He asked after you when your name came up in connection with Silas Arnett's kidnapping. How long have you been here? Who brought you?"

She recoiled slightly under the pressure of the doubled-up questions. "I don't know anything," she protested defensively. "I was in a car-the police were taking me home after questioning me. I must have dozed off. I've been awake for about an hour but I haven't seen anyone except you. I don't feel hungry or thirsty, so I can't have been asleep very long-but if you think you're confused...." She left it at that.

"So you've no idea what day it is, I suppose, or where we might be?" Damon looked around the room for clues, but there were no obvious ones to be seen. There was nothing visible through the room's only window but a patch of blue sky. The patterned carpet that covered the floor looked as old as the bedstead, but it was probably modern. It was faded but quite free of dust and crumbs-which suggested that it had a suitskin capacity to digest waste. A closet door that stood ajar showed nothing but bare boards and empty hangers. There was a small table beside Damon's bed on which his backpack and sidepouch had been placed, and the only item there which had not been on his person when he succumbed to the gas was a glass of clear liquid. It was easy enough to reach, and he picked it up in both hands so that he could take a sip. It was water.

"I don't know anything at all," Catherine Praill repeated, her voice increasing its note of alarm. "I don't understand why they brought me here. Are they holding us to ransom?"

She pronounced the word as if the possibility were almost unthinkable-a revenant crime from a more primitive world. Was it unthinkable, though? Was anything unthinkable now? In a world where every child had eight or ten parents, might not the potential rewards of kidnapping-for-cash come to outweigh the risks, especially given the awesome powers which these kidnappers seemed to possess?

"I don't think so," Damon told her. "It wouldn't make much sense. But then-I don't know anything either. It's not for lack of information-I simply can't separate the truth from the lies. I don't know what to believe."

"My foster parents will be worried. I didn't have anything to do with Silas being kidnapped. The men from Interpol seemed to think that I did, but I didn't. I would have helped them if I could."

"It's okay," Damon told her. "Whoever brought us here, I don't think they mean to do us any harm."

"How do you know?" she demanded. "You said you didn't know anything."

"I don't-but I think they took Silas because they were trying to force two of my other foster parents to abandon some plan they've cooked up, or at least to let them in on it. They thought that if they could attract enough public attention my foster parents would be intimidated-but my foster parents aren't the kind to bend with the wind. I can't figure out who did what, or why, and I can't trust anything that anyone says to me, but ... well, it wouldn't make sense for them to harm us. I think they want me to do something for them, and I suspect that they only took you to add to the confusion."

"I don't understand," said the blond girl, growing more distraught in spite of Damon's attempt to soothe her fears. "Silas doesn't have anything to do with his old friends-and I certainly don't."

"Nor do I," Damon said, while he tested the handcuffs to make certain that there was no way of slipping out of them. "Unfortunately, the people who've imprisoned us refuse to believe that, of Silas or of me. I

really don't think they have anything against you, though. You just got caught up in it by accident."

Damon believed what he'd told the girl, but he couldn't help feeling a slight twinge of doubt as to whether all this was actually happening at all. It could be another VE, similar to the last although far more modest. How could he ever be sure, now, that he'd really woken up? How could he ever know whether there really had been a mirror man and a miraculous new VE technology, or whether it had all been a product of his own fertile imagination?

Even if this were real, he realized as he pursued the discomfiting thought, he might be snatched back into some such VE without a moment's notice if clever nanomachines really had been implanted in his hindbrain, and if they were still there. In today's world, it wasn't only walls and phone links that couldn't be trusted. How could any man know what kind of burden he was carrying around in the depths of his own being? He was carrying his own cargo of watchful nanomachines, charged with the duty of keeping his flesh free from invaders, but who could stand watch over the watchmen? In PicoCon's empire, there could be no ultimate security, no ultimate secrecy-and it appeared that PicoCon's empire was closer to its final conquest than he had ever imagined. What could now stand in its way, save for confusion? In a world where nothing could be sealed away in any kind of vault, everything that was to be hidden had to be hidden in plain view, camouflaged by a riot of illusions.

If Conrad Helier really had faked his death, Damon thought, he really might have returned to public life by pretending to be his own son-but Conrad Helier's son was very definitely, and very defiantly, his own man. Unfortunately, Conrad Helier's son had a brain shrouded in mist, and he felt further away from understanding now than he had been before.

"Did you have any unnaturally vivid dreams while you were asleep?" he asked the young woman.

"No dreams at all," she replied, "so far as I can remember. Why?" Her voice cracked on the last word, as fear broke through. She looked as if she were about to cry. She was immune to the worst effects of pain, but IT couldn't immunize anyone against the purely psychological component of fear.

"Please don't worry," he begged her, although the plea sounded foolish even to him. "I really don't think we're in any danger." He wasn't at all certain that he was out of danger. When he had tried to fly, he had only fallen. Either the mirror man had tricked him and mocked him-for no reason Damon could fathom-or the fault had been in himself, in his skill or his courage. Which was worse?

"It's crazy," Catherine Praill insisted. "Why would anyone want to kidnap someone like me? What kind of-"

Before she could finish the sentence the door of the room was kicked open and thrust violently back against the wall. A head peered around the jamb, while the barrel of an obscenely heavy gun, clutched in two unfashionably hairy hands, swept the enclosed area from side to side with crude threat.

Once the gunman was sure that the two prisoners were helpless, and unaccompanied by anyone more menacing, he said: "All clear." He didn't come into the room itself, being content to hover in the corridor while a woman stepped past him, pausing on the threshold to survey the scene with calm disdain.

"Oh," she said as her eyes met Damon's. "It's you." Her disappointment was palpable.

"Rachel Trehaine," Damon said as lightly as he could. He shook his head but the fog wouldn't clear. "I thought you were just a scientific analyst," he added, knowing that he was only a pale imitation of his old smart-ass self. "I didn't expect to see you in charge of a hit squad."

The expression of disgust on the red-headed woman's face was something to be seen. "I'm not in charge of a hit squad," she said. "I'm just...." She hesitated, obviously unsure as to how her present occupation ought to be characterized.

"They didn't shove a note under your door, by any chance?" Damon meant it as a feeble joke, but when he saw the disgusted expression turn to one of puzzlement he realized that it might have been a lucky guess. He resisted the temptation to giggle and took advantage of his luck to hazard another guess. "You were expecting Silas Arnett, weren't you?"

Rachel Trehaine wasn't in the least amused by his perspicacity. "Call Hiru Yamanaka at Interpol," she said to one of the men waiting in the corridor. "Tell him we've found one of his missing persons. And try to find something in the van that we can use to cut through the chains of those handcuffs."

"How long have I been a missing person?" Damon asked, still fighting the fog.

"I wasn't talking about you," the woman from Ahasuerus said. "I was referring to Miss Prail."

Damon grimaced slightly as he realized that he should have known that. So far as Interpol knew, he was probably still safe and sound on Rajuder Singh's private island. "Where are we?" he asked as mildly as he could. He didn't want to add any further fuel to Rachel Trehaine's understandable annoyance.

"Venice Beach," she told him, with only a slight hint of disgust.

His captors had brought him home-or very nearly home. In retrospect, that wasn't particularly surprising.

"Thanks for coming to fetch us," Damon said meekly. "I'm sorry you had to take the trouble."

"I don't suppose you have any idea why they didn't contact Interpol directly," the woman said wearily. She was looking out into the corridor, waiting for the members of her team to find something that could be used to cut Damon and Catherine free.

"I think they're trying to tell you something," Damon said. "Not you personally-the people in charge of the foundation."

"What are they trying to tell us?" the data analyst demanded sharply.

Damon didn't want to admit that he was confused, but he wasn't sure that his run of lucky guesses could be sustained. "They seem to think that Ahasuerus and the remnants of Conrad Helier's old research team are loose cannons rolling around their deck," he said tentatively. "I think they want everybody-including Interpol-to know that there's a new captain on the bridge, one who intends to run a very tight ship from now on."

"What on earth is all that supposed to mean?" Rachel Trehaine demanded aggressively. She looked at Catherine Prail as if to see whether the younger woman understood it any better than she did.

"I wish I could be more precise," Damon assured her. "I wish they'd be more precise. I don't know what to believe. There's too much of it, and it's almost all lies."

The woman from Ahasuerus was still annoyed, but she wasn't entirely insensitive to his distress. She

nodded, as if to concede that he'd been through enough for the present. By the time one of the gunmen appeared with a pair of wire cutters she had begun to look thoughtful. Damon didn't suppose she'd been able to find out exactly what Eveline and Karol were playing at in the short time available to her, but she must have found out enough to keep her interested. She probably knew at least as much as Damon did, and was probably better placed than he was to start putting the pieces together. When Damon thanked her for cutting him free from the bed's head she finally took the trouble to ask whether he was all right.

He assured her that he was, then went to place a reassuring hand on Catherine Prail's arm.

"It's all over now," he told her gently. "The police will want to question you again, but I'm sure they don't suspect you of being involved in Silas Arnett's abduction. It's possible that you carried something into his house without knowing you were doing it, but Interpol must have a reasonable idea by now what kind of game this is. They're being played with exactly as we are."

"That's an interesting observation, Mr. Hart," said a new voice. .

Damon looked around to see Hiru Yamanaka, who was coming through the doorway waving his ID card at all and sundry.

"You got here very quickly," said Rachel Trehaine, her eyes narrowing slightly with awful suspicion.

"So we did," Yamanaka agreed. "That's because we weren't very far away. Mr. Hart is right, Miss Prail-we do have some other questions to ask you, but we certainly won't be bringing any charges against you and we'll take much better care of you this time. You, Mr. Hart, are under arrest."

"For what?" Damon demanded, blurting the question out with frank amazement. "You don't really think I'm Conrad Helier, enemy of mankind, do you?"

"No, I don't," the inspector said equably. "In fact, I'm certain that you're not, but I do have reason to think that you have information relevant to an ongoing murder inquiry, and perhaps to the whereabouts of a man we're currently seeking in that connection."

Damon felt horror clutch at his stomach. The mirror man had said that his side in the dispute hadn't killed anyone-but there was no way to know how many lies the mirror man had told. "Silas is dead?" he said, leaping to what seemed to be the obvious conclusion.

"We still have no information as to the whereabouts or well-being of Dr. Arnett," Yamanaka said, taking no satisfaction from his own punctiliousness. "The inquiry in question is into the murder of Surinder Nahal. We are holding your friend Diana Caisson as a possible accomplice, and we are making every effort to locate our chief suspect, Madoc Tamlin-who is, I believe, currently in your employ."

Damon was lost for words. He didn't know whether to be more alarmed by the fact that Diana was in custody or the fact that Madoc-who evidently wasn't-had somehow been fingered for a murder he surely couldn't have committed. He had thought himself dazed and confused before, but he was doubly so now. "Oh shit," he murmured, in lieu of anything meaningful to say.

Yamanaka was looking at the short length of chain dangling from Damon's wrist, as if regretting that Rachel Trehaine had taken the trouble to have it cut. "Please come with me, Mr. Hart," he said. "I think it's time you told us everything you know about this matter. We're rather tired of people playing with us."

For a fleeting second, Damon wondered whether the man from Interpol might be right-but only for a

fleeting second. By the time he consented to be led away, he was already rehearsing the half-truths and evasions he would have to deploy. Whatever kind of game this was, he didn't think Interpol could possibly win it. He didn't even think they could be reckoned as serious players, although Inspector Yamanaka obviously didn't see things that way.

Damon was taken to one of two waiting cars. Sergeant Rolfe was beside it, holding the rear door open. While Damon climbed in, Hiru Yamanaka went around the other side and took the seat next to him. Rolfe slammed the door shut and walked away, escorting Catherine Prail to the second car.

"I suppose you got a note pushed under your door too," Damon said to Yamanaka as the car pulled away.

"We put Ms. Trehaine under discreet surveillance after you went to see her," the inspector told him mildly. "We were taking an interest in all your movements, and the call you paid on Ahasuerus stood out as one of the least expected."

"Where were you when Steve Grayson kidnapped me?" Damon asked sourly.

"Again, not as far away as you might have thought. Unfortunately, we lost sight of you temporarily. We feared for your safety, having seen the message which was put out on the Web shortly after you and Mr. Grayson took off-and even more so when Rajuder Singh satisfied us that you really had been taken from the island by force. Do you wish to press charges against Grayson and Singh, by the way? We didn't have enough evidence to arrest them without your testimony, but we're still keeping an open file on the matter."

"That's okay," Damon said dryly. "They thought they were acting in my best interests, and perhaps they were. Best to let it alone-Karol is my foster father, after all." As an afterthought, he added: "They were working for Karol, weren't they?"

"I believe so," the Interpol man confirmed. "We checked their records, of course. Rajuder Singh's is unblemished to a degree that's rather remarkable in such an old man. He's an ecological engineer and has been for well over a century. He knew your father quite well, although that was a long time ago."

Damon didn't respond to that item of delicately trailed bait. When the silence had lasted five or six seconds, Yamanaka spoke again in an awkward manner to which he was plainly unaccustomed. "I ought to inform you that there was an unfortunate incident shortly after you left Molokai-an explosion aboard the Kite. Rescuers picked up a dozen survivors, but there was no sign of Karol Kachellek."

Damon turned to look at him, feeling that insult was being heaped upon injury. "Karol?" he said helplessly. Numbly, he noted that the Interpol man had said "incident" rather than "accident."

"I'm afraid so," Yamanaka said. "It seems probable that he's dead, although no body has been found."

"Murdered?"

"We don't know that. The investigation is continuing."

"Am I a suspect in that investigation too?" Damon asked abrasively. "Do you think I went to Molokai to plant a bomb on my foster father's boat?" He didn't expect an answer to that and he didn't get one, so he

quickly changed tack. "Is Eveline okay?"

"So far as we know," the man from Interpol said, with a slight sigh that might have been relief at the opportunity to impart some good news. "I'm very concerned, though, for the safety of Silas Arnett. If you have any information regarding the identity of the persons responsible for his abduction I implore you to tell me without delay. We've now received several communications from someone who claims to be the real Operator one-oh-one, disowning all the recent notices posted under that alias. It's difficult to confirm her story, of course, but given that she's incriminating herself I'm inclined to believe her. It has always seemed to me that this business could not be the work of Eliminators, unless some powerful organization had suddenly decided to commit its resources to the cause of Elimination. I find that hard to believe."

"How old is the woman who claims to be the original Operator one-oh-one?" Damon asked curiously.

"She's a hundred and five now," Yamanaka told him, "but that's a side issue. My most urgent concern is the safety of Silas Arnett. Now that those confessions have been released..."

"They were fakes," Damon told him.

"Painfully obvious fakes," Yamanaka agreed, "which could easily have been made without Dr. Arnett's active involvement. That's what worries me. If his kidnappers didn't actually need him, but only needed to remove him from the scene, they might have killed him before they removed him from his house. Now that we've found Dr. Nahal's body, there seems to be more than adequate cause for concern."

"You don't really think I had anything to do with that, do you?" Damon asked gruffly.

"You commissioned Madoc Tamlin to look for Dr. Nahal.

When the local police discovered Tamlin at the murder scene he attacked them with a crowbar and ran away."

"I commissioned Madoc to collect some information," Damon said defensively. "I can't believe he'd involve himself in a murder-that's not his style at all. You can't be serious about holding Diana as an accomplice."

The man from Interpol wouldn't confirm or deny his seriousness. Instead, he said: "Dr. Arnett's supposed confession was an interesting statement, wasn't it? Food for thought for everyone- and food which will be all the more eagerly swallowed for being dressed up that way."

"It was rubbish," Damon said.

"I dare say that Dr. Arnett was correct about the effect the Crash had, however," Yamanaka went on. "The way he spoke in his second statement about bringing people together was really quite moving. The idea that for the first and only time in human history all humankind was on the same side, united against the danger of extinction, is rather romantic. The world isn't like that anymore, alas. That's a pity, don't you think?"

"Not really," Damon replied, wondering where this was leading. He knew that the Japanese were supposed to have made a fine art of beating around the bush before coming to the point, but the man from Interpol hadn't previously shown any particular inclination to circumlocution. "A world devoid of conflicts would be a very tedious place to live."

"I take your point," Yamanaka conceded, "but you are a young man, and even I can barely imagine what the world was like before and during the Crash. I wonder, sometimes, how different things might seem to the very old: to men like Rajuder Singh, Surinder Nahal, and Karol Kachellek, and women like Eveline Hywood and the real Operator one-oh-one. They might be rather disappointed in the world they made, and the children they produced from their artificial wombs, don't you think? They were hoping to produce a Utopia, but... well, no one could convincingly argue that the meek have inherited the world-at least, not yet."

Damon didn't know what the policeman might read into any answer he gave, so he prudently gave none at all.

"Sometimes," Yamanaka added, in the same offhandedly philosophical tone, "I wonder whether anyone can inherit the world, now that people who owned it all in the days before the Crash believe that they can live forever. I'm not sure that they'll ever let go of it deliberately... and such fighting as they'll have to do to keep it will be mostly among themselves."

He thinks he's figured it out, Damon thought, with a twinge of grudging admiration. He's asking for my help in finding the evidence. And why shouldn't I cooperate, if people are actually dying? Why shouldn't I tell him what I know ... or what I believe? "My father never owned more than the tiniest slice of the world," he said aloud, by way of procrastination. He was awkwardly conscious of the fact that he had said my father instead of Conrad Helier. "He was never a corpsman, and never wanted to be."

"Your father remade and reshaped the world by designing the New Reproductive System," Yamanaka replied softly. "The corpsmen who thought the world was theirs to make and shape might well have resented that, even if he never disturbed their commercial empire. Men of business always fear and despise Utopians, even the ones who pose no direct threat to them. The corpsmen probably resent your father still, almost as much as the Eliminator diehards resent them."

"He's been dead for fifty years," Damon pointed out. "Why would corpsmen want to waste their time demonizing the dead?" He hoped that Yamanaka might be able to answer that one; he certainly had no answer himself.

"His collaborators are still alive," Yamanaka countered-and then, after a carefully weighed pause, added: "or were, until this plague of evil circumstance began."

Twenty

By the time the two cars reached the local Interpol headquarters Damon had decided to continue the strategy that he had reflexively undertaken while chatting informally to Hiru Yamanaka, and which he had employed in all his previous dealings with the police. He proceeded to deny everything. He told himself that his purpose was to conserve all the relevant information he had for his own future use, but he was uncomfortably conscious of his own inability to decide exactly what was relevant.

The strategy was not without its costs. For one thing, Yamanaka refused to let him speak to Diana Caisson-although Damon wasn't certain that he needed to rush into a confrontation as awkward as that one would inevitably prove to be. For another, it intensified Yamanaka's annoyance with him-which would be bound to result in an intensification of the scrutiny to which his life and actions were currently being subjected.

Yamanaka had obviously anticipated that Damon would not respond to his subtle overtures, although he put on a show of sorrow. He soon reverted to straightforward interrogation, although his pursuit of information seemed rather halfhearted. At first Damon took this to be a gracious acceptance of defeat, but by the time the interview was over he had begun to wonder whether Yamanaka might actually prefer it if he were out on the street inviting disaster rather than sitting snugly and safely in protective custody while Interpol chased wild geese.

"The claims made by the so-called real Operator one-oh-one are, of course, receiving a full measure of publicity," Yamanaka told him, with a dutiful concern that might well have been counterfeit. "They have not gone uncontradicted, but would-be assassins might not be inclined to believe the contradictions. Were you to return to your apartment right away, trouble might follow you. Were you to attempt to disappear into the so-called badlands in the east of the city, you might easily deliver yourself into danger."

"I can make my own risk assessments and responses," Damon told him. The fog was lifting now, and he was becoming more articulate by the minute. "You don't have any evidence at all to connect me to Surinder Nahal's death. As far as I can tell, you have nothing to connect Madoc and Diana to it either, except that they found the body before the local police. Maybe Madoc got a bit excited when the cops burst in on him, but that's understandable. It's not as if they did any real damage. Even if you press ahead with the assault charges, the fact that they might have gone to the place where they found the body on my behalf doesn't make me an accessory to the assault. Given that you don't have any charges to bring against me, I think you ought to let me go now."

"I can hold you overnight if I have reason to believe that you're withholding relevant information," Yamanaka pointed out, strictly for form's sake.

"How could I possibly know anything relevant to the assault?"

"Apparently," Yamanaka observed serenely, "you don't even know anything relevant to your own kidnapping. Given that you were unlucky enough to be kidnapped twice in a matter of hours, that seems a little careless."

"Karol's error of judgment wasn't a kidnapping at all," Damon said. "It was just a domestic misunderstanding. As for the second incident, I was asleep the whole time, from the moment I was gassed until the moment I woke up where Rachel Trehaine found me."

"Even so, Mr. Hart," Yamanaka observed, as a parting shot, "you seem to have become extraordinarily accident-prone lately. It might be unwise to trust your luck too far."

Damon didn't want to extend the conversation any further. He accepted a ride back to his apartment building, but the uniformed officer who drove the car didn't attempt to continue the interrogation.

When he'd taken time out to visit the bathroom and order some decent cooked food from the kitchen dispenser, Damon checked his mail. He wasn't unduly surprised or alarmed to find that there was nothing from Madoc Tamlin, although there were three messages from Diana Caisson, all dispatched from the building he'd just come from. There was nothing from Molokai, but there was, at long last, a curt note

from Lagrange-5, saying that Eveline Hywood would be available to take his call after nineteen hundred hours Greenwich Mean Time.

Damon subtracted eight hours and checked the clock, which informed him that he had half an hour still in hand. He double-checked the date to make sure that he had the right one—he'd lost an entire day between the time he'd been snatched from Karol Kachellek's secret hideaway and the morning he'd been picked up in Venice Beach.

By the time he'd changed and eaten a makeshift meal the half hour was almost up. He decided that he couldn't be bothered twiddling his thumbs until the hour struck, so he slipped inside his hood.

It would have been typical of Eveline to refuse the call until the appointed hour actually arrived, but she didn't. It wasn't an AI sim that answered the phone, but that didn't mean that the conversation would be eye-to-eye. The image floating in the familiar VE environment was being directly animated by Eveline Hywood, but it still had to be synthesized to edit out the hood she was wearing. Damon knew that Eveline would be giving no secrets away, in what she said or the way she looked, but he still wanted to hear what she had to say.

"Damon," she said pleasantly. "It's good to see you. I've been very worried about you. Is there any news of Karol or Silas?" Eveline knew perfectly well that if there had been any news it would have been relayed to her instantly, but she was putting on a show of concern. Damon noticed that the last time she had undergone somatic adjustment for her progressive myopia she had had her irises retinted. Her natural eye color was dark brown, but her irises were now lightened almost to orange. Given that the melanin content of her skin had been carefully maintained, the modified eyes gave her stare a curiously feline quality. It was easy enough to believe that she might be the prime mover in whatever plot had caused such intense annoyance to the recently self-appointed overlords of Earth.

"They're still missing," Damon confirmed. "I expect they'll turn up eventually, dead or alive. That's out of our hands, alas. Do you have any idea what's going on, Eveline?" He knew that he'd have to wait a little while for her answer; their words and gestures had a quarter of a million miles to traverse. The time delay wasn't sufficient to cause any real difficulties, and Eveline must be thoroughly accustomed to it, but Damon knew that he would find it disconcerting to begin with. While he waited, he looked at her appraisingly, trying to figure out exactly what kind of person she was. He had never managed to do that while they were living under the same roof.

He wondered why Eveline had designed the VE as a duplicate of her actual environment. Was she underlining the fact that she lived in deep space: the only foreign country left where things had to be done differently? In L-5, even a room decked out as simply as possible had to have all kinds of special devices to contain its trivial personal possessions and petty decorations. In space, nothing could be relied upon to stay where you put it, even in a colony which retained a ghost of gravity by virtue of its spin.

"Someone is evidently intent on blackening your father's name," Eveline told him, with an airy wave of her slender hand. "I can't imagine why. These self-appointed Eliminators seem to be getting completely out of hand. There are none up here, mercifully; L-Five isn't perfect, but it's a haven of sanity compared to Earth. I think it's because we're building a new society from scratch, without nations or corporations; because we have no history we feel no compulsion to maintain such ancient traditions as rebellion, hatred, and murder."

Damon didn't bother to question her certainty as to whether L-5 was really Eliminator-free, or corporation-free. It had taken so long to get through to her that he didn't want to waste any time. He knew perfectly well that he wasn't going to get any straight answers, but he wanted to know where he

stood, if she was prepared to tell him.

"Why is it happening now, Eveline?" he asked softly. "What brought your adversaries crawling out of the woodwork after all this time?"

"I have no idea," she said. Damon had to presume that she was lying, but that was only to be expected, given that this was far from being a secure call. They both had to proceed on the assumption that anyone with any interest in this convoluted affair might be listening in. If she wanted to give him any clues, she would have to do it very subtly indeed. Unfortunately, he and Eveline had been virtual strangers even while they were living under the same roof; they had no resources of common understanding to draw on.

Damon had opened his mouth to ask the next question before he realized that Eveline had only paused momentarily. "You might be better able to guess than I am," she added. "After all, this whole affair is really an attack on you, isn't it?"

"It seems to have turned out that way," he admitted. But it didn't start like that, he thought. That's a deflection, a diversionary tactic-for which you and my father's other so-called friends are partly responsible. You called the bet and raised the stakes. I'm just caught in the crossfire.

"Please be careful, Damon," Eveline said. "I know that we've had our differences, but I really do care about you a great deal."

Damon was glad to hear it. It was an encouragement to continue. Eveline could have shut him out completely, but it seemed that she didn't want to do that-or didn't dare to. "Could it have something to do with this stuff that you and Karol are investigating-these para-DNA life-forms?" he asked, biting the bullet. He expected her spoken answer to be a denial, of course, but he also expected it to be a lie. So far as he could judge, Karol's dabbling with the black deposit on the rocks of Molokai's shoreline was the only thing which could possibly make this a "very bad time."

"How could it have anything to do with that?" Eveline asked, frowning as if in puzzlement-but her synthesized stare was gimlet sharp. A flat denial would have instructed him to let the matter lie; the question was actively inviting further inquiry. Damon knew that he had to select his words very carefully, but he felt slightly reassured by the fact that his foster mother might be making a vital concession.

"I'm not sure," he said, in a calculatedly pensive manner. "Karol said there were two possibilities regarding its origins: up and down. He was looking at the bottom of the sea while you're looking for evidence of its arrival from elsewhere in the solar system." But he had a third alternative in mind when he said it, Damon left unsaid, and there is a third alternative, isn't there? The third alternative was sideways, and he searched Eveline's steady gaze for some confirmatory sign that she knew what he was driving at.

"That's right," Eveline said conversationally. "We're expecting two of our probes to start relaying valuable information back from the outer solar system within a matter of days. Karol's people will continue to work on the seabed samples, of course, but my own estimate of the probabilities is that they're unlikely to find anything. I think the Oort Cloud is the likelier source-but I've always had panspermist leanings, as you know. It's very difficult to be perfectly objective, even when you've been a scientist for more than a hundred years."

"It would be more interesting, in a way, if it had come from one of the black smokers," Damon said, hoping that she would not mind being challenged. "For one planet to be able to produce two different forms of life suggests an authentic creative verve. I always thought panspermia was a rather dull hypothesis, with its suggestion that wherever we might go in the universe we'll only find more of the

same."

"Sometimes," Eveline said, "the truth is dull. You can design virtual environments as gaudy and as weird as you like, but the real world will always be the way the real world is." She looked around as she said it at the scrupulously dull and slavishly imitative VE with which she had surrounded herself.

"Speaking of dull truths," Damon said, "I suppose you and my late father didn't really cause the Crash?"

"No, we didn't," she answered predictably. "When they find Silas, he'll put the record straight. He didn't really say any of those things-it's all faked. Just another virtual reality, as fantastic and ridiculous as any other. It's all lies-you know it is." Her eyes weren't fixed on his now; if he was reading her correctly, she was dismissing this topic and asking him to move on.

"Do you think there might be a new plague?" he asked mildly. "Might this para-DNA invader throw up something just as nasty as the old meiotic disrupters and chiasmalytic transformers?"

"That's extremely unlikely," she answered, just as mildly. "So far as we can tell, para-DNA is entirely harmless. Organisms of this kind will inevitably compete for resources with life as we know it, but there's no evidence at all of any other kind of dangerous interaction and it would be surprising if there were. Para-DNA is just something which happened to drift into the biosphere from elsewhere-almost certainly from the outer solar system, in my opinion. It's fascinating, but it's unlikely to pose any serious threat."

"Are you absolutely sure of that?" Damon asked, watching the luminous eyes.

"You know perfectly well that there's no absolute certainty in science, Damon," Eveline answered equably. "Investigations of this kind have to be carried out very carefully, and we have to wait until we have all the data in place before we draw our ultimate conclusions. All I can say is that there's no reason at present to believe that para-DNA is or could be dangerous."

"Of course," Damon said in a neutral tone. "I do understand that. It's interesting, though, isn't it? A whole new basis of life. Who knows what it might have produced, out there in the vast wilderness of space? I asked Karol whether it might be the gateway to a whole set of new biotech tools. Have you had much interest from the corps?"

"A little," Eveline said, "but I really can't concern myself with that sort of thing. This isn't a matter of commerce, Damon-it's far more important than that. It's a matter of enlightenment. I really wish you understood that-but you never did care much for enlightenment, did you?"

There had been a time when a dig like that would have stung him, but Damon felt that she was fully entitled. He was even prepared to consider the possibility that she might be right.

"A lot of people will be interested," he predicted, "even if there are no fortunes to be made. The corps will want to investigate the possibilities themselves. Para-DNA doesn't actually belong to you, after all. If you're right about its origins, it's just one more aspect of the universe-everybody's business."

"Yes it is," she agreed, looking sideways at the window which offered them both a view of the magnificent starfield. "Everybody's business. Anything we discover will be freely available to anyone and everyone. We're not profit minded."

"Nor is the Ahasuerus Foundation," Damon observed. "You and they have that in common-but I met a corpsman not long ago who contended that even the corps aren't really profit motivated anymore. He

suggested to me that the Age of Capital was dead, and that the New Utopia's megacorps have a new agenda."

"The problem with corporation people," Eveline said, with the firmness of committed belief, "is that you can never believe a word they say. It's all advertising and attention seeking. Science is different. Science is interested in the truth, however prosaic it might be." Again she looked sideways at the star field, which was not in the least prosaic, even in the context of the virtual environment.

"You would say that, wouldn't you?" Damon pointed out. "After all, you've given a lifetime to the pursuit of scientific truth, dull and otherwise. But I will try to understand, Eveline. I think I'm beginning to see the light. I wish you luck with your inquiries-and I hope that the kind of misfortune which seems so rife down here can't reach out as far as Lagrange-Five."

"I hope so too," Eveline assured him. "Take care, Damon. In spite of our past disagreements, we all loved you and we still do. We'd really like to have you back one day, when you've got all the nonsense out of your system." Her eyes were still uncommonly bright. They shone more vividly than he'd ever seen them shine before, or ever thought likely-but they didn't shine as brightly or as implacably as the stars that she could always look out upon, whether she were in her actual laboratory or its virtual simulation.

I know you'd like to have me back, Damon thought. I only wish you weren't so certain that there's nothing else I can do. All he said out loud was: "I'll be careful. Don't worry about me, Eveline. I understand that you've got more important things to do."

After he'd broken the connection Damon found that two images still lingered in his mind's eye: Eveline's eyes, and the star field at which she'd glanced on more than one occasion. Eveline wasn't one for idle sidelong glances; he knew that she'd been trying to make a point. He even thought he knew what point it was that she had been trying to make-but it was just a guess. Beset by confusions as he was, there was nothing he could do but guess. Unfortunately, he had no idea what reward there might be in guessing correctly, nor what penalty there might be if he jumped to the wrong conclusion.

In a way, the most horrible thought of all was that it might not matter in the least what he came to believe, or what he tried to do about it. The one thing he wanted more than to be safe and sound was to be relevant. He wanted to be something more than Catherine Prail; he wanted a part to play that might make a difference, not merely to his own ambitions but to those of his foster parents and those of the stubbornly mysterious kidnapers. If there were people in the world who thought it possible, reasonable, and desirable to play God, how could any young man who was genuinely ambitious be content to play a lesser role?

Twenty-one

Madoc Tamlin waited patiently while Harriet, alias Tithonia, alias the Old Lady, watched the VE tape that he'd found on the badly burned body. She sat perfectly still except for her hands, which made very slight movements, as if she were a pianist responding reflexively to some inordinately complicated

nocturne that she had to memorize.

Madoc knew that the Old Lady was concentrating very intently, because she wasn't just watching the recording; she was also watching the code that reproduced it, whizzing past in a virtual display-within-the-display. Over the years, Harriet had built up a strange kind of sensitivity to code patterns which allegedly allowed her to detect the artificial bridges used to link, fill in, and distort the "natural" sequences generated by digitizing camera work.

Madoc had never been admitted into Harriet's lair before; on the rare occasions when they'd met they'd done so on neutral ground. She'd made an exception this time, but not because he was on the run from the LAPD after clobbering one of their finest with a crowbar. She'd let him in because she was interested in the business he'd got mixed up in.

That was quite a compliment, although Madoc knew that it was a compliment to Damon rather than to him. It was Damon's mystery, after all; he was only the legman.

In order to get into the Old Lady's lair he'd had to undergo all the old pulp-fiction rituals: a blindfold ride in a car, followed by a blindfold descent into the depths of some ancient ruin in the Hollywood hills. Most people still avoided Hollywood, associating it with the spectacular outbreak of the Second Plague War rather than the long-extinct film industry, but Harriet wasn't like most people. There were hundreds of thousands-maybe millions-of centenarians in the USNA, but she was nevertheless unique.

Most people who lived to be a hundred had bought into IT in the early days; the brake had been put on their aging processes when they were in their thirties or forties, way back in the 2120s. No one knew exactly what Harriet had been doing in those days, but it certainly hadn't been honest or profitable. She'd been part of the underclass that had absorbed all the shit flying off the fan of the genetic revolution. In the previous century her kind had provided both plague wars with the greater part of their virus fodder, but Harriet had been born just late enough to miss the longest-delayed effects of those conflicts. Circumstances had dictated, however, that she continue to age at what used to be the natural rate until she was well into her seventies and the calendar was well into the 2150s. Apart from the usual wear and tear she'd had multiple cancers of an unusually obdurate kind-the kind that didn't respond to all the usual treatments. Then she'd been picked up by PicoCon as a worst-case guinea pig for the field trials of a brand-new fleet of nanomachines.

PicoCon's molecular knights-errant had gobbled up the Old Lady's cancers and stopped her biological clock ticking. They had snatched her back from the very threshold of death, and made her as fit and well as anyone could be who'd suffered seventy-odd years of more-than-usual deterioration. Nine hundred out of a thousand people in her situation would have been irredeemably set on the road to premature senility, and ninety-nine out of the remaining hundred would have keeled over as a result of some physical cause that the nanomech hadn't entirely set aside, but Harriet was the thousandth. Gifted with the poisoned chalice of eternal old age, she'd gone on and on and on-and she was still going on, nearly forty years later. She was a walking miracle.

In a world full of old ladies who looked anywhere between forty and seventy years younger than they actually were, Harriet was the Old Lady, Tithonia herself. Madoc knew, although most of her acquaintances did not, that her second nickname came from some ancient Greek myth about a man made immortal by a careless god, who'd forgotten to specify that he also had to stay young.

Even as a walking miracle, of course, Harriet alias Tithonia would have been no great shakes in a world lousy with miracles. PicoCon had a new one every day, all wrapped up and ready for the morning news, with abundant "human interest" built in by the PR department. Harriet had taken it upon herself to

become more than a mere miracle, though; she'd become an honest-to-goodness legend. Almost as soon as she was pronounced free of tumors she'd reembarked on a life of crime, mending her ways just sufficiently to move into a better class of felonies.

"If I can't live every day as if it were my last, who can?" she was famous for saying. "I'm already dead, and this is heaven-what can they do to me that would make a difference?"

Madoc supposed that if the LAPD had really wanted to put Harriet out of business, lock her up, and throw away the key, they could probably have done it twenty years ago-but they never had. Some said that it was because she had powerful friends among the corps for whom she undertook heroic missions of industrial espionage, but Madoc didn't believe that. He knew full well that any powerful friends a mercenary happened to acquire were apt to be out of the office whenever trouble came to call, while the powerful enemies on the other side of the coin were always on the job. Madoc's theory was that the LAPD let Harriet alone out of respect for her legendary status, and because a few notorious adversaries on the loose were invaluable when it came to budget negotiations with the city.

Either way, Madoc and everyone else figured that it was a privilege to work with the Old Lady. That, as much as her efficiency, was why she was so expensive.

Harriet finally finished her scrutiny of the VE tape and ducked out from under the hood. Her face was richly grooved with the deepest wrinkles Madoc had ever seen and her hair was reduced to the merest wisps of white, but her dark eyes were sharp and her gaze could cut like a knife.

"The body had been burned, you say?" she questioned him-not because she didn't remember what he'd said but because she wanted it all set out in neat array while she put the puzzle together.

"Thoroughly," he confirmed. "It must have been covered in something that burned even hotter than gasoline, then torched." It was easy enough to see what Harriet was getting at. Whoever had committed the murder had had time. They could have torched the VE pack along with the body if they'd wanted to, or they could simply have picked it up and put it in a pocket. If they'd left it behind they had done so deliberately, in order that it would be found. The only hitch in that plan, Madoc assumed, had been that it was he and Diana who had found it instead of the police. Madoc, naturally enough, had brought it to the Old Lady instead of to Interpol.

"We're supposed to believe that the tape explains why the guy was killed," Harriet concluded.

"That's the way I figure it," Madoc admitted. "If that really is the original tape that was used as a base to synthesize Silas Arnett's confessions-or the first of them, at any rate, it identifies Surinder Nahal as the kidnapper in chief."

Madoc had inspected the tape himself before giving it to Harriet for more expert analysis. It contained a taped conversation between the captive Silas Arnett and another man, easily identifiable in the raw footage by voice as well as appearance as Surinder Nahal. Various phrases spoken by both men-but especially those spoken by Nahal, carefully distorted to make recognition difficult-had been used in the first of Arnett's two "confessions," but nothing Arnett had said on this tape amounted to an admission of guilt regarding any crime, past or present. On the other hand, there was no evidence on this tape that he had been tortured, or even fiercely interrogated.

"Insofar as the discovery points a finger at anyone," Harriet went on, "it implies that Arnett's friends took swift and certain revenge against Surinder Nahal because he tried to set them up, and left the VE pak on his body to explain why they killed him."

"Thus setting themselves up all over again," Madoc pointed out. "I think it stinks, but I'm not sure where the odor originates. How about you? Is the tape genuine? Is it really raw footage, or is it just a slightly less transparent lie than the one they dumped on the Web?"

"That's an interesting question," Harriet said.

"I know it is," Madoc said, trying not to let his exasperation show. "What's the answer?"

"I'll be honest with you, Madoc," Harriet said. "The tape's a fake. It's not a crude fake, but it's definitely a fake. Even Interpol could have determined that-probably. The fact that Silas Arnett still hasn't turned up would have alerted them to the same stink that reached your sensitive nostrils."

"So why the hesitation?" Madoc wanted to know.

"The thing is," the Old Lady said, "that I'm not sure how much deeper we ought to dig into this. You see, if Arnett's friends didn't kill the man whose body you found, then someone else did-and it certainly wasn't some dilettante Eliminator."

"I don't get it," Madoc said. "You're supposed to be the only ace Webwalker in the world who doesn't give a damn what she gets involved with. You're supposed to be utterly fearless."

"I am," she told him coldly. "This isn't a matter of watching my back, Madoc-it's you I'm worried about. Nobody's going to come after me, and I doubt that they intend to harm Damon Hart, but you're not part of the game plan. You might easily be seen as a minor irritation best removed from the field of play with the minimum of fuss. If this tape was really intended to fall* into Interpol's hands rather than yours the people who left it might be a trifle miffed, and they're not the kind of people you want to have as enemies. It's one thing to set yourself up as an outlaw, quite another to become a thorn in the side of people who are above the law."

Madoc stared at her. "Do you know who's behind all this?" he asked sharply.

"I don't know anything," she told him, "but I'm absolutely certain that I can make the right guess."

"Is that why you called it an interesting problem?"

"Yes it is-but what interests me is why, not who. It's the why that I can't fathom. The how has its intriguing features too, but I think I understand pretty well how the moves came to be played the way they were-I just can't figure out why the game's being played at all."

"Well," said Madoc a little impatiently, "what interests me at present is that Damon has disappeared. When I first got you involved, I admit, it was mainly a matter of money-Damon's money. I was just doing a job for him. I don't really care about Arnett, or Nahal, or Kachellek-but I do care about Damon."

"Damon's back," Harriet replied, raising her white eyebrows a fraction, as if she had only just realized that he didn't know. Maybe it hadn't occurred to her that a young man on the run couldn't keep his fingers on the pulse of things quite as easily as an old lady in hiding.

"Since when?" Madoc asked.

"Since this morning. That tap I put into Ahasuerus told me-not that they were trying to keep it a secret.

As soon as Trehaine found out that it was Damon she'd been sent out to find she called Interpol. Catherine Praill was with him. She's probably irrelevant, but the people who took Damon clearly wanted him back in play as soon as possible. That's why I'm fairly sure they won't hurt him. It's possible that he now knows far more than I do. Interpol will have him under a microscope, of course-it won't be easy for you to get to him without being picked up."

"I've got to get the tape to him," Madoc said, "and anything else you can give me. Who's doing this, Harriet? Who's jerking us all around?"

Harriet shrugged her narrow shoulders. "PicoCon," she said flatly. "OmicronA might be in it too, but PicoCon's board likes to keep these little adventures in-house. It's a matter of style. What I can't figure out is what they're so annoyed about and why they're tackling it in such a roundabout way. Compared with their irresistible juggernaut, Eveline Hywood's organization is a mere ant, which could be crushed underfoot on a whim. Ahasuerus might be a flea, but it's a flea that's already in their pocket, moneywise. This can't be everyday commercial competition, and it must be something that they find interesting, or they'd just stamp on it-but if it isn't about money...." She left the sentence unfinished.

"PicoCon," Madoc repeated wonderingly. "PicoCon kidnapped Silas Arnett and tried to frame Conrad Helier for causing the Crash? PicoCon blew up Kachellek's boat, torched Surinder Nahal's body, and strewed forged tapes and Eliminator bulletins all over the Net?"

"They're also handily placed for pushing messages under people's doors hereabouts-but for what it's worth, I don't think PicoCon did all of that. They just started the ball rolling. This business with the burned body and the VE pak is a counter-punch. I think Hywood's people did that-and I think they rigged the second confession too. They were supposed to roll over and beg for mercy, but they fought back instead. You have to admire them for it, but it might be unwise. Just because PicoCon used gentler methods first time around it doesn't mean that they won't use brute force to settle the matter. That's why I'm worried about you. If Kachellek really was blown up, you might be next on the list."

"I can't believe that cosmicorps play games like this," Madoc said wonderingly. "PicoCon least of all-they've got more than enough real work to occupy them."

"That's a matter of perspective," Harriet told him dryly. "You could say that there's a point at which any successful corporation becomes so big and so powerful that the profits take care of themselves, leaving the strategists with nothing to do but play games. Serious games, but games nevertheless. Attacking Conrad Helier's memory seems a trifle unsporting, though-terrible ingratitude."

"Ingratitude? Why? Helier's team was always strictly biotech, as far as I can work out. I thought PicoCon's fortune was based on inorganic nanotech. What did he ever do for them?"

"He gave them the world on a plate. PicoCon may be the engine churning out the best set pieces nowadays, but the New Reproductive System stabilized the board for them. The Crash put a belated end to unpoliced population growth, but Helier's artificial wombs made certain that the bad old days would never come back again. If Helier hadn't got the new apparatus up and running in time to become the new status quo, some clown would have engineered a set of transformer viruses to refertilize every woman under the age of sixty-five and we'd have been back to square one. You probably think the Second Plague War was a nasty affair, but that's because you read about it in the kind of history books which only tell you what happened and skip lightly over all the might-have-beens. If it hadn't been for Conrad Helier, you'd probably have had to live through the third round of the Not-Quite-Emortal Rich versus the Ever-Desperate Poor-and PicoCon would have spent the last half-century pumping out molecular missiles and pinpoint bombs instead of taking giant strides up the escalator to true emortality."

Madoc had to think about this for a minute or two, but he soon saw the logic of the case. New technologies of longevity were an unqualified boon in an era in which population had ceased to grow, even though access to them was determined by wealth. In a world whose poorer people were still producing children in vast numbers, those same technologies would inevitably have become bones of fierce contention, catalysts of all-out war.

"You don't suppose," he mused, "that Hywood and Kachellek might have done just that-engineered a set of viruses to refertilize the female population?"

"No, I don't," said Harriet. "Even if they were silly enough to work on the problem, they'd have the sense to bury their results. Anyway, the world now has the advantage of starting from a position of relative sanity instead of rampant insanity-if some such technology did come along I think ninety-nine women in every hundred would have the sense to say no. It would be interesting to know what Hywood and Kachellek have done-but it might be safer not to try to find out. As I said before, if they really did blow Kachellek's boat to smithereens with him in it. . . ."

"If?" Madoc queried.

"It really is a game, Madoc. Bluff and counterbluff, lie and counterlie. The one thing of which we can be certain is that nothing is what it seems to be-not just on the surface but way down through the layers. PicoCon is making a big issue out of the possibility that Conrad Helier is only playing dead. Maybe Kachellek's playing dead too. Maybe Surinder Nahal is only playing dead."

"If that burned body really was his," Madoc murmured, "he was putting on a very convincing act."

"That might be the whole point of the exercise. Do you want me to get a message to Damon for you?"

"Can you do that? Without the cops knowing, I mean."

"I think so-but you can't bring him here. I've used up so much borrowed time that I'll be dying way beyond my means whenever I go, but I still like to be careful. It's a matter of professional pride. You'll have to figure out a safe place-and he'll have to figure out how to get there without dragging Interpol in his wake. I'll set it up for you-but if you want my advice, you'll tell him to put the rest of his money back in the bank and call it quits, so that you can start playing Three Wise Monkeys. We're out of our league here. Nobody can fight PicoCon and win."

If you never play out of your league, Madoc thought, you never get promoted. All he said aloud, though, was: "Okay-I need to get a meeting set up as soon as possible. Damon will want the tape, and everything else I've got, whether he intends to fight or not."

"Don't be too sure of that," Harriet advised him soberly. "Things have moved fast-he might not be in the same frame of mind as he was when he sent you off on this wild goose chase. Now that he's had his little holiday, he might want to play Three Wise Monkeys too, and he might be prepared to cut you adrift and leave you to PicoCon's tender mercies-or to the LAPD's."

Her concern seemed genuine, but Madoc couldn't imagine that he needed it. You might know PicoCon, Old Lady, he thought, but you don't know Damon. He'd never change sides on me. Madoc was as certain of that as he needed to be-and even if he hadn't been, what choice did he have?

PART FOUR

Movers and Shakers

Twenty-two

After sitting through the second tape of his "confessions," Silas Arnett found himself looking out upon a pleasant outdoor scene: a wood, like the ones to the south of his house. A rich carpet of leaf litter was delicately dappled by sunlight streaming through the canopy. The gnarled boughs of the trees offered abundant perches to little songbirds whose melodies filled the air. It was a simulation of an ancient woodland, whose design owed more to nostalgia than historical accuracy.

Unfortunately, the pleasantness of the surroundings found no echo within his body. In the VE he was a mere viewpoint, invisible to himself, but that only served to place more emphasis on his sense of touch, which informed him that the conditions of his confinement were now becoming quite unbearable.

The subtle changes of position he was able to make were no longer adequate to counter the aching in his limbs. The chafing of the straps which bound his wrists and ankles was now a burning agony. It did no good to tell himself that by any objective standard these were very minor pains, no worse than those which constituted the everyday condition of millions in the days before IT. He, Silas Arnett, had grown fully accustomed to being able to control pain, and now that he could no longer do it he felt that he might easily die of sheer frustration.

A human figure came through the trees to stand before him.

It was dressed in a monk's habit, and Silas inferred that it was supposed to be male, but it was a modern secular monk, not a member of any religious order that might have been contemporary with an ancient forest. The ornament the monk wore around his neck was not a cross but a starburst: a symbol of the physicists' Creation rather than the redemptive sacrifice of the Christ whose veneration was now confined to a handful of antiquarians.

The man pushed the hood back from his forehead and let its fold fall upon his shoulders. Silas didn't

recognize the exposed visage; it was a handsome, serene face which bore the modest signs of aging that most monks considered appropriate to their station.

Silas wasn't fooled by the appearance. He knew that the mind behind the mask was the mind of his tormentor.

His "tormentor" had not, in the end, resorted to any very violent torture, but in his present condition Silas found it impossible to be grateful for that. Even had he been more comfortable, any gratitude he might have felt would have been tempered by the knowledge that even though he had not been cut or burned he had certainly been imprisoned, maligned, mocked, and misrepresented.

"That one looked even worse than the first one," he said, gritting his teeth against his discomfort and hoping that talk might distract him from his woe. "It really doesn't add anything. I can't see why you bothered."

"I didn't," said the monk. "That was someone else's work. I presume that your friends did it-you noticed, I dare say, that the underlying message was that what you and Conrad Helier did was both necessary and justified. On the surface, it begged to be identified as a mere lie, a vicious but half-baked slander, but that was double bluff. The subtext said: Even if it were true, it wouldn't be in the least terrible. Even if Conrad Helier did cause the Crash, he did it for the noblest of reasons, and it desperately needed to be done. He was a hero, not an enemy of mankind. When the original Operator one-oh-one indignantly blew her cover, by the way, she objected strenuously to my use of that particular phrase. She thinks that I should have said 'enemy of humankind.' She's of an age to be sensitive about that sort of thing-and I suppose a man of your age can probably sympathize with her."

Silas wasn't in the least interested in the authentic Eliminator's retention of outdated radfem sensibilities. "I suppose the subtext of that habit and starburst you're wearing," he said, "is that what you're doing to me is being done for the noblest of reasons- even though you won't deign to explain what they are."

"Nobility doesn't come into it," the monk told him. "I simply want Conrad Helier to come out of hiding. You were the bait. To be perfectly honest, I'm a little disappointed in him. Dumping that tape was a distinctly weak-kneed response to my challenge. The tape I left with the burned body was much cleverer-as we would all have had the chance to appreciate if Damon's troublesome friend hadn't got to the scene before the police and removed the evidence. I wish I knew whether your friends' failure to rescue you is a matter of incompetence, laziness, or a sacrifice move. They might actually have abandoned you to whatever fate I care to decide. Perhaps they think that it might inconvenience me more if nobody actually came to rescue you at all."

"Fuck this," Silas said vituperatively. "All this may be just a game to you, but I'm suffering. If you've done what you set out to do and don't intend to kill me, isn't it about time you simply let me go?"

"It's certainly time that someone came to get you," the monk admitted. "I'm truly sorry that Conrad Helier hasn't bothered to do it. Alas, I can't simply release you. This VE's fitted to a telephone, and I'm calling from elsewhere. The mechanical devices holding you in position require manual release."

"Someone was here earlier-actually in the room. You took care to let me know that when I first woke up."

"Everything had to be set up, and manually operated devices have to be put in place manually. As soon as you were secure, however, my helpers made themselves scarce. You've been alone for some time, excepting virtual encounters. You mustn't worry, though. I may have overestimated Conrad Helier's

resources or willingness to respond, but if he doesn't come for you soon Interpol or Ahasuerus will. That wouldn't suit my purposes nearly as well, but I suppose it might have to do."

"The reason you overestimated Conrad's resources and his willingness to respond," Silas snarled, "is that you simply can't bring yourself to accept that he's dead and buried."

"No," said the monk, "I can't. I know how he did it, you see- and I've proved it by repeating the trick. He's not too proud to repeat it himself, it seems. Karol Kachellek's gone missing, supposedly blown up by a bomb planted on the Kite by persons unknown. The implication, of course, is that whoever took you has also gone after Kachellek-but I didn't do it. I dare say a dead body will turn up in a day or two, suitably mangled but incontrovertibly identifiable by means of its DNA. By my count, that makes three men who are supposed to be dead but aren't. Where will it all end? It's beginning to look as if Helier is determined to call my bluff and sit tight no matter what."

It seemed to Silas that the only one who was sitting tight was him. He wriggled his torso, deliberately pushing against the back of the padded chair in the hope of countering the aches generated within his muscles. He dared not move his arms or legs in the same way because that would have made the restraining cords contract and cut into his raw flesh. It helped a little. "I'd hoped, of course, that Helier might be hiding out on the artificial island," the monk went OH, "but that was overoptimistic. He's off-world-probably a lot further from Earth than Hywood. Not that that's a bad thing, from my point of view. If Kachellek joins them the whole core of the team will be up, up, and away. I'd be prepared to settle for that-always provided that if they ever want to play in my sandpit again they'll accept my rules. Heaven forbid that we should ever succeed in crushing the spirit of heroic independence, when all we actually need to do is send it into space. If Conrad Helier does eventually come to get you, Silas, tell him that's the deal: he can follow his own schemes in heaven, but not on Earth. Anything he does down here has to be checked out with the powers that be, and if it isn't authorized it doesn't happen. He'll know who the message is from."

Silas remained stubbornly silent, although he knew that he was supposed to respond to this instruction. The twittering of virtual birds filled the temporary silence. Their voices seemed oddly insulting; the cycles of their various songs were out of phase, but the programmed nature of the chorus was becoming obvious. Damon Hart, Silas felt sure, would have used an open-ended program with an elementary mutational facility for each individual song, so that the environment would be capable of slow but spontaneous evolution.

As if he were somehow sensitive to Silas's thoughts, his captor said: "It begins to look as if Damon Hart's the only worthwhile card I've got. You really should have taken better care of that boy, Silas-you've let him run so far that you might never get him back. Do you suppose Conrad Helier might be prepared to sacrifice him as well as you?"

"You're crazy," Silas said sulkily. "Conrad's dead."

"I understand that you feel the need to keep saying that," the monk reassured him. "After all, you're still on the record, even if no one's ever going to play it back but me. You'll forgive me if I ignore you, though. Helier will have to come out eventually, if he wants to deal. I really don't want to foul his operation up. I admire his enterprise. All I want is to ensure that we're all playing on the same team, planning our ends and means together. We are all on the same side, after all-we'll get to where we're going all the sooner if we all pull in the same direction."

"Where are we going?" Silas asked. "And who's supposed to be doing the pulling? Exactly who are you?" Unable to resist changing the position of his legs he tried to do so without moving his ankles, but he

was no contortionist. He gasped as the ankle straps clutched at him.

If the real man behind the image of the monk could hear evidence of Silas's distress he ignored it. "Please don't be deliberately obtuse, Silas," he said in the same bantering tone. "We're going to the land of Cokaygne, where all is peace and harmony and everybody lives forever. But there can't be peace unless we find a peaceful way of settling our differences, and there won't be harmony unless we can establish a proper forum for agreeing on our objectives and our methods. That's all I want, Silas-just a nice, brightly polished conference table to which we can all bring our little plans and projects, so that they can all receive the blessing of the whole board of directors. As to who's doing the pulling, it's everyone who's making anything new-and those who make the most are pulling the hardest."

When the flaring pain in his ankles died down of its own accord Silas felt a little better. "Conrad never liked that kind of corpspeak," he growled, "or the philosophy behind it. If he were alive-which he isn't-you'd never get him to knuckle under to that kind of system. He always hated the idea of having to take his proposals and projects to panels of businessmen. He did it, when he needed finance-but he stopped doing it the moment he could finance himself. He'd never have gone back to it. Never in a million years."

"That's because he was a child of the old world," the monk said. "Things are different now, and although it's a little ambitious to start talking in terms of a million years I really do believe that we have to start thinking in terms of thousands. If Conrad Helier hadn't decided to drop out of sight, he'd be in a better position to see how much things have changed. If he participated in the wider human society even to the limited extent that Hywood and Kachellek do he'd still have his finger on the pulse of progress, but he seems to have lost its measure. I think he's fallen victim to the rather childish notion that those who desire to plan the future of the human race must remove themselves from it and stand apart from the history they intend to shape. That's not merely unnecessary, Silas, it's downright silly-and we can't tolerate it any longer."

Silas was busy fighting his anguish and couldn't comment. The other continued: "We don't have any objection to vaulting ambition-as I said before, we admire and approve of it-but Helier and his associates have to realize that there are much bigger fish in the pool now. We're just as determined to shape the future of the world as he is, and we have the power to do it. We don't want to fight, Silas-we want to work together. Helier is being unreasonable, and he must be made to see that. The simple fact is that if he can't be a team player, we can't allow him to play here. That goes for Eveline Hywood and Karol Kachellek too. People can't make themselves invisible by pretending to die, any more than they can exclude themselves from their social obligations by refusing to answer their phones. We have to make them see that-and in this instance, we includes you."

"I don't want to play," Silas told the man of many masks flatly. "I'm retired, and I intend to stay that way. All I want is out of here. If you want me to beg, I'm begging. Tell your machine to give me back my IT. At the very least, tell it not to grab me so hard every time I twitch. I couldn't break free if I tried."

"It won't be long now," the monk said. "If I'd realized in advance that Helier would play it this way I'd have made things easier for you. My people could have found you two days ago, and I didn't want to make it too easy. I really am sorry. I'll give Helier two more hours, and if nobody's found you by then I'll tip off Interpol. They should be able to get the local police to you within twenty minutes-it's not as if you were way out in the desert."

"Two fucking hours may seem like nothing to you," Silas muttered hoarsely, "but you aren't sitting where I am."

"Oh, pull yourself together, man. You're not going to die. You've got sore wrists and ankles, not a ruptured ulcer. I'm trying to make you understand something important. I could almost believe that you really have retired."

"I have, damn it! I got heartily sick of the whole fucking thing! I'm done working night and day in search of the biotech Holy Grail. I'm a hundred and twenty-six years old, for God's sake! I need time to rest, time to let the world go by, time without pressure. Eveline and Karol might have been entirely swallowed up by Conrad's obsessions, but I haven't. I watched Mary die and I watched Damon grow up, both of them so tightly bound by those obsessions that they were smothered. Damon had a life in front of him, but the only way Mary could break free, in the end, was to die. Not me. I retired."

"You really don't see, do you?" said the fake monk patronizingly. "You've never been able to break free from the assumptions of the twenty-first century. In spite of all that IT has achieved, you still take death and decay for granted. You think that your stake in the world will end in ten or twenty or fifty years' time, when the copying errors accumulated in your DNA will have filled out your body with so many incompetent cells that all the nanomachines in the world won't be able to hold you together."

"It's true," Silas growled, surprising himself with the harshness of his voice. "Even men fifty of a hundred years younger than I am are being willfully blind if they think that advances in IT will keep pushing back the human life span faster than they're aging. Sure, it's only a matter of time before rejuve technology will cut a lot deeper than erasing wrinkles. It really will be possible to clear out the greater number of the somatic cells which aren't functioning properly and replace them with nice fresh ones newly calved from generative tissue-but only the greater number. Even if you really could replace them all, you'd still be up shit creek without a paddle because of the Miller effect. You do know about the Miller effect, I suppose, even though you're not a biologist by trade or vocation?"

"I know what the Miller effect is," the monk assured him. "I'm thoroughly familiar with all the brave attempts that have been made to produce a biotech fountain of youth-even those made way back at the dawn of modern history, when Adam Zimmerman was barely cold in his cryonic vault. I know that there's a fundamental difference between slowing aging down and stopping it, and I know that there's an element of paradox in every project which aims to reverse the aging process. I'm not claiming that anyone now alive can become truly emortal no matter how fast the IT, escalator moves. I might have to settle for two hundred years, Damon Hart for two-fifty or three hundred. Even embryos engineered in the next generation of Helier wombs for maximum resistance to aging might not be able to live much beyond a thousand years-only time will tell. But that's not the point.

"The point, Silas, is that even if you and I won't be able to play parent to that new breed, Damon's generation will. Conrad Helier and I must be reckoned mortal gods-but the children for whom we hold the world in trust will be an order of magnitude less mortal than we. The world we shape must be shaped for them, not for old men like you. Those who have had the role of planner thrust upon them must plan for a thousand years, not for ten or a hundred.

"Conrad Helier understands that well enough, even if you don't-but he still thinks that he can play a lone hand, sticking to his own game while others play theirs. We can't allow that. We aren't like the corpsmen of old, Silas-we don't want to tell you and him what to do and we don't want ownership of everything you and he produce, but we do want you both to join the club. We want you both to play with the team. What you did in the Crash was excusable, and we're very grateful to you for delivering the stability of the New Reproductive System, but what Conrad Helier is doing now has to be planned and supervised by all of us. We have to fit it into our schemes."

"Exactly what is it that you think Conrad's followers are doing?" Silas asked curiously.

"If you don't know," the monk replied tartly, "they must have been so deeply hurt by your decision to retire that they decided to cut you out entirely. Even if that's so, though, I'd be willing to bet that all you have to do is say you're sorry and ask to be let back in. You really should. I can understand that you felt the need to take a holiday, but people like us don't retire. We know that the only way to make life worth living is to play our part in the march of progress. We may not have true emortality, but we have to try to be worthy of it nevertheless."

"Cut the Eliminator crap," Silas said tersely. "You're not one of them."

"No, I'm not," the monk admitted, "for which you should be duly thankful. I do like the Eliminators, though. I don't altogether approve of them-there's too much madness in their method, and murder can no longer be reckoned a forgivable crime-but I like the way that they're prepared to raise an issue that too many people are studiously avoiding: who is worthy of immortality? They're going about it backwards, of course-we'll never arrive at a population entirely composed of the worthy by a process of quasi-Darwinian selection-but we all need to think about the myriad ways in which we might strive to be worthy of the gifts of technological progress. We are heirs to fabulous wealth, and the next generation will be heirs to an even greater fortune. We have to make every effort to live up to the responsibilities of our inheritance. That's what this is all about, Silas. We don't want to eliminate your estranged family-but they have to acknowledge the responsibilities of their inheritance. The fact that they played a major role in shaping that inheritance doesn't let them off the hook."

"And if they won't?" Silas wanted to know.

"They have to. The position of God isn't vacant anymore. The privilege of Creation has to be determined by negotiation. Conrad Helier may be a hundred and thirty-seven years old, but he's still thinking and still learning. Once we get through to him, he'll understand."

"You don't know him as well as I do," Silas said, having finally become incapable of guarding his tongue so carefully as never to let any implication slip that Conrad Helier might not be dead.

"There's time," his captor assured him. "But not, I fear, for any further continuation of this conversation. I don't know who, for the moment, but somebody has finally managed to locate you. I hope we'll meet again, here or in some other virtual environment."

"If we ever meet in real space," Silas hissed with all the hostility and bravado he could muster, "you'd better make sure that your IT is in good shape. You'll need it."

The woodland blanked out, leaving him adrift in an abstract holding pattern. He heard a door crash inwards, battered down by brute force, and he heard voices calling out the news that he was here. He felt a sudden pang of embarrassment as he remembered that he was nearly naked, and knew that he must present a horribly undignified appearance.

"Get me out of this fucking chair!" he cried, making no attempt at all to censor the pain and desperation from his voice.

The hood was raised from his eyes and tilted back on a pivot, allowing him to look at his cell and his rescuer. The light dazzled him for a moment, although it wasn't very bright, and he had to blink tears away from the corners of his eyes.

There was no way to identify the man who stood before him, looking warily from side to side as if he

couldn't believe that there were no defenders here to fight for custody of the prisoner; the newcomer's suitskin had a hood whose faceplate was an image-distorting mask. He was carrying a huge handgun that didn't look like a standard police-issue certified-nonlethal weapon.

"I think it's okay," Silas told the stranger. "They left some time ago. Just cut me loose, will you?"

The stranger must have been looking him directly in the face, but no eyes were visible behind the distorting mask.

"Who are you?" Silas asked as it dawned on him belatedly that his troubles might not be over.

The masked man didn't reply. A second man came into the room behind him, equally anonymous and just as intimidatingly armed. Meanwhile, the first man extended his gun-holding its butt in both hands-and fired at point-blank range.

Silas hadn't time to let out a cry of alarm, let alone to feel the pain of the damage that must have followed the impact or to appreciate the full horror of the fact that without his protective IT even a "certified-nonlethal" shot might easily be the death of him.

Twenty-three

Damon was intending to call Interpol anyway, so the fact that U his phone hood lit up like a firework display commanding him to do exactly that didn't even make a dent in his schedule. It did worry him, though; no one got a five-star summons like that unless there was something far more important on the agenda than his ex-girlfriend's bail bond.

Hiru Yamanaka took Damon's incoming call personally. Interpol's phone VE was stern and spare but more elaborate than Damon had expected. Mr. Yamanaka was reproduced in full, in an unnaturally neat suitskin uniform, sitting behind an imposing desk. The scene radiated calm, impersonal efficiency-which meant, Damon thought, that it was as inaccurate in its implications as the most blithely absurd of his own concoctions.

"What's happened?" Damon asked without preamble.

"Thank you for calling, Mr. Hart," the inspector said with a determined formality that only served to emphasize the falseness of his carefully contrived inscrutability. "There are several matters I'd like to discuss with you." The inspector's eyes were bleak, and Damon knew that things must have taken a turn for the worse-but he also knew that Yamanaka would want to work to a carefully ordered script. The inspector knew that Damon was holding out on him, and he didn't like it.

"Go on," Damon said, meekly enough.

"Firstly, we've received the medical examiner's final report on the body discovered in the house where Miss Caisson was arrested. DNA analysis confirms that it's the body of Surinder Nahal. The ME estimates that the time of death was at least two hours before Miss Caisson and Madoc Tamlin arrived on the scene, so we're certain that they didn't kill him, but it has become a matter of great urgency that we see the VE pak which your friend removed from the scene. We have reason to believe that it might contain valuable evidence as to the identity of the real killer and the motive for the crime."

What reason? Damon wondered. "I'd be very interested to see it myself," he countered warily. "Unfortunately, I haven't been able to contact Madoc. I presume, then, that you'll be releasing Diana immediately?"

"I'm afraid not," Yamanaka told him. "The local police are still considering the possibility of charging her with illegal entry- and she was of course an accessory to the assault."

"So charge her and bail her out."

"I'm reluctant to do that until I've talked to Madoc Tamlin," the inspector told him.

"You can't hold her hostage, Mr. Yamanaka."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Yamanaka assured him, "but until Tamlin and the VE pak are safely in my hands, I can't be sure of the exact extent of her culpability." The virtual atmosphere was still heavily pregnant with some vital item of information that Yamanaka was carefully withholding.

Damon fought to suppress his annoyance, but it wasn't easy. "You must know as well as I do that the VE pak is an ill-wrapped parcel of red herring that's already begun to stink," he told the inspector waspishly. "The same is probably true of its resting place."

Yamanaka didn't raise an eyebrow, but it seemed to Damon that the policeman's synthesized gaze became more tightly focused. "Do you have any evidence to support the conjecture that the body is not that of Surinder Nahal?" the inspector asked sharply.

"No, I don't," Damon admitted, "but the evidence that it is could have been cooked up by a biotech team with the necessary expertise just as easily as a fake VE tape. If whoever is behind the kidnapping really is convinced for some reason that Conrad Helier faked his own death, it would be only natural for him to hire a bioengineer with a similar background to repeat the trick. Ask yourself, Inspector Yamanaka-if you were in that position, who would you have hired to do the job?"

"I'm a policeman, Mr. Hart," Yamanaka reminded him. "However difficult it may be, my job is to collect evidence and build cases. You, on the other hand, are a citizen. Your duty, however you might resent it, is to obey the law and give what assistance you can to my investigation. That VE pak was taken from a crime scene, which makes it evidence-and I'd be very annoyed if anyone tampered with it before handing it in."

"If I can get the VE pak for you," Damon said bluntly, "will you drop all the charges against Madoc and Diana?"

"That's not my decision," Yamanaka replied unyieldingly.

Damon gritted his teeth and paused for a few seconds, instructing himself to remain calm. "What else?"

he asked. "What's happened to heat things up?"

"We've found another body," the inspector told him bleakly.

"Karol's?" Damon asked, although he knew that was the lesser of the two probable evils.

"No-Silas Arnett's. He was found in a body bag dumped in the middle of a road up in the Hollywood Hills. Police officers conducting a routine search of the neighborhood found a chair identical to that displayed in the first broadcast tape in a house nearby. There were bloodstains on some recently severed straps that had been used to bind a man's wrists and ankles to the chair. There were several spy eyes in the walls of the room, all of them on short loop times. The tapes we've recovered show Arnett being shot in the chest while still confined. The man in the body bag died from exactly such a gunshot-without his internal technology, he had no effective defenses against such an injury."

Damon was silent for a few moments, absorbing this news.

"Does the tape show the shooter?" he asked.

"Yes, but he's unidentifiable. His suitskin had a face mask. He had a companion, similarly masked."

"But you think they're Eliminators-and you suspect that the VE pak left on the burned body will be a similar record of an execution."

"The body bag was presumably placed in the road in order to draw attention to the house, and to the tape," Yamanaka said. "That seems consonant with the hypothesis that the shooting was the work of Eliminators."

Damon couldn't be sure whether the careful wording was routine scrupulousness, or whether Yamanaka was laying down a red carpet for any alternative explanation Damon might have to offer. Damon had already laid the groundwork for a rival account by suggesting that the burned body Madoc had found wasn't Nahal's at all but merely some dummy tricked out to seem like Nakal's, possibly designed by Nahal himself-but Silas Arnett's body hadn't been burned to a crisp.

We haven't killed anyone, the mirror man had said-but he had certainly exposed the people he had named to the danger of Eliminator attack. Now Karol's boat had been blown up, and Silas Arnett had been shot. If Conrad Helier had faked his own death, perhaps he had faked those incidents too-but that if was looming larger by the minute. Nor was Silas the only one who had been exposed to possible Eliminator wrath by the mirror man's stupid broadcasts. Damon was the only one alive who had been forthrightly condemned as an "enemy of mankind."

There was still a possibility, Damon told himself, that this was all a game, all a matter of carefully contrived illusions piled up tit-for-tat-but if it weren't, he could be in big trouble. The question was: what did he intend to do about it?

"Your people always seem to be one step behind, Mr. Yamanaka," he observed, by way of making time to think.

"So it seems," the inspector agreed. "I think it might help if you were to tell us everything you know, don't you? Surely even you must see that the time has come to give us the VE pak."

It was the "even you" that did it. Damon felt that he had troubles enough without insult being added to

injury.

"I don't have it," he snapped. "I don't have anything that you could count as evidence."

Yamanaka's image didn't register any overt trace of disappointment or annoyance, but the lack of display had to be a matter of pride. Yamanaka still had one card up his sleeve, and he didn't hesitate to play it in spite of its meager value. "Miss Caisson is very anxious to contact you, Mr. Hart," he said. "I'm sure she'd be grateful if you'd return her calls."

"Thanks for your concern," Damon said dryly. "I'll do that. Please call me if you have any more news." He broke the connection and immediately called the number Diana had inscribed on his answering machine in letters of fire that were only a little less clamorous than Interpol's formal demand.

The LAPD's switchboard shunted him into a VE very different from the one Hiru Yamanaka had employed: a pseudophotographic image in which Diana was seated in a jail cell behind a wall of virtual glass. Fortunately, she seemed more relieved than angry to see him. She hadn't forgiven him anything, but she was desperate for contact with the outside world.

"I've just been talking to Yamanaka," Damon said, by way of preemptive self-protection. "I told him to charge you and bail you if he wasn't prepared simply to release you, but he won't do it. He's got dead bodies piling up all over the place, and he wants Madoc badly. He'll be forced to let you go eventually, but you'll have to be patient."

"This is crazy, Damon," Diana complained. "They must know that we didn't kill the guy. We didn't even know the body was there."

"They know you didn't kill him," Damon reassured her. "What on earth possessed you to go there? Why was Madoc fool enough to let you?"

"I was only trying to help," Diana said defensively.

"Thanks," Damon said, for diplomatic reasons. There was no point in contradicting her, even though it was a blatant lie. "I'm sorry you got involved in this, Di-but I'll do my best to make sure that you get out clean."

"If the Eliminators are after you," she told him sharply, "I'm hardly likely to stand idly by and let them get you, am I? Just because we fell out over private matters doesn't mean that I want you hurt."

For the sake of eavesdroppers, Damon said: "As soon as Madoc contacts me I'll tell him to turn himself in and hand the VE pak to Interpol. I'll pay for his lawyer and any fine he incurs. Neither of us ever intended our investigation to overstep the limits of the law, and I'll make certain that there are no further transgressions."

"And what then?" she asked, presumably hoping that he might have an olive branch ready to extend to her.

"I might have to go away for a while," he said.

"Where?" she wanted to know. She was trying hard to cling to a forgiving mood-or at least the appearance of one-but all her resentments were still bubbling away beneath the surface.

"I don't know. I've been out of touch with my family for too long; it might be a good idea to rebuild some bridges. If Karol and Silas really are dead I ought to see Eveline, even if it means a trip into space. There's just the two of us now, it seems-and I hear that one can get a very different perspective on things from L-Five. One that helps a lot of things become clear."

Diana looked at him as if she thought he might be taunting her. In her view, the first person he ought to be seeing with a view to putting things right was her. "And then what?" she said, not bothering to apply the brake to the escalation of her anger.

"I don't know, Di," Damon said, refusing to be drawn. "I haven't thought any further ahead than that. Just sit tight for a while, okay? You'll be out soon."

As soon as she realized that he had no intention of sticking around for a row, her rising anger melted into mere anxiety. "Don't go," she said swiftly. "We really need to talk, Damon- to straighten things out."

"Those things are already straightened out," he said as gently as he could. "None of this concerns you, Di. I didn't know you'd gone to Madoc when I asked him to help me. I suppose I'd have asked him anyway, because he was the one who seemed best placed to help me out-but to be honest, Di, your involvement is a complication I could well do without. Let's leave things as they are, shall we?"

"You ungrateful bastard!" she howled as the anger returned in full force. "After all I've done for-"

"I don't have time for this, Di," Damon said brutally-and broke the connection.

He remained silent and still in the ensuing darkness for a few moments while he collected himself, and then he returned himself to one of his own customized VEs: one which made it appear that he was imprisoned within a vast multifaceted gem. He set up his other messages on a virtual lectern and began to scroll through them tiredly, fearful of finding some Eliminator threat that would further intensify his confusion and anxiety. Mercifully, nothing of that kind seemed to be lurking among the more usual junk.

Had he been in a more conventional holding pattern Damon would have noticed the flicker earlier, but it hardly showed up against the dazzling crystalline background and its first effect was to communicate an unfocused and near-subliminal awareness that something was slightly out of kilter. He glanced around anxiously for a moment or two, wondering whether there was some kind of glitch in his code reader, before he realized what was happening-at which point he returned his attention to the lectern and tried to look as if he were engrossed in the routine business of informational triage.

Having dumped all the electronic junk and sorted the scant remainder, Damon called Karol's base at Molokai, to ask for news of the men injured in the explosion aboard the Kite. The man summoned by the AI answerphone to take the call evidently knew who Damon was, although Damon didn't recall seeing him on Molokai, but he seemed to have classified Damon as an outsider, if not a hostile witness. He gave a brusque rundown of the injuries sustained by crewmen Damon had never met but said that Karol hadn't yet been found, dead or alive.

Damon put on a show of profuse apologies and deep concern, in the course of which he asked his impatient informant for permission to switch the call into one of his own VEs. When the other shrugged his shoulders Damon decanted them into a pleasantly moonlit meadow. The signal hidden within the flicker was easier to read there, but Damon carefully gave no indication that he was paying attention to anything other than the tense features of Karol's associate.

He learned nothing of interest except that Rajuder Singh had made a full recovery from his "accidental

injuries" and had joined in the search for Karol-or for Karol's body. His informant didn't react to the news that Silas Arnett had been found dead.

"Have you got the centipedes out of the island's systems?" Damon asked mischievously. "It must have been very inconvenient to have the elevator out of commission."

"Everything is under our full control once again," the other informed him brusquely, "but we still have a great deal of work to do. I must go now."

"I've a lot to do myself," Damon assured him, having made his own decisions. "I'll call again for further news of Karol."

When he came out from under the hood Damon immediately went to the bathroom and took a shower. He scrubbed himself as thoroughly as he could, although he knew full well that there were bugs on the market nowadays that no amount of scrubbing could remove. He had to hope that the people who'd taken him to the foothills of Olympus and lied to him about his ability to fly hadn't been able to see any reason for getting under his skin- or that if anything had been planted under his skin his own internal technology had been able to take care of the intrusion.

He went into the bedroom to put on a fresh suitskin, but he didn't take his beltback or sidepouch from the bedside table where he'd laid them down. The only things he picked up were two swipecards that had been lurking at the back of a drawer let into the beside table; these he placed in a pocket in the lower element of the suitskin.

After leaving the apartment Damon stopped the elevator at street level instead of going down into the car park. He went out into the street, nodding politely to Building Security's desk man as he passed by, and ambled along the crowded pavement, checking the reflections in a number of plate-glass windows just in case he was dealing with people who thought that the unsophisticated approach was best.

By the time he'd taken three turns he had identified the man who was following him. It seemed infinitely more likely that the tail was one of Yamanaka's men rather than an Eliminator, but Damon knew that no one could prove that he had even considered the possibility, and he wasn't feeling much better disposed toward the forces of law and order than he was to crazy assassins.

Damon took another turn down a service alley cluttered with recycling bins that had been richly fed with the litter of a dozen stores and businesses. He had plenty of time to duck out of sight behind the second bin before his pursuer turned the corner.

The man who moved furtively into the alley, anxiously craning his neck for some sign of his target's passage, was at least five centimeters taller than Damon and eight or ten kilos heavier. Damon knew that if he were a cop he'd also have taken lessons in the art of self-defense-but Damon had a much more extensive education in the art of attack. When his follower reached the dump bin Damon went for him without delay, aiming his first kick at the inside of the man's knee and the first upward sweep of his hand at the Adam's apple.

Damon didn't pause when his opponent went down. He kicked again and again, as hard as he could. He knew that the man's IT would take care of the damage, but that didn't figure in his calculations. He was glad of the opportunity to hit back at his persecutors, knowing that this time there would be no gas grenades to interrupt him.

Until he had laid the man unconscious, Damon had not known how much anger and frustration had been pent up in him, but the exhilaration of the whirlwind action had hardly begun the work of purging it. He felt a perverse stab of disappointment when no one else appeared in the alley's mouth to provide a further challenge.

He knelt down beside his victim and checked the pouches in the man's beltpack. There was nothing to identify him; like Damon, he was carrying no identifiers save for a gnomish set of unmarked swipecards. Damon picked these up by the edges, wondering whether it might be worth keeping the swipecards to see what might be retrieved electronically therefrom. He knew, though, that if the man were a policeman it wouldn't be a good idea to be found in possession of stolen goods. In the end, he replaced the cards in the pouch.

Before Damon went on he landed one last gratuitous kick on the side of the stricken man's head, just in case he deserved it: one which would leave an ugly and very noticeable bruise.

As soon as he had put a safe distance between himself and the alley, Damon went into a clothing store. He bought a new suit-skin off the peg and left his own behind in the fitting room, transferring nothing to the new garment except the two swipecards. After leaving the store he booked into a public gym and took another shower, just in case his hair or skin had picked up any stray nanomachines while he had been getting rid of the inconvenient follower. Madoc had always advised him that the cleverest bugs were the ones that infected you after you figured that you'd purged them all.

As soon as he was finished in the gym Damon moved away from the busier streets toward ones which were less well-equipped with eyes and ears, taking shortcuts whenever they became available and changing direction five times to make any attempted analysis of his movements virtually impossible. Then he called into a bar so that he could look up Lenny Garon's address on the customers' directory terminal.

He thought it best to move once more before getting down to the serious business of the day, so he slipped out into the street again and wandered into a run-down mall which had a row of terminal booths. All of them were empty.

Damon slotted one of the swipecards and immediately set to work, his fingers flying over the keyplate. He knew that he had less than two minutes in which to make his mark, and that he wouldn't be able to do much more than five minutes' worth of sabotage-but the evening traffic was already building up and five minutes would be enough to store up a wealth of trouble.

When he emerged from the mall again every traffic signal for at least a kilometer in all directions was on green, and the jams were building up at every intersection.

He'd estimated that five minutes of downtime ought to be enough to snarl up at least twenty thousand vehicles, creating a jam so tight that it would take at least an hour to clear. The pavements were jamming up almost as badly as the gridlocked vehicles, and tempers were soaring in the late afternoon heat with amazing rapidity.

Damon kept on ducking and dodging until he was certain that he was free and clear of all humanly possible pursuit, and then he began the painstaking business of making his way across town to his destination-the destination that had been coded into the flicker affecting his domestic VEs.

That flicker had used a code which he and Madoc Tamlin had worked out seven years before, so that they might exchange information while under observation, using their fingers or any object with which a

man might reasonably fidget. It was a crude code, but Damon still remembered every letter of the alphabet.

L-E-N-N-Y, the flicker had spelled out.

There was only one Lenny the signal could possibly refer to, and only one reason why Madoc might want him to visit the Lenny in question. Whether Madoc was with him or not, Lenny Garon had to have the VE pak which Madoc had stolen from under the noses of the LAPD-the one piece of the mirror man's carefully constructed puzzle which had been prematurely swept from the field of play.

Damon didn't imagine for a moment that whatever the VE tape had to show him would be any more reliable than the VE tapes of Silas Arnett's bogus confessions, but just for once he wanted to be a step ahead of all the people who were trying to push him around. Just for once, he wanted to be able to do things his way-whatever his way turned out to be, when he'd had time to think and time to make a plan.

Damon knew that he had to advise Madoc to turn himself in, but he had told Diana the truth when he said that he might have to go away, perhaps even to rebuild bridges linking him to his estranged family. Everything depended on what Madoc had found out about Silas's kidnappers and about what had really happened to Surinder Nahal.

Twenty-four

The capstack in which Lenny Garon lived was not one of the more elegant applications of gantzing technology-as was only to be expected, given that it dated back to a time before PicoCon had acquired the Gantz patents and begun the synergistic combination of Leon Gantz's exclusively organic technology with their own inorganic nanotech. In those days, gantzers had looked for models in nature which their trained bacteria might be able to duplicate without too much macrotech assistance, and they had come up with the honeycomb: six-sided cells laid out in rows nested one on top of another.

The pattern had the strength to support tall structures- Lenny's stack was forty stories high-but the resultant buildings had zigzag edges that looked decidedly untidy. The individual apartments came out like long square tubes with triangular-sectioned spaces behind each sidewall, into which all the supportive apparatus of modern life had to be built. Bathrooms and kitchens tended to be consigned to this inconvenient residuum, so that the square section only needed one dividing wall separating living room and bedroom.

All this might have seemed charming, in a minimalist sort of way, had it not been for the fact that the entire edifice in which Lenny Garon lived had been gantzed out of pale gray concrete rubble and dark gray mud. Beside the more upmarket blocks that had been tastefully decorated in lustrous pigments borrowed from flowering plants or the wing cases of beetles, Lenny's building looked like a glorified termite mound.

"Thanks for coming, Damon," Lenny said, anxiously blinking his eyes as he checked the corridor while

letting Damon into a capsule that was only slightly more squalid than the rest. "I really appreciate your giving me the benefit of your experience."

It took Damon a moment or two to realize that the boy was putting on a show for the eyes and ears that even walls as shabby as these must be expected to contain, in case anyone should ever consult them with a view to identifying accessories to a crime. He didn't bother to add his own line to the silly charade.

"Thanks, Lenny," Madoc said to the anxious streetfighter, once Damon was safely inside. "Now take a walk, will you. I'll pay you a couple of hundred in rent, but you'll have to forget you ever saw us, okay?"

Lenny was evidently disappointed by the abrupt dismissal, but he was appropriately impressed by the notion that he could sublet his apartment by the hour for real money. "Be my guest," he said-but he dawdled at the door before opening up again. "I hear you're an enemy of mankind now, Damon. Good going- anything I can do, you only have to ask."

"Thanks," Damon said. "I will."

As the door slid shut behind the boy Damon looked around the room, wondering why people still chose to live this way in a city full of empty spaces. While the greater part of Los Angeles slowly rotted down to dust-whole counties ripe for redevelopment by today's more expert gantzers-it was preference rather than economic necessity which kept its poorer people huddled together in neighborhoods full of high-rise blocks, living in narrow rooms with fold-down beds, kitchens the size of cupboards, and even smaller bathrooms.

Perhaps, Damon thought, people had grown so completely accustomed to crowding during the years before the Crash that their long-lived children had had the habit ingrained in their mental pathways during infancy, and there simply weren't enough children in Lenny Garon's generation to start a mass migration to fresher fields. That kind of explanation seemed, at any rate, to make more sense than oft-parroted cliches about buildings needing services and the proximity principles of supply and transport.

"I suppose you heard what happened?" Madoc said miserably.

"Yamanaka gave me the brute facts," Damon admitted. "I talked to Diana, but she had other things on her mind and it wouldn't have been a good idea to tell me anything the cops didn't already know. You found a VE pak-have you had a chance to play it through?"

"Sure. I took it all the way to the top-the Old Lady herself-so that we could play it through without anyone else looking in. It shows Silas Arnett being questioned by Surinder Nahal, giving answers very different from those he gave on the tape that was dumped on the Web. Do you want to see it? The Old Lady says it's just another fake, probably cooked up for Interpol's benefit."

"It doesn't show Nahal being killed?"

Madoc was infinitely more willing than Hiru Yamanaka to display his surprise. "No," he said, raising his eyebrows. "Why would it?"

"That's what Yamanaka's expecting. They found Silas dead and a tape that shows him being shot-as if it were an execution."

"Eliminators?" Madoc asked.

"That's what it looks like," Damon said with a sigh, "but we live in a very deceptive world. Unfortunately, the fact that it's only one more fake cooked up for his benefit won't make Yamanaka any less anxious to get his hands on the VE pak. Avoiding loss of face is just about the only thing left to him-he must know by now that the people behind this are out of reach. The police might think they're maintaining the law of the land, just as the Washington Rump still thinks it's in charge of making it, but the whole system is exhausted. When all appearances can be manufactured, the concept of evidence loses its meaning."

Madoc released the VE pak from where he'd loaded it into Lenny Garon's console and passed it over to Damon. "Do you know who's behind this?" he asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea," Damon admitted. "According to a dream I had when they snatched me away from Karol's friends, it's someone who claims to be speaking on behalf of the entire world order, but that might be megalomania or simple overstatement."

Madoc was so enthusiastic to say what he had to say that he didn't bother to query Damon's reference to a dream. "The Old Lady says that it's someone from PicoCon. Someone high up in the corp structure." He met Damon's eyes anxiously, looking for a reaction.

"That would make sense," Damon conceded. "It has to be someone with access to cutting-edge technology, and PicoCon is the edge beyond the edge. I'm sorry I got you into this, Madoc- I thought at first that it was just a petty thing. Nobody expects to go after an Eliminator Operator and run into the full might of PicoCon."

"The cops know that I didn't kill the guy whose body we found, don't they?" Madoc queried uneasily.

"Sure. Yamanaka knows that the corpse was torched several hours before you got there. His own surveillance team gave you a perfect alibi. If you say the cops spooked you-came in without a proper warning or whatever-you might excuse the blow with the crowbar as a reflexive response. The LAPD will want to pay off some of their grievances against you, but a decent lawyer ought to be able to persuade a judge to take a reasonable view of the matter."

"Who did kill him, do you think?" Madoc asked cautiously. "PicoCon?"

"I'm not sure that anybody did. I suspect that the orchestra-tor of this little pantomime is trying to establish that in today's world a body, an autopsy, and a DNA analysis don't add up to proof that someone is actually dead. The people behind this are convinced that Conrad Helier's alive, and they refuse to be told that he's not."

"Where did they get a body with Surinder Nahal's DNA?" Madoc wanted to know.

"Tissue-culture tanks that turn out steaks the size of a building could turn a half a liter of blood into a skeleton with a few vital organs and a covering of skin, without even needing rejuve technology to stretch the Hayflick limit. If Karol's body ever gets fished out of the Pacific, I suspect it'll be just as thoroughly beaten up and just as fake. None of which would prove anything about my father, who died in bed of natural causes-his cadaver would have gone to the medical examiner with every last anatomical detail in its proper place. As for Silas . . . well, it looks as if he really might be dead, but I don't know what to believe anymore. What else have you got for me?"

"Not much," Madoc admitted with an apologetic sigh. "The way the latest round of false testimony is being set in place, it looks as if this guy Nahal had some kind of grudge against your father and his

cronies that he'd been nursing for a hundred years. It looks as if Nahal had Arnett snatched, and that he put out the counterfeit Operator one-oh-one stuff himself-although the word is already out that the woman who built up the Operator one-oh-one name and reputation has turned herself in to prove that her name's been taken in vain. If you want stand-up proof that the real movers and shakers are PicoCon people, I don't have any-and I don't think you or I could ever come up with any. Do you think they killed Arnett so he couldn't retract his confessions?"

Damon shrugged. "I haven't been idling around while you've been battling it out with the LAPD," he said. "I got kidnapped twice-once by Karol's hirelings and once by some people who didn't want Karol's hirelings to put me away. The second crowd introduced me to the VE to end all VEs-a manufactured dream, of the kind the industry's been trying to develop for a century and more. It might have been a trick, and I suppose it might have been a real dream-but if it wasn't the spokesman for the movers and shakers gave me a message to pass on to my dead father. Then they stuck me in a derelict house with Lenny's friend Cathy to wait for the bloodhounds." After a slight pause he went on: "The Old Lady has to be right. No one but PicoCon could have access to VE tech that far ahead of the market-although the guy I talked to, whose image was all tricked out like some chrome-plated holoivid robot, spun me some line about products not being made for the market anymore."

"Lenny told me about Cathy," Madoc said. "Was she in on Arnett's kidnap?"

"I don't think so-although they probably planted the centipedes that disabled Silas's defenses in her luggage when they found out he'd invited her to stay. Her abduction was just a red herring. Whoever's doing this-and I mean the individual in charge of the operation, not the corp-believes in having his fun while he works."

"What was the message to your father?" Madoc asked curiously but tentatively. He obviously half expected to be told that it wasn't his business.

Damon didn't see any need to keep that particular secret. "Stop playing God," he said bluntly. When Madoc raised his eyebrows, expecting further elaboration, he added: "Apparently, everybody who's anybody wants to play God nowadays, and the big gods way up on Olympus are trying to figure out a set of protocols that will allow them all to play together. They want everybody to abide by the rules. If the story I was told can be taken seriously, this thing got started because my foster parents turned churlish when they were invited to join the club. So did the people at Ahasuerus. The alleged purpose of this little game is simply to force them to play ball, but the fact that it's being formulated as a game certainly doesn't mean that it's harmless. You know what they say: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.'"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Madoc demanded obligingly.

"It means that self-appointed gods inevitably begin to see everything as a game," Damon told him. "When you can do anything at all, you can only decide what to do at any particular moment on aesthetic grounds. Once you get past the groundwork of Creation, what is there to do with what you've made but play with it?"

Madoc picked up the thread of the argument readily enough. "Is that what your foster parents are doing? Playing a game with the world they made?"

Damon shrugged his shoulders. "If they are," he said, "they're being very secretive about it. Karol dropped a few hints, but the guys he hired to remove me from the action were giving nothing away. I suppose it's only natural that after I dropped out they'd want me to get down on my knees and beg

before they let me in again."

"But you don't want to get back in. You've got a life of your own now."

"It's not that simple anymore," Damon said.

"It is if you want it to be."

"I suppose I can simply refuse to play messenger no matter how hard I'm pressed," Damon conceded, working through that train of thought. "I could go home, get back into my hood and pick up where I left off, building Planet X for those game players, designing phone tapes, putting Di into the pornotape and taking her out again, using her and then erasing all the recognizable aspects of her individuality. I could just get on with my work and hope that I'll be allowed to get on with it in peace- except that after my little trip to Olympus, I'm no longer sure that kind of thing is worth doing. The chrome-plated cheat who told me I could fly was lying-but I think he was trying to persuade me that if only I were willing to come aboard I might be able to learn to fly."

Madoc couldn't follow that, but Damon was too preoccupied with his own train of thought to pause for fuller explanations. "The trouble is," he went on, "that when you've looked up at Olympus and down into the ultimate abyss, it puts everything else into a new perspective-even though you know full well that it's only a VE, just one more small step on the way to realizing all our dreams. That's who the real movers and shakers were supposed to be, in the original poem: not statesmen or corpsmen, but dreamers of dreams."

"Realizing our dreams is a long hard road for people like you and me," Madoc pointed out. "Our kind of work might look a little shabby compared with PicoCon's, but how else are people like us going to work our way up? Unless, of course, you've decided that now you've broken into your father's money you might as well use it all. You don't have to-just because you're not a virgin anymore it doesn't mean you're a whore." He sounded genuinely concerned for the matter of principle that seemed to be at stake.

"I want to know, Madoc," Damon said softly. "I want to know exactly what's going on-and you can't find out for me. PicoCon has all the answers; maybe I should try to get aboard."

"A corpsman? Not you, Damon. Not that."

Damon shrugged again. "Maybe I should go to Lagrange-Five, then, and make my peace with Eveline. She might have been a lousy mother, but she's the only one I have left... and she must know what all this is about, whether my father's alive or not."

"Nobody needs mothers anymore," Madoc opined. "All that went out with the sterility plagues-but if you choose your friends wisely, they'll be with you all the way. Whether you use the money or not, you can still be Damon Hart. If you and I stick together, we can still take on the world."

Damon knew that they were talking at cross-purposes-that Madoc's anxieties weren't connecting with his at all. Even so, the underlying substance of Madoc's argument was closer to the heart of the matter than Madoc probably knew.

Damon was still trying to figure out what his next step ought to be when the door buzzer went.

"Shit!" said Madoc, immediately moving to hit a combination of keys on the console of Lenny Garon's display screen.

The camera mounted in the outside of the door dutifully showed them two men standing in the corridor, waiting for an answer to their signal. Damon couldn't put a name to either one of them, but one of them was unusually tall-and he was sporting an ugly and very obvious bruise.

Damon echoed Madoc's expletive.

"Who are they?" Madoc asked, having picked up the note of recognition in Damon's tone.

"Probably cops," Damon said. "The big one followed me from my building. I thought I'd put him out of it-I hit him hard enough to stop any ordinary man tailing me. Must be tougher or smarter than I thought."

The man with the bruise was already growing impatient. "Mr. Tamlin?" he said. "It's all right, Mr. Tamlin-we're not the police. We just want-"

Mr. Tamlin? Damon echoed silently, wondering why on earth they were addressing themselves to Madoc rather than to him. Before he had time to focus on the seemingly obvious inference, however, the tall man's attempted explanation was brutally cut short. Something hurtled into him from beyond the limits of the picture frame and sent him cannoning into his companion.

"Oh, shit!" said Madoc, with even more feeling than before- but he was already diving for the door to wrestle it open.

Damon, for once, was much slower to react. He was still trying to piece together the logic of what was happening.

Lenny Garon had obviously not gone far when Madoc had suggested that he take a walk. Indeed, he had evidently taken it upon himself to stand guard somewhere along the corridor. As soon as he had seen the two strangers press his door buzzer, he had decided that Damon and Madoc were in dire need of his protection-and he had thrown himself at the two visitors with little or no regard for his own safety. If they were telling the truth about not being the police, Lenny might be in very grave danger indeed; he didn't have the kind of IT which could pull him through a real fight.

Madoc had the door open by now, and he hardly paused to take stock of the situation before throwing himself at the tall man's companion, who was already struggling to his feet.

The man with the bruise had knocked Lenny aside, but wasn't going after him. Instead, he was backing up toward the far wall of the corridor, holding his arms out as if he were trying to calm everything down. He had opened his mouth, probably to shout "Wait!" but he choked on the syllable as he looked into the open doorway and caught sight of Damon. The shock in his eyes seemed honest enough. He really had come looking for Madoc Tamlin, not knowing that Damon would be here too.

Damon still hesitated, but Lenny Garon didn't. Lenny had already committed himself and he was sky-high on his own adrenalin. The boy went after the tall man like a ferret after a rat, and his adversary had no alternative but to turn his placatory gesture into a stern defense.

Cop or not, the man with the bruise was certainly no innocent in the art of self-defense, and he had already been knocked down too often to tolerate being put down again. He blocked Lenny's lunging blows and hit the boy, then grabbed him and smashed him into the wall as hard as he could-hard enough to break bones.

That made Damon's mind up. He went after the tall man for a second time, determined to amplify the bruises he had already inflicted. As he charged through the doorway he didn't even look to see what had become of Madoc and the second man; he trusted Madoc's streetfighting instincts implicitly.

Again the man with the bruise tried to avoid the fight. He backed up the corridor as rapidly as he could, and this time he actually managed to shout: "Wait! You don't-"

Damon didn't wait for the "understand"-he kicked out at the knee he'd already weakened in the alley. The tall man yelped in agony and dropped to one knee, but he was still trying to scramble away, still trying to put a halt to the whole fight.

Damon figured that there'd be plenty of time for discussion once he and Madoc had the two men safely under control in Lenny's capsule, so he didn't stop. He slashed at the man's throat exactly as he had done before, and made some sort of connection before something slammed into his back and pitched him forward onto his knees.

His instinct was to lash out backward, on the assumption that someone had charged into him, but there was no one there-and the pain in his back grew and grew with explosive rapidity, giving him just time to realize that he had been shot yet again: hit by some kind of dart whose poison was making merry hell with his nervous system. His IT was undoubtedly fighting the effect, and the pain soon slackened to crawling discomfort-but he didn't lose consciousness. His rigid body hit the ground with a sickening thud, but the dart hadn't been loaded with the kind of poison that would force his senses to switch off.

As the two men snatched him up and scuttled toward the stairs, though, he began to wish that it had.

Twenty-five

Damon never did lose consciousness, but the consciousness he kept had little in reserve for keeping track of what was happening to his paralyzed body. He knew that he had been loaded into the back of a car which roared off at high speed, and he knew that when the car eventually stopped he was taken out again and bundled into a helicopter-but the only part of the journey that really commanded his attention was the time they tried to force his paralyzed limbs into a different configuration so that they could strap him into one of the helicopter's seats. He heard a great deal more than he saw, but most of what he heard was curses and oblique complaints from which he wouldn't have learned anything worth a damn even if he'd been able to concentrate.

What he was conscious of, to the expense of almost everything else, was the battle inside his body for control of his neurones. He knew that the sensation of being occupied by hundreds of thousands of ants burrowing their way through his tissues wasn't really the movement of his nanomachines, but it was hard to imagine it any other way. It wasn't especially painful, but it was severely discomfiting, both psychologically and physically. He was reasonably certain that he would come through it safely and sanely, but it was an ordeal nevertheless.

Damon found a little time to wonder whether the two hit men-which was what they presumably were, given that they certainly didn't seem to be cops-knew what effect the weapons they carried might have on moderately IT-rich victims, and whether they cared, but it wasn't until he began to recover fully possession of himself that he was able to pay close attention to their conversation. By that time, the thrum of the helicopter's rotors had bludgeoned them into taciturnity-a taciturnity that might have lasted until they landed had not the man he'd ambushed in the alley noticed that Damon was recovering from the effects of the shot. That was enough to restart the catalogue of complaints; his luckless pursuer obviously had a lot of grievances to air.

"You've got a real problem, you know that?" the tall man said. "You hear me? A real problem."

Damon fought for the composure necessary to move his head from side to side and blink his eyes. When he eventually succeeded in clearing his blurred vision, he was surprised to see that the bruise on the man's face was in better condition than it had any right to be. Somewhere along the line, he'd slapped some synthetic skin over it to provide his resident nanotech with an extra resource. The expression surrounding the bruise was one of whiney resentment.

Damon was sitting in a seat directly behind the helicopter's pilot. The shorter man who'd come to Madoc's apartment with the man with the fading bruise was sitting beside the pilot; the copter only had the four seats. Reflexively, Damon moved his reluctant hand toward the lock on his safety harness, but the tall man reached out to stop him.

"Careful!" he said. "You got me in enough trouble as it is. Anything else happens to you, I'll be out of a job for sure. Please sit tight. None of this was supposed to happen. If you'd just given me time to talk... like I said, you got a real problem, lashing out like that all the time. It's crazy!"

Damon felt an impulse to laugh, but he wasn't yet in any shape to act on it. He tried to edge sideways so that he could look out of the porthole beside his seat, but the effort proved too much.

Beyond the pilot, though, he could see dark green slopes and snow-capped peaks as well as sky. He thought he recognized Cobblestone Mountain directly ahead of the copter's course, although it was difficult to believe that they'd come so far in what had not seemed to be a long time.

"It isn't funny," the tall man complained, having deciphered the attempted laugh. "I guess I might have asked for it, the first time, waiting till you were in the alley before I tried to catch up and not realizing you'd gone in there to jump me-but what was all that stuff at the kid's apartment? We told you we weren't the police. Stupid kid could have got himself badly hurt."

By the time this speech was finished Damon had got his head far enough up to take a peep through the porthole, but it didn't tell him anything he didn't already know. They were in the hills, heading for the Sespe Wilderness.

"What happened to Madoc?" Damon asked weakly.

"We left him laid out on the kid's bed, with the VE pak cradled in his arms. The police will have them both by now-and don't blame us for having to do it that way. All we wanted was to get the tape to where it was always supposed to go. We would have let Tamlin go his own way if you hadn't practically started a war. The kid's in hospital again, but he'll be okay. You'll have to talk to him about his attitude-he doesn't have the IT for that kind of action."

"You didn't know I was there, did you?" Damon whispered, just to make sure. "I thought I left you in no

shape to follow me."

"Damn right. Dirty trick, kicking a guy in the head when he's down. When I woke up I had to get new instructions. I was told to go get the tape, so that we could deliver it to Interpol, just as we intended when we left it with the burned-out body. You really are a nuisance, you know that? Thanks to you, I am having the worst day of my life. All I wanted to do was talk to you-and now you've really messed things up."

"You followed me into the alley because you wanted to talk to me?"

"Sure. Once you'd got rid of Yamanaka's bugs my employers figured it was safe to have a private word. You could have had it in town and been free and clear by dinnertime, if you hadn't taken it into your fool head to start a shooting match in a public corridor."

"You started a shooting match," Damon pointed out. "Lenny only started a brawl."

"Either way," the tall man said in an aggrieved tone, "the cops will have dug out every bug in the walls by now and run the tapes. Your face, my face ... and the face of my colleague here, who had no option but to pull his gun before your friend carved him up. All you had to do was let us in, but you had to wade in and we had to defend ourselves any way we could. Violence escalates-and now we're all in Yamanaka's file. You could have cost us our jobs."

"How sad," Damon muttered. "Who exactly is your employer?"

"I can't answer that," the tall man complained. "All I wanted was a quiet word, and now I'm up for kidnapping. They have my face. They never got my face before, but who knows what'll happen now? I could be in real trouble."

"Why?" Damon wanted to know. "How many kidnappings did you do before they got a picture of your face?"

His captor wasn't about to answer that one either.

"Why didn't your employer have his quiet word before he turned me loose last time?" Damon demanded, allowing his tone to declare that he was the one who had the serious grievance, even though he no longer felt as if he were a fleshy ant's nest. "Why come after me again, after a mere matter of hours?"

"Something else went wrong," the tall man muttered. "You Heliers are absolute hell to deal with, I'll give you that."

"What?"

The man with the bruise shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "We were monitoring an eye at the place we left Arnett," he said. "We were expecting hugs all round when your people came to get him-but that wasn't the way it went. They shot him! Can you believe that? They shot him. Next thing we know, he's been dumped in the road!"

"Are you sure they killed him?" Damon asked sharply.

The tall man hesitated before he shrugged again, which suggested to Damon that it was a recognized

possibility that Silas hadn't been killed and that the body dumped in the road might have been the same kind of substitute as the body left for Madoc to find. "His nanotech had all been flushed," the man with the bruise said eventually. "They must have known that if they watched the tape we put out on the Web. Maybe they were just knocking him out-but they had no reason to do that if they were your people. Who'd ever have thought Eliminators could be that smart, that well organized?"

"Who are my people supposed to be?" Damon asked him. "You mean Conrad Helier's people-except that Conrad Helier's dead. So is Karol Kachellek, except that you probably don't believe that either. So who's supposed to be running things, given that Eveline Hywood's a quarter of a million miles away in lunar orbit? Me?"

The tall man shook his head sadly. "All I wanted was a quiet talk," he repeated, as if he simply could not believe that such an innocent intention had led to brawling, shooting, and kidnapping-all of it dutifully registered on spy eyes that the police would have debriefed by now.

"Where are we going?" Damon asked.

"Out of town," the tall man informed him gruffly. "Your fault, not mine. We could have sorted it out back home if you hadn't blown it. Now, we have to take it somewhere really private."

The Sespe and Sequoia Wilderness reserves had supposedly been rendered trackless in the wake of the Second Plague War- by which time its chances of ever getting back to an authentic wilderness state were only a little better than zero-but Damon knew that closure against wheeled vehicles didn't signify much when helicopters like this one could land in a clearing thirty meters across.

"You can't get more private than Olympus," Damon said- but as he looked out again at the nonvirtual mountains which were now surrounding the helicopter he realized that he had actually contrived to force his adversaries to take a step they had not intended. This time, there was a record of his abduction in Interpol's hands. This time, Interpol could put faces and names to his captors, or at least to their foot soldiers. He knew that he could claim no credit for the coup-it was all the result of a chapter of accidents and misconceptions-but the fact remained that the game players had finally been taken beyond the limits of their game plan. They had been forced to improvise. For the first time, PicoCon-assuming that it was PicoCon-was losing its grip.

"Your boss is scared," Damon said, working through the train of thought. "He thinks it really might have been the Eliminators who got to Silas, after the people he expected to collect him never showed up. One minute he was convinced the message Silas was supposed to deliver was home and dry, the next he was unconvinced again. You're right-if Silas is dead you could be, in real trouble, especially now that Interpol has two faces in the frame. Mr. Yamanaka doesn't like the way you've been running rings around him. He'll come after you with such ferocity that you'll be very lucky indeed to get away with only losing your job. How much damage could you do to PicoCon, do you think, if you and your partner decided to talk?"

The tall man didn't react to the mention of PicoCon. "All you had to do was listen," he complained. "You could have saved us all a hell of a lot of trouble."

"If you were the ones who took Silas in the first place," Damon pointed out, "and posted that stupid provocative note under my door, you went to a hell of a lot of trouble yourselves, all because you wouldn't listen when we told you that Conrad Helier is dead."

"Sure," said the tall man scornfully. "Helier's dead, and para-DNA is a kind of extraterrestrial tar, just

like Hywood says. All you ever had to do was listen-but now it's getting ugly and it's all your fault."

"What does Eveline say about para-DNA?" Damon wanted to know.

"If you spent more time listening to the news and less playing cloak-and-dagger, you'd know. She made an announcement to the entire world, press conference and all. Para-DNA is extraterrestrial-the first representative of an entirely new life system, utterly harmless but absolutely fascinating. We are not alone, the universe of life awaits us, etcetera, etcetera. Now we know where you got your impulsive nature from, don't we?"

"Are you saying that para-DNA isn't extraterrestrial-or that it isn't harmless?"

"I don't know," the tall man informed him, as if it were somehow Damon's fault that he didn't know. "All I know is that if it's on the news, it's more than likely to be lies, and that if the name Hywood's attached to it then it must have something to do with our little adventure. I may be only the hired help but I'm not stupid. Whatever all this is about, your people aren't responding sensibly. It doesn't take a genius to figure that Hywood was supposed to talk to my employers before she started shooting her mouth off to the whole wide world, but she decided to kick off early instead. The whole damn lot of you are so damn touchy. Must be hereditary."

Damon didn't bother to point out that Eveline Hywood wasn't his mother. Conrad Helier was his real father, and Conrad Helier's closest associates had provided the nurture to complement his nature. It had never occurred to him before that his contentiousness might be a legacy of his genes or his upbringing, but he could see now that someone considering his reactions to this strange affair alongside those of his foster parents might well feel entitled to lump them all together.

The helicopter now began its descent toward a densely wooded slope which, while nowhere near as precipitate as the slope of the virtual mountain where he had talked to the robot man, nevertheless seemed wild enough and remote enough to suit anyone's idea of perfect privacy.

It was just as well that the helicopter could land in a thirty-meter circle, because the space where it touched down wasn't significantly bigger. The tall man undid Damon's safety harness before he could do it himself and said: "Can you get down?"

"I'm fine," Damon assured him. No thanks to you. You're not coming?"

"I'm far from fine-and that's entirely down to you," the man with the bruise countered. "We have to disappear. It wasn't exactly a pleasure meeting you, but at least I'll never see you again."

"You know," said Damon as the pilot reached back to open the door beside him, "you really have a problem. Apart from being an incompetent asshole, you have this moronic compulsion to blame other people for your own mistakes." He got the distinct impression that the tall man would have hit him, if only he'd dared.

"Thanks," said Damon to the pilot as he lowered himself to the ground. He ducked down low the way everybody always did on TV, although he knew that he was in no real danger from the whirling rotor blades.

There was a cabin on the edge of the clearing that looked at first glance as if it must have been two hundred years old if it were a day-but Damon saw as soon as he approached it that its "logs" had been gantzed out of wood pulp. He judged that its architect had been a relatively simple-minded AI. The

edifice probably hadn't been there more than a year and shouldn't have been there at all. Given that the nearest road was halfway to Fillmore, though, it was certainly private; it probably had no electricity supply and no link to the Web. It was a playpen for the kind of people who thought that they could still get back in touch with "nature."

The man who was waiting for Damon stayed inside until the helicopter had risen from the ground, only showing himself in the doorway of the cabin when no one but Damon could see his face. Damon saw immediately that he was an old man, well preserved by nanotech without being prettified by rejuve cosmetology. His hair was white and he was wearing silver-rimmed eyeglasses. Nobody had to wear spectacles for corrective purpose anymore, so Damon assumed that he must have become used to wearing them in his youth, way back in the twenty-first century, and had kept them as a badge of antique eccentricity.

"Are you the Mirror Man?" Damon asked as he approached.

The ancient shook his head. "The Mirror Man's off the project," he said, evidently untroubled by the admission he was making in recognizing the description. "I've been appointed in his stead, to tidy things up-and to calm things down. Come in and make yourself at home." He pronounced the final phrase with conscientiously lighthearted sarcasm.

"I'm a prisoner," Damon pointed out as the other stood aside to let him pass, "not a guest."

"If you'd only paused to listen to what the man had to say," the old man replied mildly, "we'd have offered you a formal invitation. I think you'd have found it too tempting to refuse. You can call me Saul, by the way." It wasn't an invitation to intimacy; Damon guessed that if the man was called Saul at all it would be his surname, not his given name.

"Stay away from the road to Damascus," Damon muttered as he surveyed the room into which he was being ushered. "Revelations can really screw up your life."

The cabin's interior was more luxurious than the exterior had implied, but it had a gloss of calculated primitivism. Authentic logs were burning within the proscenium arch of an inauthentic stone fireplace set upon a polished stone hearth. There were three armchairs arranged in an arc around the hearth, although there was no one waiting in the cabin except the old man.

There was a stick of bread on the table, together with half a dozen plastic storage jars and three bottles: two of wine, one of whiskey. Damon almost expected to see hunting trophies on the wall, but that would have been too silly. Instead there were old photographs mounted in severe black frames: photographs taken in the days when the wilderness had only been half spoiled.

"Are we expecting somebody else?" Damon asked.

"I hope so," said Saul. "To tell you the truth, I'm rather hoping that your father might drop by. If he's still on Earth, he's had time to reach the neighborhood by now. If he's stranded out in space, though ... well, we'll just have to wait and see."

Damon didn't bother with any tokenistic assertion of his father's membership of the ultimate silent majority. Instead, he said: "Nobody came in response to your other invitations. Why should anyone come now?"

"Because the cat's out of the bag," the old man told him. "Eveline Hywood hurried the announcement

through, in spite of everything. When the grim satisfaction has worn off, though, she'll remember that this is only the beginning. Your father's shown us that he won't be bullied, and that he's more than willing to fight fire with fire, tape for tape and appearance for appearance-but he can't move to the next stage of his plan without clearing it with us because he now knows that we know what that next phase will be-and that if we think it's necessary, we'll close the whole thing down."

"Who's we?" Damon wanted to know-and was optimistic, for once, that he might be told.

"All of us. Not just PicoCon, by any means. Your father may think that he made the world, and we're prepared to give him due credit for saving it, but we're the ones who own it, and we've already made our peace. If he's absolutely determined to return to the days when we were all on the same side, that's fine by us-just so long as it's our side that everybody's on."

Damon pulled one of the armchairs back from the fire before sitting down in it. He'd thought that he had recovered well enough from the shot in the back, but once he'd taken the weight off his feet he realized that nobody could get shot, even in today's world, without a considerable legacy of awkwardness and fatigue. He stirred restlessly, unable to find a comfortable posture.

Saul drew back the neighboring chair in the same careful manner, but he went to the table instead of sitting down. "You want food?" he said. "You haven't eaten in quite a while."

Damon knew that he was being offered waiter service, but he didn't want to take it. "I'll help myself, if you don't mind," he said.

"Somehow," said the old man, peering over the rim of his spectacles, "I just knew you were going to say that."

Twenty-six

"I never delivered your message," Damon said when he'd finished licking his fingers. He was sitting more comfortably now-comfortably enough not to want to get up for anything less than a five-star emergency. Saul was still standing up, hovering beside the table while he finished his own meal.

"Yes, you did," the old man countered. "Hywood's more sensitive than you give her credit for. You got through to her, far better than you got through to Kachellek."

"Is Karol really dead?"

"I honestly don't know. I doubt it very much. The business with Silas Arnett took us aback a bit, but I sincerely hope that it was merely a matter of playing to the grandstand: tape for tape, as I said, appearance for appearance. Our fake body's better than your fake body and we got our tape to Interpol while you let yours go astray, so up yours. That has to be your father, don't you think? Eveline's as clever as she's stubborn, but she isn't angry or vengeful. But you'd have done it all, wouldn't you? You'd have

lashed out as soon as you came under attack-and even when you thought you'd won, you'd still have put out one last kick in the head for good measure. You're Conrad Helier's son all right."

"The only father I ever had was Silas Arnett," Damon said, trying to sound offhanded about it. He sipped from his glass. It was only tap water; he'd thought it best to avoid the whiskey and the wine.

"Was it Silas you ran away from?" Saul countered. "Is it Silas you're still kicking against? I think he's just your big brother, who happened to baby-sit a lot. Dead or not, in that household Conrad Helier was always your one and only father. He still is."

That was too near to the knuckle to warrant any response.

"Why would you send the hired help to invite me up here?" Damon asked. "You already had me not forty-eight hours ago and you threw me back into the pond. You didn't really need me to get your message across to Eveline."

Saul smiled. "The Mirror Man thought that we did," he said. "In any case, we had to let you go before we could invite you to join us in a suitably polite fashion. We are inviting you to join us, by the way. Partly because it would give us a link to the Lagrange-Five biotech cowboys, but mainly because we think you're good. Now you've seen what virtual reality technics can really do, it's time for you to get properly involved, don't you think?"

"You're offering me a job?"

"Yes."

"With PicoCon?"

"Yes. You could go to OmicronA if you'd prefer-it comes to the same thing in the end."

"I'm not sure I'm ready for that," Damon said slowly.

"I think you are," Saul told him, finally condescending to take the seat opposite Damon's, leaving the one in between for whoever might turn up to take it. "I think you're as thoroughly frustrated with a life of petty crime as Hiru Yamanaka is with the business of catching petty criminals. You must understand by now what drew you into that life-and if you understand that, you must understand how pointless it is."

Damon said nothing to that. Saul didn't press him for an answer but simply settled back in his chair as if he were preparing for a long heart-to-heart talk.

"We live in a world where crime has become much easier to detect than of old," Saul observed. "A world so abundantly populated by tiny cameras that hardly anything happens unobserved. These ever present eyes are, of course, unconsulted unless and until the police have reason to believe that they might have recorded something significant, but everyone tempted to commit an antisocial act knows that he's very likely to be found out.

"If our New Utopia really were a Utopia, of course, its citizens wouldn't want to commit antisocial acts, but the sad fact is that almost all of them do. In many cases, the desire to commit such acts is actually increased by the awareness that such acts are so readily detectable. In operating as a deterrent, the high probability of detection also acts as a challenge. Everyone knows that spy eyes can be evaded and sometimes deceived-and everyone is ready to do it whenever an opportunity arises. No matter how

intensive and efficient Building Security becomes, petty thefts will still occur-not because people need to steal, or because they're avid to acquire whatever it is that they happen to be stealing, but simply because stealing proves that they're still free and that the spy eyes haven't got the better of them. That's natural, as an immediate reaction, but it's no agenda for a lifelong career."

"Tell that to the Eliminators," Damon said. "They're the ones who take it to extremes-extremes you're not too proud to exploit if it suits you. The Mirror Man likes the Eliminators."

"It's not a view I share," Saul told him with a slight sigh. "I do understand them, because I'm of the same generation as most of them, but I think they're foolish as well as wicked. They know that they've been condemned by evil fate to die, while some of those who come after them will be spared that necessity, so it's not entirely surprising that some say to themselves: murderers were once condemned to die for their crime; why should I, who am condemned to die, refrain from murder? Why should I not enjoy the privilege of my fate? Why should I not accept the opportunity to make the only contribution I can to the coming world of immortals-the exclusion of someone who is unworthy of immortality? It's not surprising-but it is wrong, and ultimately self-destructive.

"Operator one-oh-one, I gather, is rather looking forward to her day in court, in anticipation of being able to plead the Eliminator cause with all due eloquence before a large video audience. Perhaps you ought to watch her-and find a little of your own futility mirrored in hers. It's time to set bitterness and its corollary hostility aside along with other childish things, Damon. Even present technology will give you a hundred and fifty years of adulthood, if you'll only condescend to look after yourself. The technology of a hundred years hence might give you three hundred years more. Think what you might do, if you began now; think what you might help to build, if you decide to become one of the builders instead of one of the vandals."

Damon knew that it all made sense, but he'd had a few thoughts of his own on the matter in spite of the hectic pace of the last few days, and he wasn't ready to roll over just yet. "A little while ago," he said, "I talked to a boy named Lenny Garon. You probably taped the conversation. I told him exactly what you've just told me: to look after himself, to keep his place on the escalator that might one day give him the chance to live forever. Afterwards, though, I got to wondering whether I might be taking too much for granted.

"We've all grown used to the familiar pattern, haven't we? Every couple of years PicoCon or OmicronA pumps out a new fleet of nanotech miracles, which slow down the aging process just a little bit more or take rejuve engineering just a little bit deeper, chipping away at the Hayflick limit and the Miller effect and all the other little glitches that stand in the way of true emortality. Each new generation of products works its way down through the marketplace from the rich to the not-so-rich, and so on, every expansion of the consumer base adding cash to the, megacorp coffers. But what if someone already has the secret of true emortality? What if the upper echelons of PicoCon already possess a nanotech suite which, so far as they can judge, will let them live forever? What if they decided, when they first obtained the secret, that it was a gift best reserved for the favored few rather than put on general release? After all, even under the New Reproductive System the stability of the population relies on people dying in significant numbers year after year, and megacorp planning depends on the steady flow of profits feeding a never-ending demand, a never-ending hunger. I could understand the temptation to hoard the gift away, couldn't you?

"The only trouble is that everyone who was in on the secret- and everyone who subsequently discovered it-would have to be trustworthy. They'd have to be in the club. The men in control couldn't have loose cannons threatening to go off at any moment, with no way of knowing where the blast would go. If there were a person like that around, the gods would have to silence him-but they'd have to find him first. As you've so carefully pointed out, a person like me can easily be exposed to thoroughgoing

scrutiny in a world where every wall has eyes and ears . . . but some people really can stay out of sight, if they know where the darkest shadows are.

"It's interesting to follow these flights of fancy occasionally, isn't it, Mr. Saul? I still don't know for sure why PicoCon is so desperate to locate a man who's been dead for fifty years, do I?"

"That's an interesting fantasy, Damon," Saul replied. "Isn't it a trifle paranoid, though? The idea that big corporations hold back all the best inventions in order to maintain their markets is as old as capitalism itself."

"We live in a postcapitalist era, Mr. Saul," Damon said earnestly. "The market isn't everything-not anymore. We have to start thinking in terms of millennia rather than centuries. Gods have nobler goals in mind than vulgar profits-and you can spell profits any way you like."

Saul laughed at that, and there didn't seem to be anything forced about the laughter. "I suppose that sophisticated biotechnics and clever nanomachinery are so similar to magic that we have begun behaving rather like the magicians of legend," he admitted. "We have a tendency to be jealous and secretive; some of us, at least, have learned to love deceit for its own sake. Has your father's team behaved any differently?"

"I think Eveline would argue that your end is merely her means," Damon countered. "She'd say that what the Mirror Man told me-and what you're telling me now-is just advertising, bait on a line to reel me in. She'd argue that you don't really have any long-term objectives except preserving your advantages and maintaining your comforts-that you're obsessed about controlling things because you couldn't bear to be controlled. She sees the megacorps as an anchor holding progress back rather than a cutting edge hastening its progress forward."

"And she'd be echoing Conrad Helier every inch of the way- but she'd be wrong. The point is, what do you think?"

"I think that you and the Mirror Man really do believe that you're the new gods and I think you're as jealous as any god of old. You want to plan the future, and you want to make sure that everyone will play his allotted part in the plan-or at least that no one's in a position to put a spoke in your wheel."

"I didn't ask you what you think I believe. I asked you what you think."

Damon had known exactly what he was being asked-but he wasn't sure that he'd made up his mind about that. "I doubt that you'll ever get everyone to agree about the objectives of the game," he ventured. "I think it might be healthier if you didn't even try. After the last couple of days, though, I think one thing you do need to get settled is that the game shouldn't be played with real bullets-even certified-nonlethal ones. There's a lot to be said for conflict, if it maintains the dynamic tension that generates social change. There's even something to be said for combat, so long as it isn't mortal, but the distinction between cuts that heal and cuts that don't isn't as easy to make as some people imagine. I don't approve of Elimination either, but I don't want a two-tier system. Everybody should get a chance at real life, whether they're team players or not."

Damon never found out what Saul's reply to that would have been, and he wasn't sorry when the interruption came. He needed time to think about the offer Saul had made him, and he knew that there was vital information that he still didn't have. When the cabin door opened behind him, he was grateful for the respite.

The newcomer looked very tired-as well he might, given that there had been no sound of rotor blades. He'd come on foot, at least for the last kilometer or so.

Damon figured that Saul would be disappointed not to see Conrad Helier, but on his own account he was profoundly glad that the man standing in the doorway was Silas Arnett, very much alive.

"It's very good of you to come, Silas," Saul said with only a hint of mocking irony. "Do join us."

As Silas came forward Damon jumped to his feet and ran to meet him. It wasn't a five-star emergency, but it was a five-star opportunity. Silas seemed slightly surprised, but he accepted the hug before wincing under its pressure.

"Mind my stigmata," he muttered. The wound in his chest was overlaid by his suitskin, but the cloth clung so tightly to the contours of his chest that Damon could see the outlines of the swelling.

"I thought it really might have been the Eliminators who got to you first," Damon said.

"It really might have been," Silas agreed sourly. "As it was, they came too close for comfort to being accidental Eliminators. It seems that Karol thought it would be a good idea to declare me dead, just in case I decided to deny that heartfelt confession he put together on my behalf when I returned to public life. As you've probably found out, leaving the group means that they're very reluctant to trust you in future. Is this the piece of shit who was judge and prosecutor at my trial?"

Damon could feel the tension in Silas's arms, and he knew that an affirmative answer was likely to call forth an immediate and violent response. He was sorely tempted to say yes, but Saul had softened him up just enough to make him hesitate. "He says not," he said in the end. "He says we can call him Saul, but he didn't say whether it's his first name or his last."

Silas obviously wasn't immediately convinced by the first item of information, but he extricated himself from Damon's embrace and looked hard at the seated man. "Oh shit!" he said eventually. "It really is you, isn't it?"

"It's been a long time, Silas," Saul said evenly, "but everyone remembers the spectacles. You really didn't know the man who conducted your interrogation, in spite of that teasing coda he tacked onto the broadcast tape. That was just to prepare the way for the VE pak that went astray-the one that falsely implied that the supposedly late Surinder Nahal was your captor."

"Whereas, in fact," Damon put in, "Surinder Nahal is presumably heading up PicoCon's own zombie biotech team, in direct opposition to yours. Who is this guy, Silas?"

"His name really is Saul," Silas admitted. "Frederick G. Saul was his favored signature way back when-but that was in the days when everybody knew what the G stood for without having it spelled out. I thought he was long dead, but I should have known better."

"I never pretended to die," the bespectacled man observed dryly. "I just faded out of view. Would you like something to eat, Silas?"

"I've eaten," Silas replied brusquely.

"To drink?"

Silas looked at Damon's glass. "Just water," he said. He let Saul go to the bathroom to get it while he studied Damon. Saul didn't hurry.

"You all right?" Silas said. "I heard they shot you too."

"Twice," said Damon. "My own fault-the first time I wouldn't lie down for the gas and the second time I wouldn't wait for a polite invitation. I'm fine-and still alive by everyone's reckoning, including the Eliminators who have me down as an enemy of mankind. What does the G stand for?"

"Gantz," Silas told him, watching the bathroom door at which Saul had not yet reappeared. "He's Leon Gantz's grandson, nephew of Paul and Ramon-and his other granddaddy was one of the insiders in the Zimmerman coup. He's one of the last best products of the Old Reproductive System."

Damon said nothing while he mulled over the possible significance of this revelation.

"How's Diana?" Silas asked, groping for a topic of conversation more suited to an emotional reunion between a foster father and his estranged child.

"We split up," Damon told him. By way of retaliation he asked: "How's Cathy?"

"She thinks I'm dead. I haven't decided yet whether to let her in on the secret."

"But you're going to keep it from the rest of the world?" Damon asked, with one eye on the third party who had just reemerged from the bathroom.

Silas shrugged as he accepted a tumbler of water from Frederick Gantz Saul's steady hand; his own was trembling slightly. "Between them, PicoCon and Karol haven't left me a lot of choice, have they? I'm flattered that Eveline wants me back, but it would have been nice to have a less pressured decision to make."

"Is it just Karol and Eveline?" Damon asked. "Or is there someone else jerking their strings?"

It seemed that Silas couldn't quite meet Damon's eye, so he looked sideways at Saul, as if to say that there were secrets that still needed to be kept.

"He's been told a thousand times," Saul said, "but he still won't believe it. He even tried to imply that it was you he was rebelling against, because you were the only real father figure he had. You're the one who owes it to him to explain that flesh and blood do not a father make."

"Clever bastard, isn't he?" Silas said to Damon. Then he sighed theatrically. "We lied to you, Damon. We lied to the world. Conrad's alive. Not on Earth, mind-but he is alive. I didn't want to lie to you, but by the time I was ready to break ranks I wasn't sure I could tell you without also telling the world."

It was no longer a surprise, but it was a shock of sorts. Damon had to sit down again, and this time he looked into the fire, at the glowing ash flaking from the half-consumed logs.

Silas took the seat next to him: the seat that had been reserved for him all along. "What else do you want to know?" he said quietly. "Saul knows it all by now, I suppose-but he might not have given you a straight account of it. I'm not here to negotiate with him, or to set the seal on any agreements. I'm just here to acknowledge that we've taken note of his concerns."

"So he really is playing God," Damon said, meaning Conrad Helier. "Even to the extent of moving in mysterious ways."

"We're not interested in playing God," Silas countered. "That's Saul's way of looking at the world. The man who taunted me while he made up that fatuous tape mistook the meaning of that quote he flung in my face. We never aimed to occupy the vacant throne of God-we just decided that we had to do our bit to help compensate for its vacancy. We're not interested in moving into Olympus-we never have been."

"You'd be happier in the palace of Pandemonium, no doubt?" Damon suggested sarcastically.

"Damon, I don't want to be a god and I certainly don't want to be a devil. I'm a man, like other men. So is Conrad."

"Except that you're both supposed to be dead. I couldn't believe that my father had faked his death, even though the Mirror Man seemed so very sure. Even after the Mirror Man had shown me that if anyone in the world had the technical resources to make sure, it was him, I wouldn't concede. I couldn't believe that Conrad Helier could be so hypocritical-to preach the gospel of posthumous reproduction as forcefully as he did, and then go into hiding while his friends brought up his own child. If you and he are men like other men, how come there's one law for the rest and another for you?"

"Conrad did back himself into a corner," Silas admitted. "Sometimes, when you change your mind, you have to figure out how best to limit the damage. Being men like other men, Conrad and I don't always get things right. If you live as long as you might, Damon, you'll make plenty of errors of judgment along the way."

"Like designing the viruses which caused the Crash? You did that too, I suppose?"

"We designed one of them. To this day, I don't know for sure who designed the others, although we always suspected that Surinder Nahal must have made at least one-and it wouldn't surprise me in the least if Frederick G. Saul had a hand in it somewhere, even if the hand in question was only clutching a thick wad of cash. It's possible that some of the transformers really did arise naturally-in which case we needn't have bothered-but I always thought the Gaian Mystics were fools to insist beforehand that Ma Nature would find a way, and even bigger fools to insist afterwards that she had. The arguments in the second of my fake confessions were good ones: we didn't kill anybody; we just took away a power which should never have been claimed as a right. When the multiplication of the species reached the point at which the ecosphere stood in imminent danger of irreversible injury, the increase had to be halted, and the reproduction of individuals had to be limited in the interests of the whole community. The Crash had to happen. Conrad tried to make it as painless as possible. If you'd been in his place you'd have done it too."

"So why not take credit for it? Why not admit it, instead of letting the despised Gaian Mystics credit it to the Earth Mother? Why let it hang over your reputation like the sword of Damocles, waiting for a rival megacorp or a maverick Eliminator to cut it loose?"

"The fallout would have interfered with our work. If Conrad had tangled himself up with the necessity to plead his case in the media, he wouldn't have been able to get the New Reproductive System up and running so quickly. Sometimes, hypocrisy is unavoidable."

Damon curled his lip righteously. "And it still is, isn't it?" he said. "Otherwise, Conrad would be able to stand up and take due credit for his latest parlor trick. He designed para-DNA, didn't he? Eveline's so-called discovery is just one more Big Lie-a lie that Mr. Saul's friends were trying to nip in the bud."

That's what the whole pantomime was intended to do: squash your plan before it had a chance to interfere with theirs."

"I don't know anything about that," Silas said sourly. "As soon as I retired, I was out of it. After that, neither Eveline nor Karol would give me the time of day. You'll have to ask Saul for recent intelligence of Conrad's plans."

Saul had taken his own seat by now. "You're too modest, Silas," he said. "You knew the way things were heading. Isn't that why you left?"

"G for Gantz," Silas repeated. "Is that really what this has all been about? Keep your sticky hands off my toys?"

"No, it isn't," Saul replied sharply. "It isn't a petty matter at all. I only wish your friends had realized that."

"You're losing me," Damon observed.

Saul said nothing, stubbornly waiting for Silas to take the responsibility. "You're right, Damon," Silas said eventually. "Para-DNA is a laboratory product. We worked on it for years: a non-DNA life system capable of forming its own ecospheres in environments more extreme than the ones DNA can readily cope with. At first we were talking in terms of bridging the gap between the organic and the inorganic—a whole new nanotech combining the best features of both. The early talk about applications was all about seeding Mars and the asteroids, perhaps as a step in terraformation but not necessarily. Conrad was disappointed about the failure of our probes to find extraterrestrial life, and doubly disappointed by the fact that all the pre-Crash arks that set out in search of new Ararats seemed to have failed in their quest. It was another little flaw in the universal design which Conrad set out to correct. He didn't think of it as playing God—merely compensating once again, in a wholly human way, for the vacancy of the divine throne."

"But that was only the first plan, wasn't it?" Saul put in.

"Yes," Silas admitted. "Eventually, Conrad began considering other possible applications. There were a lot of people who were glad that the probes and the arks hadn't turned up anything at all: people who'd always thought of alien life in terms of competition and invasion, as a potential threat. Conrad despised that kind of cowardice—but there's something about the view of Earth you get from Lagrange-Five and all points farther out that gives people a jaundiced view of the people at the bottom of the gravity well. You've probably seen it in Eveline, if you've talked to her lately—and Mr. Saul is unfortunately correct in judging that Eveline's not much more than Conrad's echo.

"Anyway, for whatever reason, Conrad became increasingly disappointed by the development of the Utopia which the New Reproductive System was supposed to have produced. He felt that the old world still cast too deep and dark a shadow over the new. He thought he'd put an end to the old patterns of inheritance, but he was overoptimistic—as you can readily judge from the fact that men like Frederick Gantz Saul are now safely ensconced in the uppermost echelons of PicoCon. For a brief while, when the viruses seemed to have the upper hand, everyone was on the same side—or so it appeared to Conrad—but when the menace had been overcome and the NRS was up and running, the old divisions soon reappeared."

"Remember, though," Saul put in, "that Conrad Helier was a backslider too. You're the living proof of it, Damon. Even he couldn't live up to the highest principles of the Utopia he'd sketched out on his drawing

board."

Silas ignored that. "Conrad became convinced that Earth had lost its progressive impetus," he said dully. "He became very fond of going on and on about new technology being used to preserve and reproduce the past instead of providing a womb for new ambition. It was mostly hot air, I thought-that was one of the reasons why we fell out. He came to believe that the only way to get things moving here on Earth in a way that would give proper support and encouragement to the people out on the frontier-the Lagrangists and their kin-was to get everyone back on the same side, united against a perceived threat. He came to think that Earth was in need of an alien invader: an all-purpose alien invader which could turn its hand to all kinds of tasks."

Damon shook his head. "Para-DNA," he said. "Utterly harmless but absolutely fascinating, etcetera, etcetera-until more and more of it turns up and it begins to reveal its true versatility. And what then, Silas? Conrad can't possibly be backslider enough to start killing people."

"No," Silas said unhappily. "But he doesn't have any compunctions at all about destroying property. That, I assume, is what attracted the attention and fervent interest of Frederick Gantz Saul and the present controllers of the Gantz patents. Hence the warning shots fired across our bows. Hence this meeting, in the course of which Mr. Saul will no doubt commission both of us to explain to Conrad and Eveline that the fun's over: that Eveline's preemptive move to established the extraterrestrial credentials of para-DNA has to be our last. I assume he's about to tell us that if the plan goes forward one more inch he and his friends will come after us hard, with authentically lethal force."

Damon looked at Saul, who was still looking at Silas. "You shouldn't have retired, Silas," Saul remarked. "You should have stayed on the inside, to maintain a bridge to sanity."

"Conrad's not mad," Silas was quick to retort. "His anxieties were real enough. He's afraid that the earthbound majority of the human race is on the brink of exporting its spirit of adventure to virtual environments, by courtesy of PicoCon's VE division and all the bright young men of Damon's generation. The fashion-ability of VE games, VE dramas, and telephone VEs is already helping to move a substantial part of everyday human existence and everyday communication into a parallel dimension where artifice rules-and the cleverer the VE designers and the AI answering machines become, the more secure that reign will be.

"Conrad thinks that people shouldn't be living in the ruins of the old world, contentedly huddling together in the better parts of the old cities, binding themselves ever more tightly to their stations in the Web like flies mummified in spider silk. Nor does he think it's rebellion enough against that kind of a world for the disaffected young to use derelict neighborhoods as adventure playgrounds where they can carve one another up in meaningless ritual duels. He thinks that if we can't maintain some kind of historical momentum, we'll stagnate. He thinks that we have to build and keep on building, to grow and keep on growing, to expand the human empire and keep on expanding it, to make progress. If people need a spur to urge them on, he's more than willing to provide it. I don't say that's right, but it's not mad.

"Like the viruses which caused the Crash, Conrad intends para-DNA to be nonlethal weaponry-nothing more than a nuisance. It's supposed to attack the structure of the cities and the structure of the Web; it's supposed to make it impossible for the human race to dig itself a hole and live in manufactured dreams. It wouldn't attack people, and it certainly wouldn't murder people wholesale, but it would always be there: a sinister, creeping presence that would keep on cropping up where it's least expected and where it's least welcome, to remind people that there's nothing-nothing, Damon-that can be taken for granted. Long life, the New Reproductive System, Earth, the solar system ... all these things have to be managed, guarded, and guided. According to Conrad, we ought to be looking toward the real alien worlds instead

of-or at least as well as- synthesizing comfortable simulacra. Whatever you or I might think of his methods, he's not mad."

"I can see why PicoCon thinks it's necessary to rein you in, though," Damon observed. "I can understand why the people who actually own the earth and all the edifices gantzed out of its surface would like the right of veto over schemes like that."

"Maybe," said Silas. "But I think Conrad might argue that the current owners of the Gantz patents ought to be down on their bended knees thanking him for introducing an element of built-in obsolescence to their endeavors. Mr. Saul would presumably prefer it if the meek inherited the earth, because he thinks that a meek consumer is a good consumer. He and his kind are interested in what people want, and the more stable and predictable those wants become, the better he'll like it-but Conrad's more interested in what people need."

Damon looked at Saul, who seemed quite untroubled by anything Silas had said.

"At the end of the day, though," Damon pointed out, "PicoCon calls the shots, here and in outer space. The secret couldn't be kept-and now that it's out, Conrad, Eveline, and Karol have no alternative but to abandon the plan."

"That's not for me to decide," Silas said obdurately. "I'm not here to negotiate."

"Of course not," said Saul with a hint of malicious mockery. "But you can carry an olive branch, can't you? One way or another, now that you've joined the ranks of the unsleeping dead, you'll be able to transmit our offer of a just and permanent peace to Conrad Helier?"

"Just and permanent?" Silas echoed, presumably to avoid giving a straighter answer.

"That's what we want," Saul said. "It's also, in our opinion, what we all need. We don't want to bludgeon Conrad Helier- or the Ahasuerus Foundation for that matter-into reluctant and resentful capitulation. We really would like them to see things our way. That's why we're mortally offended by their refusal even to talk to us. Yes, we do have the power to impose our will-but we'd far rather reach a mutually satisfactory arrangement. I think Conrad Helier has seriously mistaken our position and our goals, and the true logic of the present situation here on Earth."

All Silas said in reply to that was: "Go on."

"Your anxiety regarding the possibility of people giving up on the real world in order to live in manufactured dreams is an old one," Saul said mildly. "The corollary anxiety about the willingness of their effective rulers to meet the demand for comforting dreams is just as old-and so is Conrad's facile assumption that the best way to counter the trend is to import new threats to jolt the meek inheritors of Earth out of their meekness and expel them from their Utopia of comforts. Frankly, I'm as disappointed by Conrad's recruitment to such an outmoded way of thinking as I am by the Ahasuerus Foundation's retention of their equally obsolete attitude of mind.

"I can understand the fact that you don't approve of me, either personally or in terms of what I represent. One of my grandfathers was part of the consortium which funded Adam Zimmerman's scheme to take advantage of a worldwide stock-market crash-one of the men who really did steal the world or comer the future, according to your taste in cliches. The other was the man whose pioneering work in biotechnological cementation made it possible to build homes out of desert sand and exhausted soil that were literally dirt cheap, thus giving shelter to millions, but you probably think that the good he did was

canceled out by the enormity of the fortune that flowed from the generations of patents generated and managed by his sons-my uncles. I am the old world order personified: one of a double handful of men who really did own the world by the end of the twenty-first century.

"Oddly enough, the fact that we still own it today has a good deal to do with Conrad Helier. Had he not put the New Reproductive System in place so quickly, the devastations of the Crash might have extended even to us; as it was, his efficiency allowed rather more of the old world order to be saved than he might have thought ideal. Nor has he put an end to the ancient system of inheritance, as his own legacy to Damon clearly demonstrates. When I and my fellow owners die-as, alas, we still must, in spite of all the best efforts of the Ahasuerus Foundation-we shall deliver the earth into safe hands, which can be trusted to keep it safe for as long as they may live. Eventually, there will arise a generation who will keep it safe forever.

"You may think it terrible that effective ownership of the entire earth should remain forever in the hands of a tiny Olympian elite, but ownership is also stewardship. While the earth was effectively common land it was in the interest of every individual to increase his own exploitation of it at the expense of others- and the result was an ecocatastrophe which would have rendered the planet uninhabitable if the Crash had not been precipitated in the nick of time.

"We cannot and will not tolerate further threats to the security of Earth, because Earth is too precious to be put at the smallest risk. Our news of the arks is old, and the news sent back by our more ambitious probes is hardly less recent, but the fact is that we have so far found no sign of any authentic extraterrestrial life. There is no threat in that discovery, but there is no promise either: no promise of any safe refuge should any extreme misfortune befall Earth. The pre-Crash ecocatastrophe might well have caused the extinction of the human species, and nothing like it can ever be permitted to happen again. If our outward expansion into the universe is to continue-and I agree with Conrad Helier that it ought not to be the exclusive prerogative of clever machinery-then it must continue in response to opportunity, not to threat.

"True progress cannot be generated by fear; it has to be generated by ambition. You may well dread the prospect of a wholesale retreat into artificial worlds of custom-designed illusion, but it's pointless to try to drive people from their chosen refuges with whips and scorpions; they'll only try all the harder to return. The real task is to offer them real-world opportunities that will easily outweigh the rewards of synthetic experience."

"When your new nanotech VEs hit the marketplace, that isn't going to be easy," Damon observed. "Or did the Mirror Man's little lecture about products not being made for the market mean that you intend to bury the technology?"

"What my colleague was trying to explain," Saul said, "is that we're not developing such technologies solely with a view to putting new products in the marketplace. We have much broader horizons in mind, but we're not going to bury anything-not even para-DNA. We have more faith in humankind than Conrad Helier does. We don't believe that the people of Earth, however meek they may become, will want to retreat into manufactured dreams twenty-four hours a day. We don't believe that people will settle for cut-price contentment when they still have the prospect of real achievement before them-and we do believe that they still have the prospect of real achievement. We think Conrad Helier's aims can better be served by a carrot than a stick-and that's why we're so very anxious to bring him to the conference table. We never wanted to bury para-DNA; what we'd really like to do is to investigate the contribution it might make to our own methods of breaking down the distinction between the organic and the inorganic."

"You want to buy it?" Silas said in a tone which implied that he didn't believe that a man like Conrad

Helier-unlike the inheritors of the Gantz patents-would ever sell out to PicoCon.

"Not necessarily," said Saul wearily. "In fact, I have grave doubts as to whether it has any potential at all that our own people don't already have covered-but I do want to talk about its potential, and its appropriate uses. It's not impossible that we might actually be able to assist in Conrad's great crusade. In fact, I think it's more than likely that we can. If only he would condescend to listen, I think we can show him a future far brighter and infinitely more promising than the one he presently has in mind."

Damon could see that this was not what Silas had expected. He had had no clear idea what to expect on his own account, but he had to admit that Saul's line of argument had taken him by surprise. Like Silas, he had been thinking entirely in terms of threats-who could blame either of them, after the violent farce of the last few days?-and he was not quite willing to believe, as yet, that there was nothing within the iron glove but a velvet fist. He was, however, prepared to listen-and so, it appeared, was Silas, both on his own behalf and that of Conrad Helier.

"All right," said Silas, flushing slightly as he glanced at Damon-as if he were in search of approval, or at least of understanding. "Tell me what you're offering. If it seems worthwhile, I'll do everything within my power to make sure that Conrad, Eveline, and Karol pay proper attention-but it had better be good."

"It is," said Frederick Gantz Saul. "It certainly is."

Twenty-seven

Damon eased his car through the midmorning traffic, which was flowing normally through well-behaved control lights. He couldn't help feeling a slightly exaggerated sense of his own mortality, in spite of the profuse official denials that had been issued to confirm that he was not Conrad Helier, enemy of mankind. While there were people around who worked on the assumption that everything on the news was likely to be a lie, such denials were likely to be less effective than sly denunciations of the kind that Saul's people had put out while they were still playing rough.

He knew that it was well within the capability of any twelve-year-old or hundred-and-twelve-year-old Webwalker to discover his address and car registration. He knew too that one of the problems of longevity was that it preserved a substantial fraction of the madness to which people were subject alongside the sanity which only the majority achieved. The downside of efficient IT was that it did a far better job preserving the body than it did preserving the mind-and some kinds of madness, albeit not the nastiest kinds, really were all in the mind.

At present, that downside was limited; the most powerful nanotechnologies were so recent in their provenance that even under the New Reproductive System less than a sixth of the population of California consisted of centenarians. In fifty years' time, however, that percentage would have trebled, and most of the 15 percent of current centarians would still be alive. Nobody knew how many of those would still be *compos mentis*; Morgan Miller had been dead for nearly a hundred and eighty years, but the effect named after him had not yet revealed the full extent of its horror. True emortality required more

than the continual revitalization of somatic cells; it required the continued revitalization of the idiosyncratic neuronal pathways that were the foundation of every individual self, every unique personality.

According to Frederick Gantz Saul, there would be crazy people around for some time yet-but not forever. In time, according to Saul, sanity would prevail; foolishness, criminal behavior, and disaffection would fade into oblivion and everyone would be safe. Damon still had not made up his mind whether to believe that, let alone whether to believe Saul's further assertion that the sanity and safety in question would not be a kind of stagnation.

The heightened sense of mortality should have worn off once he was off the street, but it didn't. It accompanied him in the elevator and didn't let up when he stepped out into the LA offices of the Ahasuerus Foundation. Damon hadn't made an appointment, and he wouldn't have felt utterly crushed if he'd been told to go away by the AI receptionist, but Rachel Trehaine didn't even keep him kicking his heels for the customary ten minutes of insult time. He had expected to find her in a frosty mood, but she was positively welcoming-presumably because she was curious.

"How can I help you, Mr. Hart?" she asked.

"I hoped that you might be able to offer me an expert opinion," he said. "I'm not sure that I have anything to offer in trade, but you might be interested in some of what I have to say."

"I can't speak on behalf of the foundation," she was quick to say. "I'm only..."

"A humble data analyst," Damon finished for her. "That's okay. You've heard, I suppose, that the three men Yamanaka arrested have pleaded guilty to all the charges-kidnapping, illegal imprisonment, conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, etcetera. They'll be put away for at least twenty years-but I dare say that when they come out of suspended animation they'll walk straight into jobs with PicoCon, who'll bear the full responsibility and cost of their rehabilitation. There won't be a full trial, of course-just a formal hearing to determine the sentence."

"I'm sure that Inspector Yamanaka is very grateful to you," the red-haired woman said. "If you hadn't resisted so valiantly when they came after you a second time...."

"Actually, it was all Lenny Garon's doing. When he heard them say that they weren't police, he leaped to the conclusion that they were Eliminators enthusiastic to execute an enemy of mankind. Hero worship eclipsed his sense of probability for a few vital moments. I'm grateful to him, of course, but I think Inspector Yamanaka still has a lurking suspicion that he's been fobbed off with a few disposable scapegoats. He doesn't believe that it was all their own idea. On the other hand, he doesn't really want to look too hard for evidence of the involvement of a man like Frederick Saul, in case his career runs onto the rocks."

"People who have careers do have to be careful, Mr. Hart," she pointed out.

"True-and I certainly don't want to jeopardize yours. In fact, I rather hoped that you might be able to help me out with my own career decisions. I seem to have reached something of a crossroads."

"The Ahasuerus Foundation isn't interested in employing you," she told him.

"PicoCon is."

"In that case," she said, "you should count yourself very fortunate."

"I've heard that they have a great future ahead of them," Damon admitted, "but I'm not sure that their optimism would be shared-at least not wholeheartedly-by an unbiased observer."

"I'm flattered that you consider me an unbiased observer," she assured him, "but I'm not sure that I have enough facts at my disposal to make a reasoned analysis of your career prospects with PicoCon or any other company."

"But you do know something about the Saul family, don't you? One of the men who financed the foundation was a Saul, wasn't he?"

"The Ahasuerus Foundation was set up by Adam Zimmerman, entirely funded from his own resources."

"Resources which he earned, if earned is the right word, by masterminding a coup which turned a stock-market crash into an economic holocaust-and left a few dozen men with effective possession of two-thirds of the earth's surface. The possession in question then made inexorable progress to the point at which those men's heirs-who are even fewer in number than they were-are now the effective owners of the whole earth."

"That's a slight exaggeration," Rachel Trehaine protested.

"I know," Damon said. "But the point is that it's only slight. As long as they're united, and as long as they can keep buying up innovators like PicoCon and OmicronA, the gods of New Olympus really do own the earth-and they're busy reinventing the laws of trespass."

No reply was forthcoming to that observation, but Damon hadn't expected one. "I looked at the background material Madoc dredged up for me," he said. "Adam Zimmerman's so-called confession is a remarkable document-as remarkable, in its way, as the charter he set up for the foundation. His penultimate will and testament poses an interesting philosophical question, though. You're supposed to bring him out of suspended animation when you have the technology available to make him young again and keep him that way forever-barring the usual accidents, of course-but what would qualify as reasonable grounds for believing that the latter criterion had been achieved? Some might argue that a man of his age-he was forty-eight, wasn't he, when he was consigned to the freezer?-already has a good chance of riding the escalator all the way, but you'd undoubtedly take the view that he'd want the benefit of much better rejuve technology than the current market standard- technology that could be guaranteed to beat the Hayflick limit and the Miller effect."

"With all due respect," said the red-haired woman, "the internal affairs of the foundation are none of your concern."

"I understand that. I'm only talking hypothetically. I'm intrigued by the question of how we could ever know that we were in possession of a technology of rejuvenation that would stop aging permanently, preserving the mind as well as the body. How could we ever know that a particular IT suite was good for, say, two thousand years, without actually waiting two thousand years for the results of the field tests to come in? What sort of data analysis would allow us to reach a conclusion regarding the efficacy of the technology ahead of time?"

"It wouldn't be easy," Rachel Trehaine admitted warily. "But we now have a very detailed knowledge of the biochemistry of all the degenerative processes we lump together as aging. At present, we arrive at estimates of projected life spans by monitoring those processes over the short term in such a way as to produce an extrapolatable curve. That curve has to be adjusted for rejuvenative interruptions, but we can

do medium-term experiments to monitor the effects of repeated rejuvenative treatments."

"Do you still use mice for those experiments?" Damon asked.

"We use live animals in some trials," she countered rather stiffly, "but most of the preliminary work can be done with tissue cultures. I assume that what you're driving at is the impossibility of getting rid of the margin of uncertainty which arises from dealing with any kind of substitute for human subjects. You're right, of course-we'll never be sure that a treatment which multiplies the lifetime of a cell or a mouse by a thousand will do the same for a human being, until we've actually tried it."

"As I see it," Damon said, "we'll never be able to tell the difference between a technological suite that will allow us to live for a long time and one which really will allow us to live forever. Most people, of course, don't give a damn about that-they only want the best there is-but you have to decide when to wake Adam Zimmerman up. You have to decide, day by day and year by year, exactly how to balance the equation of potential gain against potential risk-because you can't leave him in there indefinitely, can you? Nor can you keep waking him up to ask his advice, because every journey in or out of Susan multiplies the risks considerably, and even the nanotech you pump into him while he's still down and out can't fully compensate for the fact that the first Susan technology he used was pre-ark."

"You're right," she admitted. "For us, if for no one else, nice statistical distinctions are important. What's your point?"

"For a long time, Ahasuerus must have been field leaders in longevity research. Your heavy investment in biotech put you on the crest of the wave-and you presumably had a healthy and mutually supportive relationship with other researchers, all the way from Morgan Miller to Conrad Helier and Surinder Nahal. You were all on the same side, all trading information like good team players. Then PicoCon and OmicronA came at the problem from a different angle, with a different attitude. They're the field leaders now, aren't they? While they've been forming their own team, yours has broken up. Nowadays, it must require serious industrial espionage to discover what the boys across the street are up to, and exactly how far they've got."

"The Ahasuerus Foundation is not involved in industrial espionage," she informed him as stiffly and as flatly as she was bound to do.

"It's not simply a matter of there being a new team in town, is it?" Damon went on softly. "The real problem is that they're trying to redefine the game. They're moving the goalposts and rewriting the rules. They're worried about your willingness to play by the new rules because they're worried about the terms of your charter-about the responsibility you owe to Adam Zimmerman. Is it possible, do you think, that they're anxious that letting Adam Zimmerman out of the freezer might be tantamount to letting the cat out of the bag?"

"What's that supposed to mean, Mr. Hart?"

"Let me put it this way, Dr. Trehaine. It might well be that the people with the very best internal technology would consider it desirable, or even necessary, to play down its power: to maintain the belief that what people insist on calling immortality not only isn't immortality but isn't even true emortality. It might well be that the people who control the IT megacorps consider it desirable or necessary to persuade their would-be heirs that patience is still the cardinal virtue-that in order to inherit the earth they only have to wait until their elders lose their memories, their minds, and, in the end, their lives. If that reality were mere appearance and illusion-if all the patience in the world wouldn't be enough to allow the young to come into their inheritance-what hope would there be for people like me? What is there to wait

for, if my generation can never become the inheritors of Earth?"

"If you think that we already have true emortality, Mr. Hart," Rachel Trehaine said dryly, "you're mistaken. I can say that with certainty."

"I'm not sure how much your certainty is worth, Dr. Trehaine," Damon told her bluntly, "but even if you're right-what about the escalator? If IT really is advancing quickly enough to put true emortality in the hands of people now alive, what will it be worth to the young? While each generation thinks that it has a chance to be the first to the top of the mountain, the philosophy of Elimination will remain the province of outsiders- but as soon as it becomes generally known that the summit has been claimed, and claimed in perpetuity, the Eliminators might become a valuable asset to those whose uneasy heads are only a few funerals away from the crown.

"You're the professional data analyst, Dr. Trehaine-you're in a far better position than I am to balance all the variables in the equation. How do you like the Eliminators? How far away are we, in your estimation, from an undeclared war between the young and the old? And what, if you were a rising star in the PicoCon/OmicronA constellation, would you want to do about it?"

"I think you're being ridiculously melodramatic," said Rachel Trehaine calmly. "We live in a civilized world now. Even if everyone knew that they were truly emortal, they'd have better sense than to go to war for ownership of the world. They'd know perfectly well that any such war might easily end up destroying the prize they were fighting for. Wouldn't it be better to live forever, happily and comfortably, in a world you didn't own than to risk death in order to possess a handful of its ashes?"

"You might think that," Damon said, "and so might I-but we've moved in rather different social circles during the last twenty years, and I can assure you that there are plenty of people out there who are willing to kill, even at the risk of being killed. There are plenty of people who value real freedom over comfort and safety-people who would never be content to live in a world they have no power to change."

"There are other worlds," Rachel Trehaine said mildly. "Now that we've saved Earth, the new frontiers in space are opening up again. The arks launched before the Crash are still en route- and if Eveline Hywood and her panspermist friends are right, the galaxy must be full of worlds that have ecospheres of their own, including many that are ripe for colonization."

"That's the optimistic view," Damon agreed. "As far as we know for sure, though, there isn't an acre of worthwhile real estate anywhere in the universe outside of Earth. As far as we know for sure, this world is the world. No matter how many people decide to live in glorified tin cans like the domes of Mars and Lagrange-Five, Earth might be the only inheritance that has any real market value-the only thing worth fighting for."

"Perhaps your years as a streetfighter have given you an unduly jaundiced view of your fellow men, Mr. Hart," said the data analyst. "Perhaps you haven't yet become sufficiently adult to realize how utterly juvenile such boys' games are."

"I realize that you don't much like playing games, Dr. Trehaine," Damon countered, "but you must have noticed that not everyone shares your distaste."

"What, exactly, do you want from me?" she asked.

"An opinion. An honest opinion, if you're willing to provide it, regarding Frederick Gantz Saul's argument that no one should fight the world's present owners for control of the world."

"What is his argument?" she countered, although Damon had already judged-on the basis of their eye-to-eye contact-that she knew perfectly well what Saul was offering the independent thinkers who hadn't yet fallen in line with his plans for the remaking of the world.

"He says that the nanotech revolution has only just begun, and that it can't be carried forward to its proper conclusion by the forces of commercial competition. He says that the future of the world now needs to be planned, and that too many cooks would undoubtedly spoil the broth. He reckons that the world has always underestimated the true potential of gantzing biotech because of its historical association with the business of building elementary shelters for the poorest people in the world. Cementing mud, sand, and all kinds of other unpromising materials into solid structures may seem crude and vulgar to us, but in Saul's estimation it's the foundation stone of a true bridge between the organic and the inorganic.

"We already have biotech which will transform animal egg cells into huge tissue cultures of almost any design the gene-tweakers can dream up, and modify viable organisms in thousands of interesting and useful ways. If research like yours eventually bears fruit, we'll be able to modify human beings in exactly the same way, engineering ova in artificial wombs so that they won't need elaborate IT to provide all the extra features- like emortality-that we consider necessary and desirable. According to Saul, that revolution will be completed by gantzing biotech/nanotech hybrids, which will enable us to work miracles of transformation with any and all inorganic structures.

"Saul calls himself a true Gaian-not a Gaian Mystic, but someone with a real understanding of the implications of the Gaia hypothesis. The whole point of that hypothesis, according to Saul, is that it's wrong to think of the inorganic environment as something given, as a framework within which life has to operate. Just as Earth's atmosphere is a product of life, he says, so are its oceans and its rocks: everything at the surface is part of the same system-and when we take control of that system, as we very soon will, it won't simply be a matter of juggling Earth's biomass; we'll have more transformative power than the so-called continental engineers ever dreamed of. Earth's crust will be ours to sculpt as we wish-or, rather, as Earth's owners wish.

"But that, according to Saul, is only the beginning. As below, he says, so above. Give him gantzers powerful enough and a few hundred years, and he'll change the faces of Mars and Venus. Every asteroid in the belt will be an egg patiently awaiting gantzing sperms to transform it into a star-traveling monster, bigger than a thousand arks and infinitely more comfortable. Only give them the time, he says, and the owners of Earth will give the whole universe to the rest of us. Only give them time, and they'll show us what ownership really can mean, by demonstrating that there is no matter anywhere which needs to be considered inert or useless. Only give them time, and they will bring the entire universe to life-and all they ask in return is Earth, their own precious corner, their own legitimate heritage.

"That's what Frederick Gantz Saul offered Conrad Helier, in exchange for effective ownership and control of para-DNA. That's what he must have offered your employers in order to bring them meekly into line. It's what he'll offer everyone who ever looks as if they might be getting out of line-but I'd be willing to bet that he'll always be prepared to show them the stick before offering the carrot, just to make sure that he has their full attention. So what I need to know, Dr. Data Analyst, is: is it true? Or is it, perhaps, just a clever line of patter, intended to defuse all opposition to a state of affairs that puts Saul and his friends in almost total control of what might-so far as we know for sure-be the only world there is or ever will be."

"And you want an honest opinion?" Rachel Trehaine challenged him. "My honest opinion, as an individual rather than an employee of the Ahasuerus Foundation."

"If you think I've given you enough in exchange," he said, "I'd be very grateful."

"Unfortunately," she said, "you've already put your finger on the root of the problem. However expert we may be as data analysts, we can't possibly know for sure how good our extrapolations are. Only time will tell whether Saul's promises can be redeemed. In the meantime, they're pie in the sky. On the other hand, what other choice have you got? If you don't buy into his dream, all you have is the prospects of a teenage streetfighter permanently engaged in a rebellion he can't win. If you don't want to work directly for PicoCon you can always join Eveline Hywood in Lagrange-Five, or make your way to whichever far-flung hidey-hole your father found for himself, but you know better than to think that they can continue to avoid toeing the line. They're old enough to know better-and so are you."

Damon had kept his eyes locked on hers while she delivered this speech, but he let them fall now.

"What did you expect me to say?" she asked him not unkindly. "What else could I say?"

"I thought I ought to make sure," Damon told her, trying to sound grateful for her effort. "I didn't know how far out of line Ahasuerus was. I suppose I was wondering whether there was something you knew that I didn't, or something you might see that I'd missed-something which would put the matter into a less dismal light."

"If Saul's right," she told him, "the light's not dismal at all. You may not be able to have a substantial share in the earth, but how many people ever could? The point is that you-or your heirs-might still be able to claim a substantial share of the universe. For all his faults, Saul tells a hell of a story-and it might be true. Shouldn't we at least hope that it is?"

"I suppose we should," Damon admitted grudgingly.

Twenty-eight

Madoc Tamlin went out onto the bedroom balcony and lifted his face to bathe in the light of the afternoon sun. The breakers tumbling over the shingle had just begun their retreat from the ragged line of wrack and plastic that marked the high tide. In the distance, he could see Lenny Garon and Catherine Prail walking together, making slow but methodical progress in the direction of the house.

High above the house a young wing glider was wheeling in search of a thermal. His angelic wings were painted like a flamingo's, each pink-tinted pinion feather brightly outlined. Madoc had never seen a real flamingo, but he knew that they were smaller by far than the bird boy. Natural selection had never produced a bird as large as the human glider, but modern technology had taken over where mutation had left off, in every sphere of human existence.

Madoc smiled as he watched the glider swoop low and then soar, having found his thermal. He willed the flier to attempt a loop or some equally daring stunt, but the conditions weren't right and the boy hadn't yet obtained the full measure of his skill. In time, no doubt, he would dare anything-flirtation with danger was at least half the fascination that attracted men to flight.

Damon was lucky to have inherited a house like this, Madoc thought-all the more so if, as Damon continued to insist, Silas Arnett's death had been no more real than Surinder Nahal's. It was a pity that Damon didn't seem to appreciate what he had- but that had always been Damon's problem.

"Who was on the phone?"

Madoc hadn't heard Diana Caisson come up behind him; her bare feet made no sound on the thick carpet.

"Damon," he said, without turning to look at her. He knew that she would be wearing nothing but a bath towel.

"When's he coming?"

Still Madoc wouldn't turn to face her. "He's not," he said.

"What?"

"He's not coming."

"But I thought. . . ." Diana trailed off without finishing the sentence, but she wasn't finished. Madoc watched her cheeks go red, and he saw her fist clench harder than any streetfighter's fist. He'd seen her draw blood before, and he didn't expect to see anything less this time.

Madoc knew what Diana had thought. She'd thought that Damon had offered them temporary use of the house he'd inherited from Silas Arnett as a roundabout way of fixing up a meeting. She was still waiting for Damon to "see the light": to realize that he couldn't bear to be without her and that he had to mend his ways in order to win her back. When Damon had returned the full set of master tapes which he'd plundered for his various VE productions, she'd recklessly assumed that it was the first step on the way to a reconciliation: a gesture of humility.

Madoc knew different. Damon had never been one for seeing the lights that other people suspended for him. He liked to chase his own fox fires.

"What did he say?" Diana asked.

Madoc thought for a moment that she might be trying-unsuccessfully-to suppress her annoyance, but then he realized that it was just a slow buildup. He didn't suppose he had any real chance of heading her off, but he felt obliged to try. "He said that we should relax and enjoy ourselves. He said that we could stay as long as we want, because he doesn't anticipate using the house at all. It's on the market, of course, but it could take weeks to sell, or even months."

"Will he be coming later in the week?"

"No, Di. When he says that he doesn't intend using the place at all, that's exactly what he means. He's busy."

"Busy!" Her voice had risen to a screech. "He's just inherited two small fortunes, to add to the one he already had but somehow never got around to mentioning. He doesn't have to make any more telephone tapes, or any more game tapes, or any more fight tapes, or any more pornotapes ... not that he ever did, it seems. He can do anything he damn well likes!" Diana had not yet begun to accept that she was fighting a losing battle, because she hadn't yet begun to understand why she had never had a chance of winning it.

"That's right," Madoc told her as gently as he could. "He can do anything he likes-and what he likes, as it happens, is setting himself up in business."

"He could have done that in Los Angeles!"

"He thinks Los Angeles is way too crowded. There's no real privacy here. If he were going to stay here, he said, he might as well take the job that PicoCon offered him. He wants to work where he can feel free."

"And what, exactly, is he going to work at?" Her fingernails were drawing blood now, and were sinking even further into her flesh in response to the anesthetic ministrations of her IT.

"I don't know. Not VE, he says. Biotech, I suppose-that's what he was trained for, before he ran away to join the circus. As to what kind of biotech, I wouldn't know."

Diana had no reply to that but curses-and the curses rapidly turned to violent action. For a moment, Madoc thought she might actually try to take it out on him, but she turned and hurled herself upon the bed instead, tearing at the quilt with her bloody hands, lacerating its surface as easily as she had lacerated her own flesh. The filling came out in flocculent lumps which rose into the air as she beat the bed in frustration.

Madoc wondered, as he always did, whether he ought to slap her about the face the way people sometimes did in antique movies, but he had never believed that it would work. It might conceivably have worked then, but it wouldn't now. The world was different now, and so was the quality of Diana's hysteria. Madoc couldn't believe that the hysteria was authentically destructive, let alone self-destructive. He couldn't believe that it was anything more than a performance, whose safety was guaranteed by courtesy of her IT-but it wasn't a performance he wanted to get involved in.

Damon had had something of the same fierce reactivity in him once, but Damon's had drained away. Damon had made a kind of peace with the world, and Diana's inability to make a similar peace had driven them apart.

"It's pointless, Di," Madoc said, going forward as if to take her arm when her fury had abated a little.

She lashed out at him from a prone position, but it was a halfhearted blow. He caught her arm easily enough, turned her over, and then caught the other so that he could look into her face without fear for his eyes.

She was weeping, but she wasn't sobbing.

"Give it up, Di," he said as softly as he could. "It's not worth it. Nothing's worth that kind of heartache, that much frustration."

Diana shook away his constraining hands, then shoved him aside and walked past him to the balcony.

She barely glanced at the boy with the flamingo wings, or at the approaching figures of Lenny and Catherine. She was lost inside herself.

"I'd have gone with him, if he asked," she said in a tortured voice. "To the ends of the earth, if necessary. A new start might be exactly what we need. I wish he could understand that. I wish..."

"He isn't going to ask you, Di," Madoc said. "He isn't even going to ask me. Damon's always been restless. He has to keep moving on."

"He shouldn't be in such a hurry," Diana said, still shivering with resentment. "The one thing nobody needs to do in today's world is hurry. There's time enough for everything. He really ought to slow down. I think he's running away, and I don't think it'll solve anything. Running never does. Nobody ever really solves anything until they can settle down and sort out exactly what it is they want. He needs me-he's just too stubborn to admit it."

"Maybe he is running away," Madoc said, "but not from you. Whatever he wants, you're simply not included. He doesn't mean to hurt you; he's just doing what he thinks he needs to do. Let him go, Di, for your own sake."

Madoc knew that he wasn't getting through to her, but Lenny and Cathy were close enough by now to see her face, and she still cared enough about appearances to want to hide the true extent of her despair from them.

"Why do they get the big bedroom?" she demanded, fixing her angry gaze on their fellow guests but holding her bloody hands behind her back, where only Madoc could see what she'd done.

"Because that's what Damon wanted," Madoc muttered. "He thinks he owes Lenny a favor, even though it was all a stupid mistake. I owe him one too, I suppose-if Yamanaka hadn't had the other guys to stamp on, I might not have got off with a fine. Try to relax, will. you. You might actually begin to enjoy yourself."

There was a slight pause before she said: "I can't." Her voice was barely above a whisper, but it was no less bitter for that- and she was only keeping her voice down because Lenny and Catherine were almost within earshot. Madoc suppressed his annoyance and put a protective arm around her bare shoulders.

"Time heals," he said, "and as you say, we have plenty of it."

"Sure," she said, continuing in the same conspicuously weak but bitter tone. "We have a hundred years, or maybe two. We have legions of little robocops patrolling our veins and our nervous systems, ready to take care of any pain that might happen to catch us by surprise. We're superhuman. Except that there are some pains that all the nanotech in the world can't soothe, some sicknesses that all the antiviruses in the world can't cure. At the end of the day, it's what you feel in your heart that counts, not what you feel in your hands and feet-and there, we're as frail and feeble as we ever were. What use is eternity, if you can't have what you want?"

"What use would eternity be if we could?" Madoc countered, knowing that it was exactly what Damon would have said. "If there were nothing we needed so badly it made us sick, and nothing we wanted so avidly that it made us wretched, what would draw us through today into tomorrow ... and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?"

"That's good," said Lenny, standing below the balcony and waving up at them. "That's really good. You

sound exactly like Damon."

"I taught him everything he knows," Madoc said, offhandedly. "He got it all from me. He may think he doesn't need me anymore, but I'll always be with him. In his mind and in his heart, there'll always be something of me. And you too, of course, Di. We mustn't forget your contribution to the making of the man."

Diana had already turned away, unwilling to expose the soreness of her distress to two mere children who couldn't possibly understand. She didn't look back to acknowledge Madoc's sarcasm.

"One day," said Cathy, looking up at the glider, "I'm going to get a pair of wings like that. Not in pink, though. I want to be a falcon, or a bird of paradise, or a golden oriole ... or all three, and then some. I want to fly as high as I possibly can, and as far as I possibly can."

Diana made a sound like a kitten in pain, but she was still determined to keep the full extent of her anguish from the boy and the girl.

"You will," Madoc said, looking down at the silken crown of Cathy's head and wondering whether Lenny could possibly be persuaded that an older and more passionate woman might be far more useful to his sentimental education than a girl his own age. "Once you've learned to fly even the sky won't be the limit."