

# THE FEAST OF SAINT JANIS

*by Michael Swanwick*

Take a load off, Janis, And  
You put the load right on me... —“The Wait“ (trad.)

Wolf stood in the early morning fog watching the *Yankee Clipper* leave Baltimore harbor. His elbows rested against a cool, clammy wall, its surface eroded smooth by the passage of countless hands, almost certainly dating back to before the Collapse. A metallic gray sparkle atop the foremast drew his eye to the dish antenna that linked the ship with the geosynchronous *Trickster* seasats it relied on to plot winds and currents.

To many the wooden *Clipper*, with its computer-designed hydrofoils and hand-sewn sails, was a symbol of the New Africa. Wolf, however, watching it merge into sea and sky, knew only that it was going home without him.

He turned and walked back into the rick-a-rack of commercial buildings crowded against the waterfront. The clatter of hand-drawn carts mingled with a melange of exotic cries and shouts, the alien music of a dozen American dialects. Workers, clad in coveralls most of them, swarmed about, grunting and cursing in exasperation when an iron wheel lurched in a muddy pothole. Yet there was something furtive and covert about them, as if they were hiding an ancient secret.

Craning to stare into the dark recesses of a warehouse, Wolf collided with a woman clad head to foot in chador. She flinched at his touch, her eyes glaring above the black veil, then whipped away. Not a word was exchanged.

A citizen of Baltimore in its glory days would not have recognized the city. Where the old buildings had not been torn down and buried, shanties crowded the streets, taking advantage of the space automobiles had needed. Sometimes they were built *over* the streets, so that alleys became tunnelways, and sometimes these collapsed, to the cries and consternation

of the natives.

It was another day with nothing to do. He could don a filter mask and tour the Washington ruins, but he had already done that, and besides the day looked like it was going to be hot. It was unlikely he'd hear anything about his mission, not after months of waiting on American officials who didn't want to talk with him. Wolf decided to check back at his hostel for messages, then spend the day in the bazaars.

Children were playing in the street outside the hostel. They scattered at his approach. One, he noted, lagged behind the others, hampered by a malformed leg. He mounted the unpainted wooden steps, edging past an old man who sat at the bottom. The old man was laying down tarot cards with a slow and fatalistic disregard for what they said; he did not look up.

The bell over the door jangled notice of Wolf's entry. He stepped into the dark foyer.

Two men in the black uniforms of the political police appeared, one to either side of him. "Wolfgang Hans Mbikana?" one asked. His voice had the dust of ritual on it; he knew the answer, "You will come with us," the other said.

"There is some mistake," Wolf objected.

"No, sir, there is no mistake," one said mildly. The Other opened the door. "After you, Mr. Mbikana."

The old man on the stoop squinted up at them, looked away, and slid off the step.

The police walked Wolf to an ancient administrative building. They went up marble steps sagging from centuries of foot-scuffing, and through an empty lobby. Deep within the building they halted before an undistinguished-looking door. "You are expected," the first of the police said.

"I beg your pardon?"

The police walked away, leaving him there. Apprehensive, he knocked on the door. There was no answer, so he opened it and stepped within.

A woman sat at a desk just inside the room. Though she was modernly dressed, she wore a veil. She might have been young; it was impossible to tell. A flick of her eyes, a motion of one hand, directed him to the open door of an inner room. It was like following an onion to its conclusion, a layer of mystery at a time.

A heavy-set man sat at the final desk. He was dressed in the traditional

suit and tie of American businessmen. But there was nothing quaint or old-fashioned about his mobile, expressive face or the piercing eyes he turned on Wolf.

“Sit down,” he grunted, gesturing toward an old, overstuffed chair. Then: “Charles DiStephano. Comptroller for Northeast Regional. You’re Mbikana, right?”

“Yes, sir.” Wolf gingerly took the proffered chair, which did not seem all that clean. It was becoming clear to him now; DiStephano was one of the men on whom he had waited these several months, the biggest of the lot, in fact. “I represent—”

“The Southwest Africa Trade Company.” DiStephano lifted some documents from his desk. “Now this says you’re prepared to offer—among other things—resource data from your North American *Coyote* landsat in exchange for the right to place students in Johns Hopkins. I find that an odd offer for your organization to make.”

“Those are my papers,” Wolf objected. “As a citizen of Southwest Africa, I’m not used to this sort of cavalier treatment.”

“Look, kid, I’m a busy man, I have no time to discuss your rights. The papers are in my hands, I’ve read them, the people that sent you knew I would, Okay? So I know what you want and what you’re offering. What I want to know is *why* you’re making this offer.”

Wolf was disconcerted. He was used to a more civilized, a more leisurely manner of doing business. The oldtimers at SWATC had warned him that the pace would be different here, but he hadn’t had the experience to decipher their veiled references and hints. He was painfully aware that he had gotten the mission, with its high salary and the promise of a bonus, only because it was not one that appealed to the older hands.

“America was hit hardest,” he said, “but the Collapse was worldwide.” He wondered whether he should explain the system of corporate social responsibility that African business was based on. Then decided that if DiStephano didn’t know, he didn’t want to. “There are still problems. Africa has a high incidence of birth defects.” *Because America exported its poisons; its chemicals and pesticides and foods containing a witch’s brew of preservatives.* “We hope to do away with the problem; if a major thrust is made, we can clean up the gene pool in less than a century. But to do this requires professionals —eugenicists, embryonic surgeons—and while we have these, they are second-rate. The very best still come from your nation’s medical schools.”

“We can’t spare any.”

“We don’t propose to steal your doctors. We’d provide our own students—fully trained doctors who need only the specialized training.”

“There are only so many openings at Hopkins,” DiStephano said. “Or at U of P or the *UVM* Medical College, for that matter.”

“We’re prepared to—” Wolf pulled himself up short. “It’s in the papers. We’ll pay enough that you can expand to meet the needs of twice the number of students we require.” The room was dim and oppressive. Sweat built up under Wolf’s clothing.

“Maybe so. You can’t buy teachers with money, though.” Wolf said nothing. “I’m also extremely reluctant to let your people *near* our medics. You can offer them money, estates—things our country cannot afford. And we *need* our doctors. As it is, only the very rich can get the corrective surgery they require.”

“If you’re worried about our pirating your professionals, there are ways around that. For example, a clause could be written—” Wolf went on, feeling more and more in control. He was getting somewhere. If there wasn’t a deal to be made, the discussion would never have gotten this far.

The day wore on. DiStephano called in aides and dismissed them. Twice, he had drinks sent in. Once, they broke for lunch. Slowly the heat built, until it was sweltering. Finally, the light began to fail, and the heat grew less oppressive.

DiStephano swept the documents into two piles, returned one to Wolf, and put the other inside a desk drawer. “I’ll look these over, have our legal boys run a study. There shouldn’t be any difficulties. I’ll get back to you with the final word in—say a month. September twenty-first. I’ll be in Boston then, but you can find me easily enough, if you ask around.”

“A month? But I thought...”

“A month. You can’t hurry City Hall,” DiStephano said firmly. “Ms. Corey!” The veiled woman was at the door, remote, elusive.

“Sir.”

“Drag Kaplan out of his office. Tell him we got a kid here he should give the VIP treatment to. Maybe a show. It’s a Hopkins thing, he should earn his keep.”

“Yes, sir.” She was gone.

“Thank you,” Wolf said, “but I don’t really need . . .”

“Take my advice, kid, take all the perks you can get. God knows there aren’t many left. I’ll have Kaplan pick you up at your hostel in an hour.”

Kaplan turned out to be a slight, balding man with nervous gestures, some sort of administrative functionary for Hopkins. Wolf never did get the connection. But Kaplan was equally puzzled by Wolf's status, and Wolf took petty pleasure in not explaining it. It took some of the sting off of having his papers stolen.

Kaplan led Wolf through the evening streets. A bright sunset circled the world and the crowds were much thinner. "We won't be leaving the area that's zoned for electricity," Kaplan said. "Otherwise I'd advise against going out at night at all. Lot of jennie-deafs out then."

"Jennie-deafs?"

"Mutes. Culls. The really terminal cases. Some of them can't pass themselves off in daylight even wearing coveralls. Or chador—a lot are women." A faintly perverse expression crossed the man's face, leaving not so much as a greasy residue.

"Where are we going?" Wolf asked. He wanted to change the subject. A vague presentiment assured him he did not want to know the source of Kaplan's expression.

"A place called Peabody's. You've heard of Janis Joplin, our famous national singer?" Wolf nodded, meaning no.

"The show is a recreation of her act. Woman name of Maggie Horowitz does the best impersonation of Janis I've ever seen. Tickets are almost impossible to get, but Hopkins has special influence in this case because—ah, here we are."

Kaplan led him down a set of concrete steps and into the basement of a dull, brick building. Wolf experienced a moment of dislocation. It was a bookstore. Shelves and boxes of books and magazines brooded over him, a packrat's clutter of paper.

Wolf wanted to linger, to scan the ancient tomes, remnants of a time and culture fast sinking into obscurity and myth. But Kaplan brushed past them without a second glance and he had to hurry to keep up.

They passed through a second roomful of books, then into a hallway where a gray man held out a gnarled hand and said, "Tickets, please."

Kaplan gave the man two crisp pasteboard cards, and they entered a third room.

It was a cabaret. Wooden chairs clustered about small tables with flickering candles at their centers. The room was lofted with wood beams,

and a large, unused fireplace dominated one wall. Another wall had obviously been torn out at one time to make room for a small stage. Over a century's accumulation of memorabilia covered the walls or hung from the rafters, like barbarian trinkets from toppled empires.

"Peabody's is a local institution," Kaplan said. "In the twentieth century it was a speakeasy. H. L. Mencken himself used to drink here." Wolf nodded, though the name meant nothing to him. "The bookstore was a front and the drinking went on here in back."

The place was charged with a feeling of the past. It invoked America's bygone days as a world power. Wolf half-expected to see Theodore Roosevelt or Henry Kissinger come striding in. He said something to this effect and Kaplan smiled complacently. "You'll like the show, then," he said. A waiter took their orders. There was barely time to begin on the drinks when a pair of spotlights came on, and the stage curtain parted.

A woman stood alone in the center of the stage. Bracelets and bangles hung from her wrists, gaudy necklaces from her throat. She wore large tinted glasses and a flowered granny gown. Her nipples pushed against the thin dress. Wolf stared at them in horrified fascination. She had an extra set, immediately below the first pair.

The woman stood perfectly motionless. Wolf couldn't stop staring at her nipples; it wasn't just the number, it was the fact of their being visible at all. So quickly had he taken on this land's taboos.

The woman threw her head back and laughed. She put one hand on her hip, thrust the hip out at an angle, and lifted the microphone to her lips. She spoke, and her voice was harsh and raspy.

"About a year ago I lived in a rowhouse in Newark, right? Lived on the third floor, and I thought I had my act together. But nothing was going right, I wasn't getting any . . . action. Know what I mean? No talent comin' around. And there was this chick down the street, didn't have much and she was doing okay, so I say to myself: *What's wrong, Janis?* How come she's doing so good and you ain't gettin' any? So I decided to check it out, see what she had that I didn't. And one day I get up early, look out the window, and I see this chick out there *hustling!* I mean, she was doing the streets at *noon!* So I said to myself, Janis, honey, you ain't even trying. And when ya want action, ya gotta try. Yeah. Try just a little bit harder."

The music swept up out of nowhere, and she was singing: "Try-iiii, Try-iiii, Just a little bit harder..."

And unexpectedly, it was good. It was like nothing he had ever heard, but he understood it, almost on an instinctual level. It was world-culture

music. It was universal.

Kaplan dug fingers into Wolf's arm, brought his mouth up to Wolf's ear. "You see? You see?" he demanded. Wolf shook him off impatiently. He wanted to hear the music.

The concert lasted forever, and it was done in no time at all. It left Wolf sweaty and emotionally spent. Onstage, the woman was energy personified. She danced, she strutted, she wailed more power into her songs than seemed humanly possible. Not knowing the original, Wolf was sure it was a perfect recreation. It had that feel.

The audience loved her. They called her back for three encores, and then a fourth. Finally, she came out, gasped into the mike, "I love ya, honeys, I truly do. But please—no more. I just couldn't do it." She blew a kiss, and was gone from the stage.

The entire audience was standing. Wolf among them, applauding furiously. A hand fell on Wolf's shoulder, and he glanced to his side, annoyed. It was Kaplan. His face was flushed and he said, "Come on." He pulled Wolf free of the crowd and backstage to a small dressing room. Its door was ajar and people were crowded into it. One of them was the singer, hair stringy and out-of-place, laughing and gesturing widely with a Southern Comfort bottle. It was an antique, its label lacquered to the glass, and three-quarters filled with something amber-colored. "Janis, this is—" Kaplan began.

"The name is Maggie," she sang gleefully. "Maggie Horowitz. I ain't no *dead* blues singer. And don't you forget it."

"This is a fan of yours, Maggie. From Africa." He gave Wolf a small shove. Wolf hesitantly stumbled forward, grimacing apologetically at the people he displaced.

"Whee-howdy!" Maggie whooped. She downed a slug from her bottle. "Pleased ta meetcha, Ace. Kinda light for an African, aintcha?"

"My mother's people were descended from German settlers." And it was felt that a light-skinned representative could handle the touchy Americans better, but he didn't say that.

"Whatcher name, Ace?"

"Wolf."

"Wolf!" Maggie crowed. "Yeah, you look like a real heartbreaker, honey. Guess I'd better be careful around you, huh? Likely to sweep me off my feet and deflower me." She nudged him with an elbow. "That's a joke, Ace."

Wolf was fascinated. Maggie was *alive*, a dozen times more so than her countrymen. She made them look like zombies. Wolf was also a little afraid of her. “*Hey*. Whatcha think of my singing, hah?”

“It was excellent,” Wolf said. “It was—” he groped for words “—in my land the music is quieter, there is not so much emotion.”

“Yeah, well *I* think it was fucking good, Ace. Voice’s never been in better shape. Go tell ‘em that at Hopkins, Kaplan. Tell ‘em I’m giving them their money’s worth.”

“Of course you are,” Kaplan said.

“Well, I *am*, goddammit. Hey, this place is like a morgue! Let’s ditch this matchbox dressing room and hit the bars. Hey? Let’s party.”

She swept them all out of the dressing room, out of the building, and into the street. They formed a small, boisterous group, noisily wandering the city, looking for bars.

“There’s one a block thataway,” Maggie said. “Let’s hit it. Hey, Ace, I’d like ya ta meet Cynthia. Sin, this is Wolf. Sin and I are like one person inside two skins. Many’s the time we’ve shared a piece of talent in the same bed. Hey?” She cackled, and grabbed at Cynthia’s ass.

“Cut it out, Maggie.” Cynthia smiled when she said it. She was a tall, slim, striking woman.

“Hey, this town is *dead!*” Maggie screamed the last word, then gestured them all to silence so they could listen for the echo. “There it is.” She pointed and they swooped down on the first bar.

After the third bar, Wolf lost track. At some point he gave up on the party and somehow made his way back to his hostel. The last he remembered of Maggie she was calling after him, “Hey, Ace, don’t be a party poop.” Then: “At least be sure to come back tomorrow, goddammit.”

Wolf spent most of the next day in his room, drinking water and napping. His hangover was all but gone by the time evening took the edge off the day’s heat. He thought of Maggie’s half-serious invitation, dismissed it and decided to go to the Club.

The Uhuru Club was ablaze with light by the time he wandered in, a beacon in a dark city. Its frequenters, after all, were all African foreign service, with a few commercial reps such as himself forced in by the insular nature of American society, and the need for polite conversation. It was *de facto* exempt from the power-use laws that governed the natives.



“Mbikana! Over here, lad, let me set you up with a drink.” Nnamdi of the consulate waved him over to the bar. Wolf complied, feeling conspicuous as he always did in the Club. His skin stood out here. Even the American servants were dark, though whether this was a gesture of deference or arrogance on the part of the local authorities, he could not guess.

“Word is that you spent the day closeted with the comptroller.” Nnamdi had a gin-and-tonic set up. Wolf loathed the drink, but it was universal among the service people. “Share the dirt with us.” Other faces gathered around; the service ran on gossip.

Wolf gave an abridged version of the encounter and Nnamdi applauded. “A full day with the Spider King and you escaped with your balls intact. An auspicious beginning for you, lad.”

“Spider King?”

“Surely you were briefed on regional autonomy—how the country was broken up when it could no longer be managed by a central directorate? There is no higher authority than DiStephauo in this part of the world, boy.”

“Boston,” Ajuji sniffed. Like most of the expatriates, she was a failure; unlike many, she couldn’t hide the fact from herself. “That’s exactly the sort of treatment one comes to expect from these savages.”

“Now, Ajuji,” Nnamdi said mildly. “These people are hardly savages. Why, before the Collapse they put men on the moon.”

“Technology! Hard-core technology, that’s all it was, of a piece with the kind that almost destroyed us all. If you want a measure of a people, you look at how they live. These—*yanks*,” she hissed the word to emphasize its filthiness, “live in squalor. Their streets are filthy, their cities are filthy, and even the ones who aren’t rotten with genetic disease are filthy. A child can be taught to clean up after itself. What does that make them?” “Human beings, Ajuji.” “Hogwash. Nnamdi.”

Wolf followed the argument with acute embarrassment. He had been brought up to expect well from people with social standing. To hear gutter language and low prejudice from them was almost beyond bearing. Suddenly it *was* beyond bearing. He stood, his stool making a scraping noise as he pushed it back. He turned his back on them all, and left.

“Mbikana! You mustn’t—” Nnamdi called after him.

“Oh, let him go,” Ajuji cut in, with a satisfied tone, “you mustn’t expect better. After all, he’s practically one of *them*.”

Well, maybe he was.

Wolf wasn't fully aware of where he was going until he found himself at Peabody's. He circled the building, and found a rear door. He tried the knob; it turned loosely in his hand. Then the door swung open and a heavy, bearded man in coveralls leaned out "Yes?" he said in an unfriendly tone.

"Oh," Wolf said. "Maggie Horowitz told me I could drop by."

"Look, pilgrim, there are a lot of people try to get backstage. My job is to keep them out unless I know them. I don't know you."

Wolf tried to think of some response to this, and failed. He was about to turn away when somebody unseen said, "Oh, let him in, Deke."

It was Cynthia. "Come on," she said in a bored voice. "Don't clog up the doorway." The guard moved aside, and he entered.

"Thank you," he said.

"*Nada*," she replied. "As Maggie would say. The dressing room is that way, pilgrim."

"Wolf, honey!" Maggie shrieked. "How's it going, Ace? Ya catch the show?"

"No, I—"

"You shoulda. I was good. Really good. Janis herself was never better. Hey, gang! Let's split, hah? Let's go somewhere and get down and boogie."

A group of twenty ended up taking over a methane-lit bar outside the zoned-for-electricity sector. Three of the band had brought along their instruments, and they talked the owner into letting them play. The music was droning and monotonous. Maggie listened appreciatively, grinning and moving her head to the music.

"Whatcha think of that. Ace? Pretty good, hey? That's what we call Dead music."

Wolf shook his head. "I think it's well named."

"Hey, guys, you hear that? Wolf here just made a funny. There's hope for you yet, honey." Then she sighed. "Can't get behind it, huh? That's really sad, man. I mean they played *good* music back then; it was real. We're just echoes, man. Just playing away at them old songs. Got none of our own worth singing."

“Is that why you’re doing the show, then?” Wolf asked, curious.

Maggie laughed. “Hell no. I do it because I got the chance. DiStephano got in touch with me—”

“DiStephano? The comptroller?”

“One of his guys, anyway. They had this gig all set up and they needed someone to play Janis. So they ran a computer search and came up with my name. And they offered me money, and I spent a month or two in Hopkins being worked over, and here I am. On the road to fame and glory.” Her voice rose and warbled and mocked itself on the last phrase. “Why d’d you have to go to Hopkins?”

“You don’t think I was *born* looking like this? They had to change my face around. Changed my voice too, for which God bless. They brought it down lower, widened out my range, gave it the strength to hold onto them high notes and push ‘em around.”

“Not to mention the mental implants,” Cynthia said.

“Oh, yeah, and the ‘plants so I could talk in a bluesy sorta way without falling out of character,” Maggie said. “But that was minor.”

Wolf was impressed. He had known that Hopkins was good, but this— “What I don’t understand is why your government did all this. What possible benefit is there for them?”

“Beats the living hell out of me, lover-boy. Don’t know, don’t care, and don’t ask. That’s my motto.”

A long haired, pale young man sitting nearby said, “The government is all hacked up on social engineering. They do a lot of weird things, and you never find out why. You learn not to ask questions.”

“Hey, listen, Hawk, bringing Janis back to life isn’t weird. It’s a beautiful thing to do,” Maggie objected. “Yeah. I only wish they could *really* bring her back. Sit her down next to me. Love to talk with that lady.”

“You two would tear each other’s eyes out,” Cynthia said.

“What? Why?”

“Neither one of you’d be willing to give up the spotlight to the other.”

Maggie cackled. “Ain’t it the truth? Still, she’s one broad I’d love to have met. A *real* star, see? Not a god-dammed echo like me.”

Hawk broke in, said, “You, Wolf. Where does your pilgrimage take you now? The group goes on tour the day after tomorrow; what are your

plans?”

“I don’t really have any,” Wolf said. He explained his situation. “I’ll probably stay in Baltimore until it’s time to go up north. Maybe I’ll take a side trip or two.”

“Why don’t you join the group, then?” Hawk asked. “We’re planning to make the trip one long party. And we’ll slam into Boston in just less than a month. The tour ends there.”

“That,” said Cynthia, “is a real bright idea. All we need is another nonproductive person on board the train.”

Maggie bristled. “So what’s wrong with that? Not like we’re paying for it, is it? What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it. It’s just a dumb idea.”

“Well, *I* like it. How about it, Ace? You on the train or off?”

“I—” He stopped. Well, why not? “Yes. I would be pleased to go along.”

“Good.” She turned to Cynthia. “*Your* problem, sweets, is that you’re just plain jealous.”

“Oh Christ, here we go again.”

“Well, don’t bother. It won’t do you any good. Hey, you see that piece of talent at the far end of the bar?”

“Maggie, that ‘piece of talent,’ as you call him, is eighteen years old. At most.”

“Yeah. Nice though.” Maggie stared wistfully down the bar. “He’s kinda pretty, ya know?”

Wolf spent the next day clearing up his affairs and arranging for letters of credit. The morning of departure day, he rose early and made his way to Baltimore Station. A brief exchange with the guards let him into the walled trainyard.

The train was an ungainly steam locomotive with a string of rehabilitated cars behind it. The last car had the word PEARL painted on it, in antique psychedelic lettering.

“Hey, Wolf! Come lookit this mother.” A lone figure waved at him from the far end of the train. Maggie. Wolf joined her. “What do you think of it, hah?” He searched for something polite to say. “It is very impressive,” he said finally. The word that leapt to mind was grotesque.

“Yeah, Runs on garbage, you know that? Just like me.”

“Garbage?”

“Yeah, there’s a methane processing plant nearby. Hey, lookit me! Up and awake at eight in the morning. Can ya take it? Had to get behind a little speed to do it, though.”

The idiom was beyond him. “You mean—you were late waking up?”

“What? Oh, hey, man, you can be—look, forget I said a thing. No.” She pondered a second. “Look, Wolf. There’s this stuff called ‘speed,’ it can wake you up in the morning, give you a little boost, get you going. Ya know?”

Awareness dawned. “You mean amphetamines.”

“Yeah, well this stuff ain’t exactly legal, dig? So I’d just as soon you didn’t spread the word around. I mean, I trust you, man, but I wanna be sure you know what’s happening before you go shooting off your mouth.”

“I understand,” Wolf said, “I won’t say anything. But, you know that amphetamines are—”

“Gotcha, Ace. Hey, you gotta meet the piece of talent I picked up last night Hey, Dave! Get your ass over here, lover.”

A young, sleepy-eyed blond shuffled around the edge of the train. He wore white shorts, defiantly it seemed to Wolf, and a loose blouse buttoned up to his neck. Giving Maggie a weak hug around the waist, he nodded to Wolf.

“Davie’s got four nipples, just like me. How about that? I mean, it’s gotta be a pretty rare mutation, hah?”

Dave hung his head, half blushing. “Aw, Janis,” he mumbled. Wolf waited for Maggie to correct the boy. but she didn’t. Instead she led them around and around the train chatting away madly, pointing out this, that, and the other thing,

Finally, Wolf excused himself, and returned to his hostel. He left Maggie prowling about the train, dragging her pretty boy after her. Wolf went out for a long lunch, picked up his bags, and showed up at the train earlier than most of the entourage.

The train lurched, and pulled out of the station. Maggie was in constant motion, talking, laughing, directing the placement of luggage. She darted from car to car, never still. Wolf found a seat and stared out the window.

Children dressed in rags ran alongside the tracks, holding out hands and begging for money. One or two of the party threw coins; more laughed and threw bits of garbage.

The the children were gone, and the train was passing through endless miles of weathered ruins. Hawk sat down beside Wolf. "It'll be a slow trip," he said. "The train has to go around large sections of land it's better not to go through." He stared moodily at the broken-windowed shells that were once factories and warehouses. "Look out there, pilgrim, *that's* my country," he said in a disgusted voice. "Or the corpse of it."

"Hawk, you're close to Maggie."

"Now if you go out to the center of the continent. . ." Hawk's voice grew distant. "There's a cavern out there, where they housed radioactive waste. It was formed into slugs and covered with solid gold—anything else deteriorates too fast. The way I figure it, a man with a lead suit could go into that cavern and shave off a fortune. There's tons of the stuff there." He sighed. "Someday I'm going to rummage through a few archives and go."

"Hawk, you've got to *listen* to me."

Hawk held up a hand for silence. "It's about the drugs, right? You just found out and you want me to warn her."

"Warning her isn't good enough. Someone has to stop her."

"Yes, well. Try to understand, Maggie was in Hopkins for *three months* while they performed some very drastic surgery on her. She didn't look a thing like she does now, and she could sing but her voice wasn't anything to rave about. Not to mention the mental implants.

"Imagine the pain she went through. Now ask yourself what are the two most effective painkillers in existence?"

"Morphine and heroin. But in my country, when drugs are resorted to, the doctors wean the patients off them before their release."

"That's not the point. Consider this—Maggie could have had Hopkins remove the extra nipples. They could have done it. But she wasn't willing to go through the pain."

"She seems proud of them."

"She talks about them a lot, at least."

The train lurched and stumbled. Three of the musicians had uncrated their guitars and were playing more "Dead" music. Wolf chewed his lip in silence for a time, then said, "So what is the point you're making?"

“Simply that Maggie was willing to undergo the greater pain so that she could become Janis. So when I tell you she only uses drugs as painkillers, you have to understand that I’m not necessarily talking about physical pain.” Hawk got up and left.

Maggie danced into the car. “Big time!” she whooped. “We made it into the big time, boys and girls. Hey, let’s party!”

The next ten days were one extended party, interspersed with concerts. The reception in Wilmington was phenomenal. Thousands came to see the show; many were turned away. Maggie was unsteady before the first concert, achingly afraid of failure. But she played a rousing set, and was called back time and time again. Finally exhausted and limp, her hair sticking to a sweaty forehead, she stood up front and gasped, “That’s all there is, boys and girls. I love ya and I wish there was more to give ya, but there ain’t. You used it all up.” And the applause went on and on ...

The four shows in Philadelphia began slowly, but built up big. A few seats were unsold at the first concert; people were turned away for the second. The last two were near-riots. The group entrained to Newark for a day’s rest and put on a Labor Day concert that made the previous efforts look pale. They stayed in an obscure hostel for an extra day’s rest.

Wolf spent his rest day sight-seeing. While in Philadelphia he had hired a native guide and prowled through the rusting refinery buildings at Breeze Point. They rose to the sky forever in tragic magnificence, and it was hard to believe there had ever been enough oil in the world to all the holding tanks there. In Wilmington, he let the local guide lead him to a small Italian neighborhood to watch a religious festival.

The festival was a parade, led first by a priest trailed by eight altar girls, with incense burners and fans. Then came twelve burly men carrying the flower-draped body of an ancient Cadillac. After them came the faithful, in coveralls and chador, singing.

Wolf followed the procession to the river, where the car was placed in a hole in the ground, sprinkled with holy water, and set afire. He asked the guide what story lay behind the ritual, and the boy shrugged. It was old; he was told, very very old.

It was late when Wolf returned to the hostel. He was expecting a party, but found it dark and empty. Cynthia stood in the foyer, hands behind her back, staring out a barred window at black nothingness.

“Where is everybody?” Wolf asked. It was hot. Insects buzzed about the

coal-oil lamp, batting against it fren-ziedly.

Cynthia turned, studied him oddly. Her forehead was beaded with sweat. “Maggie’s gone home—she’s attending a mid-school reunion. She’s going to show her old friends what a hacking big star she’s become. The others?” She shrugged. “Off wherever puppies go when there’s no one to bring them to life. Their rooms, probably.”

“Oh.” Cynthia’s dress clung damply to her legs and sides. Dark stains spread out from under her armpits. “Would you like to play a game of chess or—something?”

Cynthia’s eyes were strangely intense. She took a step closer to him. “Wolf, I’ve been wondering. You’ve been celibate on this trip. Is there a problem? No? Maybe a girlfriend back home?”

“There was, but she won’t wait for me.” Wolf made a deprecating gesture. “Maybe that was part of the reason I took this trip.”

She took one of his hands, placed it on her breast. “But you *are* interested in girls?” Then, before he could shape his answer into clumsy words, she whispered, “Come on,” and led him to her room.

Once inside. Wolf seized Cynthia and kissed her, deeply and long. She responded with passion, then drew away and with a little shove toppled him onto the bed. “Off with your clothes,” she said. She shucked her blouse in a complex, fluid motion. Pale breasts bobbed, catching vague moonlight from the window.

After an instant’s hesitation, Wolf doffed his own clothing. By contrast with Cynthia he felt weak and irresolute, and it irked him to feel that way. Determined to prove he was nothing of the kind, he reached for Cynthia as she dropped onto the bed beside him. She evaded his grasp.

“Just a moment, pilgrim.” She rummaged through a bag by the headboard. “Ah. Care for a little treat first? It’ll enhance the sensations.”

“Drugs?” Wolf asked, feeling an involuntary horror.

“Oh, come down off your high horse. Once won’t melt your genes. Give a gander at what you’re being so critical of.”

“What is it?”

“Vanilla ice cream,” she snapped. She unstoppered a small vial and meticulously dribbled a few grains of white powder onto a thumbnail. “This is expensive, so pay attention. You want to breathe it all in with one snort. Got that? So by the numbers: Take a deep breath and breathe out slowly. That’s it. Now in. Now out and hold.”



Cynthia laid her thumbnail beneath Wolf's nose, pinched one nostril shut with her free hand, "Now in fast. Yeah!"

He inhaled convulsively and was flooded with sensations. A crisp, clean taste filled his mouth, and a spray of fine white powder hit the back of his throat. It tingled pleasantly. His head felt spacious. He moved his jaw, suspiciously searching about with his tongue.

Cynthia quickly snorted some of the powder herself, restoppering the vial.

"Now," she said. "Touch me. Slowly, slowly, we've got all night. That's the way. Ahhhh." She shivered. "I think you've got the idea."

They worked the bed for hours. The drug, whatever it was, made Wolf feel strangely clear-headed and rational, more playful and more prone to linger. There was no urgency to their love-making; they took their time. Three, perhaps four times they halted for more of the powder, which Cynthia doled out with careful ceremony. Each time they returned to their lovemaking with renewed interest and resolution to take it slowly, to postpone each climax to the last possible instant.

The evening grew old. Finally, they lay on the sheets, not touching, weak and exhausted. Wolf's body was covered with a fine sheen of sweat. He did not care to even think of making love yet another time. He refrained from saying this.

"Not bad," Cynthia said softly. "I must remember to recommend you to Maggie."

"Sin, why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"We've just—been as intimate as two human beings can be. But as soon as it's over, you say something cold. Is it that you're afraid of contact?"

"Christ" It was an empty syllable, devoid of religious content, and flat Cynthia fumbled in her bag, found a flat metal case, pulled a cigarette out, and lit it. Wolf flinched inwardly. "Look, pilgrim, what are you asking for? You planning to marry me and take me away to your big, clean African cities to meet your momma? Hah?"

"Didn't think so. So what do you want from me? Mental souvenirs to take home and tell your friends about? I'll give you one: I spent years saving up enough to go see a doctor, find out if I could have any brats. Went to one last year and what do you think he tells me? I've got red-cell dyscrasia, too far gone for treatment, there's nothing to do but wait. Lovely, hah? So one of these days it'll just stop working and I'll die.

Nothing to be done. So long as I eat right, I won't start wasting away, so I can keep my looks up to the end. I could buy a little time if I gave up drugs like this"—she waved the cigarette, and an ash fell on Wolfs chest. He brushed it away quickly—"and the white powder, and anything else that makes life worth living. But it wouldn't buy me enough time to do anything worth doing." She fell silent. "Hey. What time is it?"

Wolf climbed out of bed, rummaged through his clothing until he found his timepiece. He held it up to the window, squinted. "Um. Twelve... fourteen."

"Oh, *nukes*." Cynthia was up and scrabbling for her clothes. "Come on, get dressed. Don't just stand there."

Wolf dressed himself slowly. "What's the problem?"

"I promised Maggie I'd get some people together to walk her back from that damned reunion. It ended *hours* ago, and I lost track of the time." She ignored his grin. "Ready? Come on, we'll check her room first and then the foyer. God, is she going to be mad."

They found Maggie in the foyer. She stood in the center of the room, haggard and bedraggled, her handbag hanging loosely from one hand. Her face was livid with rage. The sputtering lamp made her face look old and evil "Well!" she snarled. "Where have you two been?"

"In my room, balling," Cynthia said calmly. Wolf stared at her, appalled.

"Well that's just beautiful. That's really beautiful, isn't it? Do you know where I've been while my two best friends were upstairs humping their brains out? Hey? Do you want to know?" Her voice reached a hysterical peak. "I was being *raped by two jennie-deafs*, that's where!"

She stormed past them, half-cocking her arm as if she were going to assault them with her purse, then thinking better of it They heard her run down the hall. Her door slammed.

Bewildered, Wolf said, "But I—"

"Don't let her dance on your head," Cynthia said. "She's lying."

"Are you certain?"

"Look, we've lived together, bedded the same men— I know her. She's all hacked off at not having an escort home. And Little Miss Sunshine has to spread the gloom."

"We should have been there," Wolf said, dubiously. "She could have been killed, walking home alone."

"Whether Maggie dies a month early or not doesn't make a bit of

difference to me, pilgrim. I've got my own problems.”

“A month—? Is Maggie suffering from a disease too?”

“Were all suffering, we all— Ah, the hell with you too.” Cynthia spat on the floor, spun on her heel and disappeared down the hallway. It had the rhythm and inevitability of a witch's curse.

The half-day trip to New York left the troupe with playtime before the first concert, but Maggie stayed in seclusion, drinking. There was talk about her use of drugs, and this alarmed Wolf, for they were all users of drugs themselves.

There was also gossip about the reunion. Some held that Maggie had dazzled her former friends—who had not treated her well in her younger years—had been glamorous and gracious. The predominant view, however, was that she had been soundly snubbed, that she was still a freak and an oddity in the eyes of her former contemporaries. That she had left the reunion alone.

Rumors flew about the liaison between Wolf and Cynthia too. The fact that she avoided him only fed the speculation.

Despite everything the New York City concerts were a roaring success. All four shows were sold out as soon as tickets went on sale. Scalpers made small fortunes that week, and for the first time the concerts were allowed to run into the evening. Power was diverted from a section of the city to allow for the lighting and amplification. And Maggie sang as she had never sung before. Her voice roused the audiences to a frenzy, and her blues were enough to break a hermit's heart.

They left for Hartford on the tenth, Maggie sequestered in her compartment in the last car. Crew members lounged about idly. Some strummed guitars, never quite breaking into a recognizable tune. Others talked quietly. Hawk flipped tarot cards into a heap, one at a time.

“Hey, this place is fucking *dead!*” Maggie was suddenly in the car, her expression an odd combination of defiance and guilt “Let's party! Hey? Let's hear some music.” She fell into Hawk's lap and nibbled on an ear.

“Welcome back, Maggie,” somebody said.

“*Janis!*” she shouted happily. “The lady's name is Janis!”

Like a rusty machine starting up, the party came to life. Music jelled. Voices became animated. Bottles of alcohol appeared and were passed around. And for the remainder of the two days that the train spent

making wide, looping detours to avoid the dangerous stretches of Connecticut and New York, the party never died.

There were tense undertones to the party, however, a desperate quality in Maggie's gaiety. For the first time, Wolf began to feel trapped, to count the days that separated him from Boston and the end of the tour.

The dressing room for the first Hartford concert was cramped, small, badly lit—like every other dressing room they'd encountered. "Get your ass over here, Sin," Maggie yelled. "You've gotta make me up so I look strung out, like Janis did."

Cynthia held Maggie's chin, twisted it to the left, to the right. "Maggie, you don't *need* makeup to look strung out."

"Goddammit, yes I *do*, Let's get it on. Come on, come on—I'm a star, I shouldn't have to put up with this shit."

Cynthia hesitated, then began dabbing at Maggie's face, lightly accentuating the lines, the bags under her eyes.

Maggie studied the mirror. "Now *that's* grim," she said. "That's really grotesque."

"That's what you look like, Maggie."

"You cheap bitch! You'd think *I* was the one who nodded out last night before we could get it on." There was an awkward silence. "Hey, Wolf!" She spun to face him. "What do *you* say?"

"Well," Wolf began, embarrassed, "I'm afraid Cynthia's ..."

"You see? Let's get this show on the road." She grabbed her cherished Southern Comfort bottle and upended it "That's not doing you any good either." Maggie smiled coldly. "Shows what *you* know. Janis always gets smashed before a concert. Helps her voice." She stood, made her way to the curtains. The emcee was winding up his pitch.

"Ladies and gentlemen ... Janis!" Screams arose. Maggie sashayed up to the mike, lifted it, laughed into it.

"Heyyy, Good ta see ya." She swayed and squinted at the crowd, and was off and into her rap. "Ya know, I went ta see a doctor the other week. Told him I was worried about how much drinking I was doing. Told him I'd been drinkin' heavy since I was twelve. Get up in the morning and have a few Bloody Marys with breakfast. Polish off a fifth before lunch. Have a few drinks at dinner, and really get into it when the partying begins. Told him how much I drank for how many years. So I said, 'Look, Doc, none of this ever hurt me any, but I'm kinda worried, ya know? Give it to me

straight, have I got a problem?’ And he said, ‘Man, *I* don’t think you’ve got a problem. *I* think you’re doing just *fine!*’ ” Cheers from the audience. Maggie smiled smugly. “Well, honey, *everybody’s* got problems, and I’m no exception.” The music came up. “But when I got problems, I got an answer, ’cause I can sing dem ole-time blues. Just sing my problems away.” She launched into “Ball and Chain” and the audience went wild.

Backstage, Wolf was sitting on a stepladder. He had bought a cup of water from a vendor and was nursing it, taking small sips. Cynthia came up and stood beside him. They both watched Maggie strutting on stage, stamping and sweating, writhing and howling.

“I can never get over the contrast,” Wolf said, not looking at Cynthia. “Out there everybody is excited. Back here, it’s calm and peaceful. Sometimes I wonder if we’re seeing the same thing the audience does.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to see what’s right in front of your face.” Cynthia smiled a sad, cryptic smile and left Wolf had grown used to such statements, and gave it no more thought.

The second and final Hartford show went well. However, the first two concerts in Providence were bad. Maggie’s voice and timing were off, and she had to cover with theatrics. At the second show she had to order the audience to dance—something that had never been necessary before. Her onstage raps became bawdier and more graphic. She moved her body as suggestively as a stripper, employing bumps and grinds. The third show was better, but the earthy elements remained.

The cast wound up in a bar in a bad section of town, where guards with guns covered the doorway from fortified booths. Maggie got drunk and ended up crying. “Man, I was so blitzed when I went onstage—you say I was good?”

“Sure, Maggie,” Hawk mumbled. Cynthia snorted.

“You were very good,” Wolf assured her.

“I don’t remember a goddamned thing,” she wailed. “You say I was good? It ain’t fair, man. If I was good, I deserve to be able to remember it. I mean, what’s the point otherwise? Hey?”

Wolf patted her shoulder clumsily. She grabbed the front of his dashiki and buried her face in his chest.

“Wolf, Wolf, what’s gonna *happen* to me?” she sobbed.

“Don’t cry,” he said, patting her hair.

Finally, Wolf and Hawk had to lead her back to the hostel. No one else was willing to quit the bar.

They skirted an area where all the buildings had been torn down but one. It stood alone, with great gaping holes where plate-glass had been, and large nonfunctional arches on one side.

“It was a fast-food building,” Hawk explained when Wolf asked. He sounded embarrassed.

“Why is it still standing?”

“Because there are ignorant and superstitious people everywhere,” Hawk muttered. Wolf dropped the subject. The streets were dark and empty. They went back into the denser areas of town, and the sound of their footsteps bounced off the buildings. Maggie was leaning half-conscious on Hawk’s shoulder, and he almost had to carry her.

There was a stirring in the shadows. Hawk tensed. “Speed up a bit, if you can,” he whispered.

Something shuffled out of the darkness. It was large and only vaguely human. It moved toward them. “What—?” Wolf whispered.

“Jennie-deaf,” Hawk whispered back, “If you know any clever tricks, this is the time to use ‘em.” The thing broke into a shambling run.

Wolf thrust a hand into a pocket and whirled to face Hawk. “Look,” he said in a loud, angry voice. “I’ve taken *enough* from you! I’ve got a *knife* and I don’t care *what* I do!” The jennie-deaf halted. From the corner of his eye, Wolf saw it slide back into the shadows.

Maggie looked up with a sleepy, quizzical expression. “Hey, what...”

“Never mind,” Hawk muttered. He upped his pace, half-dragging Maggie after him. “That was arrogant,” he said approvingly.

Wolf forced his hand from his pocket. He found he was shivering from aftershock. “*Nada*,” he said. Then: “That is the correct term?”

“Yeah.”

“I wasn’t certain that jennie-deafs really existed.”

“Just some poor mute with gland trouble. Don’t think about it.”

Autumn was just breaking out when the troupe hit Boston. They arrived to find the final touches being put on the stage on Boston Commons. A mammoth concert was planned; dozens of people swarmed about making

preparations.

“This must be how America was all the time before the Collapse,” Wolf said, impressed. He was ignored.

The morning of the concert, Wolf was watching canvas being hoisted above the stage, against the chance of rain, when a gripper ran up and said, “You, pilgrim, have you seen Janis?”

“Maggie,” he corrected automatically. “No, not recently.”

“Thanks,” the man gasped, and ran off. Not long after, Hawk hurried by and asked, “Seen Maggie lagging about?”

“No. Wait, Hawk, what’s going on? You’re the second person to ask me that.”

Hawk shrugged. “Maggie’s disappeared. Nothing to scream about.”

“I hope she’ll be back in time for the show.”

“The local police are hunting for her. Anyway, she’s got the implants; if she can move she’ll be on stage. Never doubt it.” He hurried away.

The final checks were being run, and the first concertgoers beginning to straggle in when Maggie finally appeared. Uniformed men held each arm; she looked sober and angry. Cynthia took charge, dismissed the police, and took Maggie to the trailer that served as a dressing room.

Wolf watched from a distance, decided he could be of no use. He ambled about the Commons aimlessly, watching the crowd grow. The people coming in found places to sit, took them, and waited. There was little talk among them, and what there was was quiet. They were dressed brightly, but not in their best. Some carried winejugs or blankets.

They were an odd crew. They did not look each other in the eye; their mouths were grim, their faces without expression. Their speech was low, but with an undercurrent of tension. Wolf wandered among them, eavesdropping, listening to fragments of their talk.

“Said that her child was going to...”

“... needed that. Nobody needed that.”

“Couldn’t have paid it away...”

“... tasted odd, so I didn’t...”

“Had to tear down three blocks...”

“... blood.”

Wolf became increasingly uneasy. There was something about their

expressions, their tones of voice. He bumped into Hawk, who tried to hurry past.

“Hawk, there is something very wrong happening.”

Hawk’s face twisted. He gestured toward the light tower. “No time,” he said, “the show’s beginning. I’ve got to be at my station.” Wolf hesitated, then followed the man up the ladders of the light tower.

All of the Commons was visible from the tower. The ground was thick with people, hordes of ant-specks against the brown of trampled earth. Not a child among them, and that felt wrong too. A gold and purple sunset smeared itself three-quarters of the way around the horizon.

Hawk flicked lights on and off, one by one, referring to a sheet of paper he held in one hand. Sometimes he cursed and respliced wires. Wolf waited. A light breeze ruffled his hair, though there was no hint of wind below.

“This is a sick country,” Hawk said. He slipped a headset on, played a red spot on the stage, let it wink out. “You there, Patrick? The kliegs go on in two.” He ran a check on all the locals manning lights, addressing them by name. “Average life span is something like forty-two—*if* you get out of the delivery room alive. The birthrate has to be very high to keep the population from dwindling away to nothing,” He brought up all the red and blue spots. The stage was bathed in purple light The canvas above looked black in contrast An obscure figure strolled to the center mike.

“Hit it, Patrick,” A bright pool of light illuminated the emcee. He coughed, went into his spiel. His voice boomed over the crowd, relayed away from the stage by a series of amps with timed delay along each rank, so that his voice reached the distant listeners in synchronization with the further amplification. The crowd moved sluggishly about the foot of the tower, set in motion by latecomers straggling in. “So the question you should ask yourself is why the government is wasting its resources on a goddamned show.”

“All right,” Wolf said. “Why?” He was very tense, very still. The breeze swept away his sweat, and he wished he had brought along a jacket. He might need one later.

“Because their wizards said to—the damn social engineers and their machines,” Hawk answered. “Watch the crowd.”

“... *Janis!*” the loudspeakers boomed. And Maggie was on stage, rapping away, handling the microphone suggestively, obviously at the peak of her form. The crowd exploded into applause. Offerings of flowers



were thrown through the air. Bottles of liquor were passed hand over hand and deposited on the stage.

From above it could not be seen how the previous month had taken its toll on Maggie. The lines on her face, the waxy skin, were hidden by the colored light. The kliegs bounced off her sequined dress dazzlingly,

Halfway through her second song, Maggie came to an instrumental break and squinted out at the audience. “Hey, what the fuck’s the matter with you guys? Why aint you *dancing*?” At her cue, scattered couples rose to their feet. “Ready on the kliegs,” Hawk murmured into his headset. “Three, four, and five on the police.” Bright lights pinpointed three widely separated parts of the audience, where uniformed men were struggling with dancers. A single klieg stayed on Maggie, who pointed an imperious finger at one struggling group and shrieked, “Why are you trying to stop them from dancing? I want them to dance. I *command* them to dance!”

With a roar, half the audience were on their feet. “Shut down three. Hold four and five to the count of three, then off. One—Two—Three! Good.” The police faded away, lost among the dancers.

“That was prearranged,” Wolf said. Hawk didn’t so much as glance at him.

“It’s part of the legend. You, Wolf, over to your right.” Wolf looked where Hawk was pointing, saw a few couples at the edge of the crowd slip from the light into the deeper shadows. “What am I seeing?”

“Just the beginning.” Hawk bent over his control board. By slow degrees the audience became drunk and then rowdy. As the concert wore on, an ugly, excited mood grew. Sitting far above it all, Wolf could still feel the hysteria grow, as well as see it. Women shed chador and danced atop it, not fully dressed. Men ripped free of their coveralls. Here and there, spotted through the crowd, couples made love. Hawk directed lights onto a few, held them briefly; in most cases the couples went on, unheeding.

Small fights broke out, and were quelled by police. Bits of trash were gathered up and set ablaze, so that small fires dotted the landscape. Wisps of smoke floated up. Hawk played colored spots on the crowd. By the time darkness was total, the lights and the bestial noise of the revelers combined to create the feel of a Witch’s Sabbath.

“Pretty nasty down there,” Hawk observed. “And all most deliberately engineered by government wizards.”

“But there is no true feeling involved,” Wolf objected. “*It* is nothing but animal lust. No—no involvement.”

“Yeah,” Onstage, Maggie was building herself up into a frenzy. And yet her blues were brilliant—she had never been better. “Not so much different from the other concerts. The only difference is that tonight nobody waits until they go home.”

“Your government can’t believe that enough births will result from this night to make any difference.”

“Not tonight, no. But all these people will have mem-ones to keep them warm over the winter.” Then he spat over the edge of the platform. “Ahhhh, why should I spout their lies for them? It’s just bread and circuses is all, just a goddamned release for the masses.”

Maggie howled with delight. “Whee-ew, man! I’m gettin’ horny just looking at you. Yeah, baby, get it on, that’s right!” She was strutting up and down the stage, a creature of boundless energy, while the band filled the night with music, fast and urgent.

“Love it!” She stuck her tongue out at the audience and received howls of approval. She lifted her Southern Comfort bottle, took a gigantic swig, her hips bouncing to the music. More howls. She caressed the neck of the bottle with her tongue.

“Yeah! Makes me horny as sin, ‘deed it does. Ya know,” she paused a beat, then continued, “that’s something I can really understand, man. ‘Cause I’m just a horny little hippie chick myself. Yeah.” Wolf suddenly realized that she was competing against the audience itself for its attention, that she was going to try to outdo everybody present.

Maggie stroked her hand down the front of her dress, lingering between her breasts, then between her legs. She shook her hair back from her eyes, the personification of animal lust. “I mean, shit. I mean, hippie chicks don’t even wear no underwear.” More ribald howls and applause. “Don’t believe me, do ya?”

Wolf stared, was unable to look away as Maggie slowly spread her legs wide and squatted, giving the audience a good look up her skirt. Her frog face leered, and it was an ugly, lustful thing. She lowered a hand to the stage behind her for support, and beckoned. “Come to mamma,” she crooned.

It was like knocking the chocks out from a dam. There was an instant of absolute stillness, and then the crowd roared and surged forward. An ocean of humanity converged on the stage, smashing through the police lines, climbing up on the wooden platform. Wolf had a brief glimpse of Maggie trying to struggle to her feet, before she was overrun. There was a dazed, disbelieving expression on her face.

“Mother of Sin,” Wolf whispered. He stared at the mindless, evil mob below. They were in furious motion, straining, forcing each other in great swirling eddies. He waited for the stage to collapse, but it did not. The audience kept climbing atop it, pushing one another off its edge, and it did not collapse. It would have been a mercy if it had.

A hand waved above the crowd, clutching something that sparkled. Wolf could not make it out at first. Then another hand waved a glittering rag, and then another, and he realized that these were shreds of Maggie’s dress.

Wolf wrapped his arms around a support to keep from falling into the horror below. The howling of the crowd was a single, chaotic noise; he squeezed his eyes shut, vainly trying to fend it off. “Right on cue,” Hawk muttered. “Right on goddammed cue.” He cut off all the lights, and placed a hand on Wolf a shoulder.

“Come on. Our job is done here.”

Wolf twisted to face Hawk. The act of opening his eyes brought on a wave of vertigo, and he slumped to the platform floor, still clutching the support desperately. He wanted to vomit, and couldn’t. “It’s—they—Hawk, did you *see* it? Did you see what they did? Why didn’t someone—?” He choked on his words.

“Don’t ask me,” Hawk said bitterly. “I just play the part of Judas Iscariot in this little drama.” He tugged at Wolf’s shoulders. “Let’s go, pilgrim. We’ve got to go down now.” Wolf slowly weaned himself of the support, allowed himself to be coaxed down from the tower.

There were men in black uniforms at the foot of the tower. One of them addressed Hawk. “Is this the African national?” Then, to Wolf: “Please come with us, sir. We have orders to see you safely to your hostel.”

Tears flooded Wolf’s eyes and he could not see the crowd, the Commons, the men before him. He allowed himself to be led away, as helpless and as trusting as a small child.

In the morning, Wolf lay in bed staring at the ceiling. A fly buzzed somewhere in the room, and he did not look for it. In the streets iron-wheeled carts rumbled by, and children chanted a counting-out game.

After a time he rose, dressed, and washed his face. He went to the hostel’s dining room for breakfast.

There, finishing off a piece of toast, was DiStephano.

“Good morning, Mr. Mbikana. I was beginning to think I’d have to send for you.” He gestured to a chair. Wolf looked about, took it. There were at least three of the political police seated nearby.

DiStephano removed some documents from his jacket pocket, handed them to Wolf. “Signed, sealed, and delivered. We made some minor changes in the terms, but nothing your superiors will object to.” He placed the last corner of toast in the side of his mouth. “I’d say this was a rather bright beginning to your professional career.”

“Thank you,” Wolf said automatically. He glanced at the documents, could make no sense of them, dropped them in his lap.

“If you’re interested, the *African Genesis* leaves port tomorrow morning. I’ve made arrangements that a berth be ready for you, should you care to take it. Of course, there will be another passenger ship in three weeks if you wish to see more of our country.”

“No,” Wolf said hastily. Then, because that seemed rude, “I’m most anxious to see my home again. I’ve been away far too long.”

Di Stephano dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a napkin, let it fall to the tablecloth. “Then that’s that.” He started to rise.

“Wait,” Wolf said. “Mr. DiStephano, I ... I would very much like an explanation.”

Di Stephano sat back down. He did not pretend not to understand the request. “The first thing you must know,” he said, “is that Ms. Horowitz was not our first Janis Joplin.”

“No,” Wolf said.

“Nor the second.”

Wolf looked up.

“She was the twenty-third, not counting the original. The show is sponsored every year, always ending in Boston on the Equinox. So far, it has always ended in the same fashion.”

Wolf wondered if he should try to stab the man with a fork, if he should rise up and attempt to strangle him. There should be rage, he knew. He felt nothing. “Because of the brain implants.”

“No. You must believe me when I say that I wish she had lived. The implants helped her keep in character, nothing more. It’s true that she did not recall the previous women who played the part of Janis. But her death was not planned. It’s simply something that— happens.”

“Every year.”

“Yes. Every year Janis offers herself to the crowd. And every year they tear her apart. A sane woman would not make the offer; a sane people would not respond in that fashion. I’ll know that my country is on the road to recovery come the day that Janis lives to make a second tour.” He paused. “Or the day we can’t find a woman willing to play the role, knowing how it ends.”

Wolf tried to think. His head felt dull and heavy. He heard the words, and he could not guess whether they made sense or not. “One last question,” he said. “Why me?”

DiStephano rose. “One day you may return to our nation,” he said. “Or perhaps not. But you will certainly rise to a responsible position within the Southwest Africa Trade Company. Your decisions will affect our economy.” Four men in uniform also rose from their chairs. “When that happens, I want you to understand one thing about our land: *We have nothing to lose*. Good day, and a long life to you, sir.”

DiStephano’s guards followed him out.

It was evening. Wolf’s ship rode in Boston harbor, waiting to carry him home. Away from this magic nightmare land, with its ghosts and walking dead. He stared at it and he could not make it real; he had lost all capacity for belief.

The ship’s dinghy was approaching. Wolf picked up his bags.

**The End**