

=====
Videostar
by Walter Jon Williams
=====

1

Ric could feel the others closing in. They were circling outside the Falcon Quarter as if on midsummer thermals, watching the Cadillacs with glittering raptor eyes, occasionally swooping in to take a little nibble at Cadillac business, Cadillac turf, Cadillac sources. Testing their own strength as well as the Cadillac nerves, applying pressure just to see what would happen, find out if the Cadillacs still had it in them to respond...

Ric knew the game well: he and the other Cadillacs had played it five years before, up and down the streets and datanets of the Albaicin, half-grown kids testing their strength against the gangs entrenched in power, the Cruceros, the Jerusalem Rangers, the Piedras Blancas. The older gangs seemed slow, tentative, uncertain, and when the war came the Cadillacs won in a matter of days: the others were too entrenched, too visible, caught in a network of old connections, old associations, old manners ... the young Cadillacs, coming up out of nowhere, found their own sources, their own products and connections, and in the end they and their allies gutted the old boys' organization, absorbing what was still useful and letting the rest die along with the remnants of the Cruceros, Rangers, and Blancas, the bewildered survivors who were still looking for a remaining piece of turf on which to make their last stand.

At the time Ric had given the Cadillacs three years before the same thing started happening to them, before their profile grew too high and the next generation of snipers rose in confidence and ability. The Cadillacs had in the end lasted five years, and that wasn't bad. But, Ric thought, it was over.

The other Cadillacs weren't ready to surrender. The heat was mounting, but they thought they could survive this challenge, hold out another year or two. They were dreaming, Ric thought.

During the hot dog days of summer, people began to die. Gunfire echoed from the pink walls of the Alhambra. Networks disintegrated. Allies disappeared. Ric made a proposition to the Cadillacs for a bank to be shared with their allies, a fund to keep the war going. The Cadillacs in their desperation agreed.

Ric knew then it was time to end it, that the Cadillacs had lost whatever they once had. If they agreed to a proposition like this, their nerve and their smarts were gone.

So there was a last meeting, Ric of the Cadillacs, Mares of the Squires, Jacob of the Last Men. Ric walked into the meeting with a radar-aimed dart gun built into the bottom of his briefcase, each dart filled with a toxin that would stop the heart in a matter of seconds. When he walked out it was with a money spike in his pocket, a stainless steel needle tipped with liquid crystal. In the heart of the crystal was data representing over eighty thousand Seven Moons dollars, ready for deposit into any electric account into which he could plug the needle.

West, Ric thought. He'd buy into an American condecology somewhere in California and enjoy retirement.

He was twenty-two years old.

He began to feel sick in the Tangier to Houston suborbital shuttle, a crawling across his nerves, pinpricks in the flesh. By the time he crossed the Houston port to take his domestic flight to L.A. there were stabbing pains in his joints and behind his eyes. He asked a flight attendant for aspirin and chased the pills with American whiskey.

As the plane jettied west across Texas, Ric dropped his whiskey glass and screamed in sudden pain. The attendants gave him morphine analogue but the

agony only increased, an acid boiling under his skin, a flame that gutted his body. His vision had gone and so had the rest of his senses except for the burning knowledge of his own pain. Ric tried to tear his arms open with his fingernails, pull the tortured nerves clean out of his body, and the attendants piled on him, holding him down, pinning him to the floor of the plane like a butterfly to a bed of cork.

As they strapped him into a stretcher at the unscheduled stop in Flagstaff, Ric was still screaming, unable to stop himself. Jacob had poisoned him, using a neurotoxin that stripped away the myelin sheathing on his nerves, leaving them raw cords of agonized fiber. Ric had been in a hurry to finish his business and had only taken a single sip of his wine: that was the only thing that had saved him.

22

He was months in the hospital in Flagstaff, staring out of a glass wall at a maze of other glass walls -- office buildings and condecologies stacked halfway to Phoenix, flanking the silver alloy ribbon of an expressway. The snows fell heavily that winter, then in the spring melted away except for patches of white in the shadows. For the first three months he was completely immobile, his brain chemically isolated from his body to keep the pain away while he took an endless series of nerve grafts, drugs to encourage nerve replication and healing. Finally there was physical therapy that had him screaming in agony at the searing pain in his reawakened limbs.

At the end there was a new treatment, a new drug. It dripped into his arm slowly via an IV and he could feel a lightness in his nerves, a humming in his mind. Even the air seemed to taste better. The pain was no worse than usual and he felt better than he had since walking out of the meeting back in Granada with the money spike in his pocket.

"What's in the IV?" he asked, next time he saw the nurse.

The nurse smiled. "Everyone asks that," he said. "Genesisios Three. We're one of the few hospitals that has the security to distribute the stuff."

"You don't say."

He'd heard of the drug while watching the news. Genesisios Three was a new neurohormone, developed by the orbital Pink Blossom policorp, that could repair almost any amount of nerve damage. As a side effect it built additional neural connections in the brain, thus raising the IQ, and made people high. The hormone was rare because it was very complex and expensive to synthesize, though the gangs were trying. On the west coast lots of people had died in a war for control of the new black labs. On the street it was called Black Thunder.

"Not bad," said Ric.

The treatment and the humming in Ric's brain went on for a week. When it was over he missed it. He was also more or less healed.

3

The week of Genesisios therapy took fifteen thousand dollars out of Ric's spike. The previous months of treatment had accounted for another sixty-two thousand. What Ric didn't know was that Genesisios therapy could have been started at once and saved him most of his funds, but that the artificial intelligences working for the hospital had tagged him as a suspect character, an alien of no particular standing, with no work history, no policorporate citizenship, and a large amount of cash in his breast pocket. The AIs concluded that Ric was in no position to complain, and they were right.

Computers can't be sued for malpractice. The doctors followed their advice.

All that remained of Ric's money was three thousand SM dollars. Ric could live off of that for a few years, but it wasn't much of a retirement.

The hospital was nice enough to schedule an appointment for him with a career counselor, a woman who would find him a job. She worked in the basement of the vast glass hospital building, and her name was Marlene.

4

Marlene worked behind a desk littered with the artifacts of other people's

lives. There were no windows in the office, two ashtrays, both full, and on the walls there were travel posters that showed long stretches of emptiness, white beaches, blue ocean, faraway clouds. Nothing alive.

Her green eyes had an opaque quality, as if she was watching a private video screen somewhere in her mind. She wore a lot of silver jewelry on her fingers and forearms and a grey rollneck sweater with cigarette burn marks. Her eyes bore elaborate makeup that looked like the wings of a Red Admirable. Her hair was almost blond. The only job she could find him was for a legal firm, something called assistant data evaluator.

Before Ric left Marlene's office he asked her to dinner. She turned him down without even changing expression. Ric had the feeling he wasn't quite real to her.

The job of assistant data evaluator consisted of spending the day walking up and down a four-story spiral staircase in the suite of a law firm, moving files from one office to another. The files were supposedly sensitive and not committed to the firm's computer lest someone attempt to steal them. The salary was insulting. Ric told the law firm that the job was just what he was looking for. They told him to start in two days.

Ric stopped into Marlene's office to tell her he got the job and to ask her to dinner again. She laughed, for what reason he couldn't tell, and said yes.

A slow spring snowfall dropped onto the streets while they ate dinner. With her food Marlene took two red capsules and a yellow pill, grew lively, drank a lot of wine. He walked her home through the snow to her apartment on the seventh floor of an old fourth-rate condeco, a place with water stains on the ceiling and bare bulbs hanging in the halls, the only home she could afford. In the hallway Ric brushed snow from her shoulders and hair and kissed her. He took Marlene to bed and tried to prove to her that he was real.

The next day he checked out of the hospital and moved in.

5

Ric hadn't bothered to show up on his first day as an assistant data evaluator. Instead he'd spent the day in Marlene's condeco, asking her home comp to search library files and print out everything relating to what the scansheets in their willful ignorance called "Juvecrime." Before Marlene came home Ric called the most expensive restaurant he could find and told them to deliver a five-course meal to the apartment.

The remains of the meal were stacked in the kitchen. Ric paced back and forth across the small space, his mind humming with the information he'd absorbed. Marlene sat on an adobe-colored couch and watched, a wine glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other, silhouetted by the glass self-polarizing wall that showed the bright aluminum-alloy expressway cutting south across melting piles of snow. Plans were vibrating in Ric's mind, nothing firm yet, just neurons stirring on the edge of his awareness, forming fast-mutating combinations. He could feel the tingle, the high, the half-formed ideas as they flickered across neural circuits.

Marlene reached into a dispenser and took out a red pill and a green capsule with orange stripes. Ric looked at her. "How much of that stuff do you take, anyway? Is it medication, or what?"

"I've got anxieties." She put the pills into her mouth, and with a shake of her head dry-swallowed them.

"How big a dose?"

"It's not the dose that matters. It's the proper combination of doses. Get it right and the world feels like a lovely warm swimming pool. It's like floating underwater and still being able to breathe. It's wonderful."

"If you say so." He resumed his pacing. Fabric scratched his bare feet. His mind hummed, a blur of ideas that hadn't yet taken shape, flickering, assembling, dissolving without his conscious thought.

"You didn't show up for work," Marlene said. "They gave me a call about that."

"Sorry."

"How are you gonna afford this taste you have for expensive food?" Marlene asked. "Without working, I mean."

"Do something illegal," Ric said. "Most likely."

"That's what I thought." She looked up at him, sideways. "You gonna let me play?"

"If you want."

Marlene swallowed half her wine, looked at the littered apartment, shrugged.

"Only if you really want," Ric said. "It has to be a thing you decide."

"What else have I got to do?" she said.

"I'm going to have to do some research, first," he said. "Spend a few days accessing the library."

Marlene was looking at him again. "Boredom," she said. "In your experience, is that why most people turn to crime?"

"In my experience," he said, "most people turn to crime because of stupidity."

She grinned. "That's cool," she said. "That's sort of what I figured." She lit a cigarette. "You have a plan?"

"Something I can only do once. Then every freak in Western America is going to be looking for me with a machine gun."

Marlene grinned. "Sounds exciting."

He looked at her. "Remember what I said about stupidity."

She laughed. "I've been smart all my life. What's it ever got me?"

Ric, looking down at her, felt a warning resonate through him, like an unmistakable taste drawn across his tongue. "You've got a lot to lose, Marlene," he said. "A lot more than I do."

"Shit. Motherfucker." The cigarette had burned her fingers. She squashed it in the ashtray, too fast, spilling ashes on the couch. Ric watched her for a moment, then went back to his thinking.

People were dying all over California in a war over the neurohormone Genesios Three. There had to be a way to take advantage of it.

6

"You a cop, buck?"

The style was different from the people Ric knew in Iberia. In Granada, Ric had worn a gaucho mode straight from Argentina, tight pants with silver dollars sewn down the seams, sashes wound around nipped-in waists, embroidered vests.

He didn't know what was worn by the people who had broken up the Cadillacs. He'd never seen any of them.

Here the new style was something called Urban Surgery. The girl bore the first example Ric had ever seen close up. The henna-red hair was in cornrows, braided with transparent plastic beads holding fast-mutating phosphorescent bacteria that constantly re-formed themselves in glowing patterns. The nose had been broadened and flattened to cover most of the cheeks, turning the nostrils into a pair of lateral slits, the base of the nose wider than the mouth. The teeth had been replaced by alloy transplants sharp as razors that clacked together in a precise, unpleasant way when she closed her mouth. The eyebrows were gone altogether and beneath them were dark plastic implants that covered the eye sockets. Ric couldn't tell, and probably wasn't supposed to know, whether there were eyes in there anymore, or sophisticated scanners tagged to the optic nerve.

The effect was to flatten the face, turn it into a canvas for the tattoo artist who had covered every inch of exposed flesh. Complex mathematical statements ran over the forehead. Below the black plastic eye implants were urban skylines, silhouettes of buildings providing a false horizon across the flattened nose. The chin appeared to be a circuit diagram.

Ric looked into the dark eye sockets and tried not to flinch. "No," he said. "I'm just passing through."

One of her hands was on the table in front of him. It was tattooed as completely as the face and the fingernails had been replaced by alloy razors,

covered with transparent plastic safety caps.

"I saw you in here yesterday," she said. "And again today. I was wondering if you want something."

He shrugged. It occurred to him that, repellent as Urban Surgery was, it was fine camouflage. Who was going to be able to tell one of these people from another?

"You're a little old for this place, buck," the girl said. He figured her age as about fourteen. She was small-waisted and had narrow hips and large breasts. Ric did not find her attractive.

This was his second trip to Phoenix. The bar didn't have a name, unless it was simply BAR, that being all that was said on the sign outside. It was below street level, in the storage cellar of an old building. Concrete walls were painted black. Dark plastic tables and chairs had been added, and bare fluorescent tubes decorated the walls. Speaker amps flanked the bar, playing cold electronic music devoid of noticeable rhythm or melody.

He looked at the girl and leaned closer to her. "I need your permission to drink here, or what?" he said

"No," she said. "Just to deal here."

"I'm not dealing," he said. "I'm just observing the passing urban scene, okay?" He was wearing a lightweight summer jacket of a cream color over a black T-shirt with Cyrillic lettering, black jeans, white sneakers. Nondescript street apparel.

"You got credit?" the girl asked.

"Enough."

"Buy me a drink then?"

He grinned. "I need your permission to deal, and you don't have any credit? What kind of outlaw are you?"

"A thirsty outlaw."

Ric signaled the bartender. Whatever it was that he brought her looked as if it was made principally out of cherry soda.

"Seriously," she said. "I can pay you back later. Someone I know is supposed to meet me here. He owes me money."

"My name's Marat," said Ric. "With a silent _t_."

"I'm Super Virgin. You from Canada or something? You talk a little funny."

"I'm from Switzerland."

Super Virgin nodded and sipped her drink. Ric glanced around the bar. Most of the patrons wore Urban Surgery or at least made an effort in the direction of its style. Super Virgin frowned at him.

"You're supposed to ask if I'm really cherry," she said. "If you're wondering, the drink should give you a clue."

"I don't care," Ric said.

She grinned at him with her metal teeth. "You don't wanna ball me?"

Ric watched his dual reflection, in her black eye sockets, slowly shake its head. She laughed. "I like a guy who knows what he likes," she said.

"That's the kind we have in Cartoon Messiah. Can I have another drink?"

There was an ecology in kid gangs, Ric knew. They had different reasons for existing and filled different functions. Some wanted turf, some trade, some the chance to prove their ideology. Some moved information, and Ric's research indicated that that seemed to be Cartoon Messiah's function.

But even if Cartoon Messiah were smart, they hadn't been around very long. A perpetual problem with groups of young kids involving themselves in gang activities was that they had very short institutional memories. There were a few things they wouldn't recognize or know to prepare for, not unless they'd been through them at least once. They made up for it by being faster than the opposition, by being more invisible.

Ric was hoping Cartoon Messiah was full of young, fresh minds.

He signaled the bartender again. Super Virgin grinned at him.

"You sure you don't wanna ball me?"

"Positive."

"I'm gonna be cherry till I die. I'm just not interested. None of the guys seem like anybody I'd want to fuck." Ric didn't say anything. She sipped the last of her drink. "You think I'm repulsive-looking, right?"

"That seems to be your intention."

She laughed. "You're okay, Marat. What's it like in Switzerland?"

"Hot."

"So hot you had to leave, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"You looking for work?"

"Not yet. Just looking around."

She leaned closer to him. "You find out anything interesting while you're looking, I'll pay you for it. Just leave a message here, at the Bar."

"You deal in information?"

She licked her lips. "That and other things. This Bar, see, it's in a kind of interface. North of here is Lounge Lizard turf, south and east are the Cold Wires, west is the Silicon Romantics. The Romantics are on their way out." She gave a little sneer. "They're brocade commandos, right? -- their turf's being cut up. But here, it's no-gang's-land. Where things get moved from one buyer to another."

"Cartoon Messiah -- they got turf?"

She shook her head. "Just places where we can be found. Territory is not what we're after. Two-Fisted Jesus -- he's our sort-of chairman -- he says only stupid people like brocade boys want turf, when the real money's in data."

Ric smiled. "That's smart. Property values are down, anyway."

He could see his reflection in her metal teeth, a pale smear. "You got anything you wanna deal in, I can set it up," she said. "Software? Biologicals? Pharmaceuticals? Wetware?"

"I have nothing. Right now."

She turned to look at a group of people coming in the door. "Cold Wires," she said. "These are the people I'm supposed to meet." She tipped her head back and swallowed the rest of her drink. "They're so goddam bourgeois," she said. "Look -- their surgery's fake, it's just good makeup. And the tattoos -- they spray 'em on through a stencil. I hate people who don't have the courage of their convictions, don't you?"

"They can be useful, though." Smiling, thin-lipped.

She grinned at him. "Yeah. They can. Stop by tomorrow and I'll pay you back, okay? See ya." She pushed her chair back, scraping alloy on the concrete floor, a small metal scream.

Ric sipped his drink, watching the room. Letting its rhythm seep through his skin. Things were firming in his mind.

7

"Hi."

The security guard looked up at him from under the plastic brim of his baseball cap. He frowned. "Hi. You need something? I seen you around before."

"I'm Warren Whitmore," Ric said. "I'm recovering from an accident, going to finish the course of treatment soon. Go out into the real world." Whitmore was one of Ric's former neighbors, a man who'd had his head split in half by a falling beam. He hadn't left any instructions about radical life-preservation measures and the artificial intelligences who ran the hospital were going to keep him alive till they burned up the insurance and then the family's money.

"Yeah?" the guard said. "Congratulations." There was a plastic tape sewed on over the guard's breast pocket that said LYSAGHT.

"The thing is, I don't have a job waiting. Cigar?"

Ric had seen Lysaght smoking big stogies outside the hospital doors. They wouldn't let him light up inside. Ric had bought him the most expensive Havanas available at the hospital gift shop.

Lysaght took the cigar, rolled it between his fingers while he looked left and right down the corridor, trying to decide whether to light it or not.

Ric reached for his lighter.

"I had some military training in my former life," Ric said. "I thought I might look into the idea of getting into the security business, once I get into the world. Could I buy you a drink, maybe, after you get off shift? Talk about what you do."

Lysaght drew on the cigar, still looking left and right. seeing only patients. He was a big fleshy man, about forty, dressed in a black uniform with body armor sewn into pockets on his chest and back. His long dark hair was slicked back behind his ears, falling over his shoulders in greased ringlets. His sideburns came to points. A brushed-alloy gun with a hardwood custom grip and a laser sight hung conspicuously on one hip, next to the gas grenades, next to the plastic handwrap restraints, next to the combat staff, next to the portable gas mask.

"Sure," Lysaght said. "Why not?" He blew smoke in the general direction of an elderly female patient walking purposefully down the corridor in flowery pajamas. The patient blinked but kept walking.

"Hey, Mrs. Calderone, how you doin'?" Lysaght said. Mrs. Calderone ignored him. "Fuckin' head case," said Lysaght.

"I want to work for a sharp outfit though," Ric said. He looked at Lysaght's belt. "With good equipment and stuff, you know?"

"That's Folger Security," Lysaght said. "If we weren't good, we wouldn't be working for a hospital this size."

During his time in the Cadillacs and elsewhere, Ric had been continually surprised by how little it actually took to bribe someone. A few drinks, a few cigars, and Lysaght was working for him. And Lysaght didn't even know it yet. Or, with luck, ever.

"Listen," Lysaght was saying. "I gotta go smoke this in the toilet. But I'll see you at the guard station around five, okay?"

"Sounds good."

8

That night, his temples throbbing with pain, Ric entered Marlene's condeco and walked straight to the kitchen for something to ease the long raw ache that coated the insides of his throat. He could hear the sounds of Alien Inquisitor on the vid. He was carrying a two-liter plastic bottle of industrial-strength soap he'd just stolen from the custodian's storeroom here in Marlene's condeco. He put down the bottle of soap, rubbed his sore shoulder muscle, took some whiskey from the shelf, and poured it into a tall glass. He took a slow, deliberate drink and winced as he felt the fire in his throat. He added water to the glass. Alien Inquisitor diminished in volume, then he heard the sound of Marlene's flipflops slapping against her heels.

Her eyes bore the heavy eye makeup she wore to work. "Jesus," Marlene said. She screwed up her face. "You smell like someone's been putting out cigarettes in your pockets. Where the hell have you been?"

"Smoking cigars with a rentacop. He wears so much equipment and armor he has to wear a truss, you know that? He got drunk and told me."

"Which rentacop?"

"One who works for the hospital."

"The hospital? We're going to take off the hospital?" Marlene shook her head. "That's pretty serious, Ric."

Ric was wondering if she'd heard take off used that way on the vid. "Yes." He eased the whiskey down his throat again. Better.

"Isn't that dangerous? Taking off the same hospital where you were a patient?"

"We're not going to be doing it in person. We're going to have someone else do the work."

"Who?"

"Cartoon Messiah, I think. They're young and promising."

"What's the stuff in the plastic bottle for?"

He looked at her, swirling the whiskey absently in the glass. "This cleaner's mostly potassium hydroxide," he said. "That's wood lye. You can use

it to make plastic explosive."

Marlene shrugged, then reached in her pocket for a cigarette. Ric frowned. "You seem not to be reacting to that, Marlene," he said. "Robbing a hospital is serious, plastic explosive isn't?"

She blew smoke at him. "Let me show you something" She went back into the living room and then returned with her pouch belt. She fished in it for a second, then threw him a small aerosol bottle.

Ric caught it and looked at the label. "Holy fuck," he said. He blinked and looked at the bottle again. "Jesus Christ."

"Ten-ounce aerosol bottle of mustard gas," Marlene said. "Sixteen dollars in Starbright scrip at your local boutique. For personal protection, you know? The platinum designer bottle costs more."

Ric was blinking furiously. "Holy fuck," he said again.

"Some sixteen-year-old asshole tried to rape me once," Marlene said. "I hit him with the gas and now he's reading Braille. You know?"

Ric took another sip of the whiskey and then wordlessly placed the mustard gas in Marlene's waiting palm. "You're in America now, Ric," Marlene said. "You keep forgetting that, singing your old Spanish marching songs."

He rubbed his chin. "Right," he said. "I've got to make adjustments."

"Better do it soon," Marlene said, "if you're going to start busting into hospitals."

9

The next day Ric went to the drugstore, where he purchased a large amount of petroleum jelly, some nasal mist that came in squeeze bottles, liquid bleach, a bottle of toilet cleaner, a small amount of alcohol-based lamp fuel, and a bottle of glycerin. Then he drove to a chemical supply store, where he brought some distilling equipment and some litmus paper.

On his way back he stopped by an expensive liquor store and bought some champagne. He didn't want the plastic bottles the domestic stuff came in; instead he bought the champagne imported from France, in glass bottles with the little hollow cone in the bottom. It was the biggest expense of the day.

Back in Marlene's apartment he opened the tops of the nasal inhalers and drained the contents into the sink. He cleaned each and set them out to dry. He set up his distilling equipment, mixing the toilet-bowl cleaner with the liquid bleach, then bubbled the resulting chlorine gas through the wood lye until the litmus paper showed it had been neutralized. He emptied the stuff into a pan and brought it to a simmer on the stove. When crystals began forming he took it off the burner and let the pan cool. He repeated the process two more times and, in the end, he had almost pure potassium chlorate. Ric then mixed the potassium chlorate with petroleum jelly to make plastic explosive. He put it in an old coffee can in the refrigerator.

Feeling pleased with his handiwork, he opened a bottle of champagne to celebrate. He drank a glass and then set up his distilling equipment again.

He put glycerine and some of the toilet bowl cleaner in a flask, mixed it, then put it over a flame. He distilled out a couple ounces of acrolein and then put the chemical in the empty nasal spray containers. He capped them. He drank another glass of champagne, put away all his materials, and turned on the vid. Something called Video Vixens was just starting. Ric settled into his chair. He hadn't seen that one.

10

"I made plastic explosive today," Ric said. "It's in the icebox."

"Great." Marlene had just come home from work and was tired. She was drinking champagne and waiting for the night's pills to kick in.

"I'll show you a trick," Ric said. He got some twine from the cupboard, cut it into strips, and soaked it in the lamp fuel. While it was soaking he got a large mixing bowl and filled it with water and ice. Then he tied the string around the empty champagne bottles, about three inches above the topmost point of the little hollow cone on the bottom. He got his lighter and set fire to the thread. It burned slowly, with a cool blue flame, for a couple minutes. Then he took the bottle and plunged it into the ice water. It split

neatly in half with a crystalline snapping sound.

Ric took some of the plastic explosive and packed it into the bottom of the champagne bottle. He pushed a pencil into the middle of it, making a narrow hole for the detonator.

"There," he said. "That's a shaped charge. I'll make the detonators tomorrow, out of peroxide, acetone, and sulphuric acid. It's easy."

"What's a shaped charge, Ricardo?"

"It's used for blowing a hole through armor. Steel doors, cars. Tanks. Things like that."

Marlene looked at him appraisingly. "You're adjusting yourself to America, all right," she said.

11

Ric took a bus to Phoenix and rented a motel room with a kitchenette, paying five days in advance and using a false name. In the motel he changed clothes and took a cab to the Bar. Super Virgin waved as he came in. She was with her friend, Captain Islam. He was a long, gawky boy, about sixteen, with his head shaved and covered with the tattoos of Urban Surgery. He hadn't had any alterations yet, or the eye implants this group favored -- instead he wore complicated mirrorshades with twin minicameras mounted above the bridge of the nose. They registered radiation in UV and infrared as well as the normal spectrum and featured liquid-crystal video displays on the backs of the eyepieces that received input from the minicameras or from any vid program he felt like seeing. Ric wondered if things weren't real to him, not unless he saw them on the vid. Captain Islam didn't talk much, just sat quietly behind his drink and his shades and watched whatever it was that he watched. The effect was unsettling and was probably meant to be. Ric could be talking to him and would never know whether the man was looking at him or at Video Vixens. Ric had first pegged him for a user, but Super Virgin said not.

Ric got a whiskey at the bar and joined the two at their table. "Slow night?" he asked.

"We're waiting for the jai alai to come on," Super Virgin said. "Live from Bilbao. We've got some money down."

"Sounds slow to me."

She gave a brittle laugh. "Guess so, Marat. You got any ideas for accelerating our motion?"

Ric frowned. "I have something to sell. Some information. But I don't know if it's something you'd really want to deal with."

"Too hot?" The words were Captain Islam's. Ric looked at his own distorted face in the Captain's spectacles.

"Depends on your concept of hot. The adjective I had in mind was big."

"Big." The word came with a pause before and after, as if Captain Islam had never heard the word before and was wondering what it meant.

Ric took a bottle of nasal mist out of his pocket and squeezed it once up each nostril.

"Got a virus?" Virgin asked.

"I'm allergic to Arizona."

Captain Islam was frowning. "So what's this action of yours, buck?" he asked.

"Several kilos of Thunder."

Captain Islam continued to stare into the interior of his mirrors. Super Virgin burst into laughter.

"I knew you weren't a fucking tourist, Marat!" she cackled. "'Several kilos'! One kilo is weight! What the hell is 'several'?"

"I don't know if you people can move that much," Ric said. "Also, I'd like an agreement. I want twenty percent of the take, and I want you to move my twenty percent for me, free of charge. If you think you can move that kind of weight at all, that is." He sipped his whiskey. "Maybe I should talk to some people in California."

"You talk to them, you end up dead," Virgin said. "They're not friendly

to anyone these days, not when Thunder's involved."

Ric smiled. "Maybe you're right."

"Where is it? Who do we have to steal it from?"

"Another thing," Ric said. "I want certain agreements. I don't want any excessive force used, here. Nobody shot."

"Sometimes things happen," Captain Islam said. Ric had the feeling that the Captain was definitely looking at him this time. "Sometimes things can't be avoided."

"This stuff is guarded by an organization who won't forget it if any of their people get hurt," Ric explained. "If you try to move this kind of weight, word's going to get out that it's you that has the Thunder, and that means these characters are going to find out sooner or later. You might be tempted to give me to them as a way of getting the heat off you. Which would be a mistake, because I intend on establishing an alibi. That would mean that they're going to be extremely upset with you misleading them." Ric sipped his whiskey and smiled. "I'm just looking out for all our interests."

"A hospital," Captain Islam said. He shook his head. "You want us to take off a hospital. The one up in Flag, right? You stupid shit."

"I have a plan," Ric said. "I know their defenses, to a certain point. I know how they're organized. I know how they think."

"That's Folger Security, for chrissake," Captain Islam said. "They're tough. They don't forget when someone makes idiots out of them."

"That's why it's got to be my rules," Ric said. "But I should probably mention something, here." He grinned, seeing the smile reflected in the Captain's quicksilver eyes. "It's an inside job," Ric said. "I'm friends with someone on their force."

Virgin whooped and banged him on the shoulder with her left hand, the one with the sheathed claws. "Why didn't you say so?" she said.

"You people," Ric said. "You've got to learn to be patient."

12

Treble whimpered against a throbbing bass line. Shafts of red sunset sliced into the violet depths of the Grand Canyon. Marlene backed, spun, turned back to Ric, touched palms. She was wearing Indian war paint. Colors zigzagged across her face. Her eyes and smile were bright.

The band was dressed like hussars, lights glittering off brocade, the lead singer sweating under her dolman, threatening to split her tight breeches with each of her leaps. Her eye makeup dazzled like butterfly wings. Her lyrics were all heroism, thunder, revolution. The romantic wave against which Cartoon Messiah and Urban Surgery were a cool reaction.

Marlene stepped forward, pressing herself against him. He circled her with his arms, felt her sacral dimples as they leaned back and spun against each other. At the end of the five-bar chorus she gave a grind of her hips against him, then winked.

He laughed. While he was establishing his alibi, Cartoon Messiah were working for him back in Flagstaff. And they didn't even know it.

13

Readiness crackled from Ric's nerves as he approached the hotel door. They could try to kill him, he knew. Now would be the best time. Black Thunder tended to generate that kind of behavior. He'd been telling them he had ideas for other jobs, that he'd be valuable to them alive, but he couldn't be sure if they believed him.

The door opened and Super Virgin grinned at him with her metal teeth. "Piece of cake, Marat," she said. "Your cut's on the table."

The hotel room was dark, the walls draped in blueblack plastic. More plastic sheets covered the floors, the ceiling, some of the furniture. Coldness touched Ric's spine. There could be a lot of blood spilled in here, and the plastic would keep it from getting on anything. Computer consoles and vid sets gave off quiet hums. Cables snaked over the floor, held down with duct tape. On a table was a half-kilo white paper packet. Captain Islam and Two-Fisted Jesus sat beside it, tapping into a console. Jesus looked up.

"Just in time," he said, "for the movies."

He was a skinny boy, about eighteen, his identity obscured by the obsessive mutilations of Urban Surgery. He wore a T-shirt featuring a picture of a muscular, bearded man in tights, with cape and halo. Here in this place, the hotel room he had hung with plastic and filled with electronics, he moved and spoke with an assurance the others hadn't absorbed, the kind of malevolent grace displayed by those who gave law and style to others, unfettered by conscience. Ric could appreciate Jesus' moves. He'd had them once himself.

Ric walked to the paper packet and hefted it. He tore open a corner, saw a row of little white envelopes, each labeled Genesis Three with the pharmaceutical company sigil in the corner. He didn't know a test for B-44 so he just stuffed the envelope in his pocket.

"This is gonna be great," Super Virgin said. She came up behind him and handed him a highball glass half-filled with whiskey. "You got time to watch the flick? We went in packing cameras. We're gonna cut a documentary of the whole thing and sell it to a station in Nogales. They'll write some scenes around it and use it on an episode of VidWar." She giggled. "The Mexicans don't care how many gringo hospitals get taken off. They'll put some kind of plot around it. A dumb love story or something. But it's the highest rated program, 'cause people know it's real. Except for Australian Rules Firefight Football, and that's real, too."

Ric looked around and found a chair. It seemed as if these people planned to let him live. He reached into his pocket and fired a round of nasal mist up each nostril. "Sure. I'll watch," he sniffed. "I got time."

"This is a rough cut only, okay?" Captain Islam's voice. "So bear with us."

There was a giant-sized liquid-crystal vid display set up on the black plastic on the wall. A picture sizzled into existence. The hospital, a vast concrete fortress set in an aureole of halogen light. Ric felt his tongue go dry. He swallowed with difficulty.

The image moved, jolting. Whoever was carrying the camera was walking, fast, across the parking lot. Two-Fisted Jesus tapped the keys of his computer. The image grew smooth. "We're using a lot of computer enhancement on the vid, see?" Super Virgin said. "We can smooth out the jitters from the moving camera. Except for select bits to enhance the ver -- the versi -- "

"Verisimilitude," said Captain Islam.

"Right. Just to let everyone know this is the real thing. And we're gonna change everyone's appearance electronically, so no one can recognize us."

Cut to someone moving into the hospital's front door, moving right past the metal detectors. Ric saw a tall girl, blond, dressed in pink shorts and a tube top. White sandal straps coiled about her ankles.

"A mercenary," Virgin said. "We hired her for this. The slut."

Captain Islam laughed. "She's an actress," he explained. "Trying for a career south of the border. Wants the publicity."

The girl stepped up to a guard. Ric recognized Lysaght. She was asking directions, pointing. Lysaght was gazing at her breasts as he replied. She smiled and nodded and walked past. He looked after her, chewed his cigar, hiked up his gunbelt. Ric grinned. As long as guards like Lysaght were around, nothing was safe.

The point of view changed abruptly, a subjective shot, someone moving down a hospital corridor. Patients in ordinary clothes moving past, smiling.

"We had a camera in this necklace she was wearing. A gold owl, about an inch long, with 3D vidcams behind the eyes. Antenna in the chain, receiver in her bag. We pasted it to her chest so it would always be looking straight forward and wouldn't get turned around or anything. Easy stuff."

"We gotta do some pickups, here," Jesus said. "Get a picture of the girl moving down a corridor. Then we tell the computer to put all the stripes on the walls. It'll be worth more when we sell it."

Subjective shot of someone moving into a woman's toilet, stepping into

a stall, reaching into handbag for a pair of coveralls.

"Another pickup shot," Jesus muttered. "Gotta get her putting on her coveralls." He made a note on a pad.

The point of view lurched upward, around, out of the stall. Centered on a small ventilator intake high on a wall. Hands came into the picture, holding a screwdriver.

"Methanethiol," Super Virgin said. "That stuff's gonna be real useful from now on. How'd you know how to make it?"

"Elementary chemistry," Ric said. He'd used it to clear out political meetings of which the Cadillacs didn't approve.

The screen was off the ventilator. Hands were reaching into the bag, taking out a small glass bottle. Carefully loosening the screw top. The hands placed the bottle upright in the ventilator. Then the point of view dipped, a hand reached down to pick up the ventilator screen. Then the ventilator screen was shoved violently into the hole, knocking the bottle over.

Airborne methanethiol gave off a horrible, nauseating smell at one-fiftieth of a part per billion. The psychology wing of the hospital was going to get a dose considerably in excess of that.

The subjective camera was moving with great rapidity down hospital corridors. To a stairwell, then down.

Cut to Super Virgin in a phone booth. She had a small voice recorder in her hand, and was punching buttons.

"Freeze that," said Two-Fisted Jesus. Virgin's image turned to ice. Jesus began tapping keys.

The tattooing shifted, dissolved to a different pattern. Super Virgin laughed. Her hair shortened, turned darker. The black insets over her eyes vanished. Brown eyes appeared, then they turned a startling pale blue.

"Leave the teeth," she said.

"Nah. I have an idea." Two-Fisted Jesus sat tapping keys for about thirty seconds. He pressed the Enter button and the metal teeth disappeared completely. He moved the picture forward a second, then back. Virgin's tongue moved readily behind her tattooed lips. The interior of the mouth was pink, a lot of gum, no teeth at all. She clapped her hands.

"That's strange, man," she said. "I like that."

"The Mexicans will probably replace her image with some vidstar, anyway," Captain Islam said. "Urban Surgery is too much for them, right now."

"Okay. I want to see this in three dimensions," Jesus said. Super Virgin's image detached itself from the background and began rotating. He stopped it every so often and made small adjustments.

"Make me taller," Super Virgin said. "And skinnier. And give me smaller tits. I hate my tits."

"We do that every time," Jesus said. "People are gonna start to twig."

"Chrome tits. Leather tits. Anything."

Captain Islam laughed. Two-Fisted Jesus made minor adjustments and ignored Super Virgin's complaints.

"Here we go. Say your line."

The image began moving. Virgin's new green eyes sparkled as she held the recorder up to the mouthpiece of the telephone.

"This is Royal Flag." It was the name of one of Arizona's more ideological kid gangs. The voice had been electronically altered and sounded flat. "We've just planted a poison gas bomb in your psychology wing. All the head cases are gonna see Jesus. The world's gene pool will be much healthier from now on. Have yourself a pleasant day."

Super Virgin was laughing. "Wait'll you see the crowd scenes. Stellar stuff, believe me."

"I believe," said Ric.

14

The video was full of drifting smoke. Vague figures moved through it. Jesus froze the picture and tried to enhance the images, without any success.

"Shit," he said. "More pickups."

Ric had watched the action as members of Cartoon Messiah in Folger Security uniforms had hammered their way into a hospital back door. They had moved faultlessly through the corridors to the vault and blasted their way in with champagne-bottle-shaped charges. The blasts had set off tremblor alarms in the vault and the Folger people realized they were being hit. Now the raiders were in the corridor before the vault, retracing their steps at a run.

"Okay," Super Virgin said. "The moment of truth, coming up."

The corridor was full of billowing tear gas. Crouched figures moved through it. Commands were yammering down the monitored Folger channels. Then, coming through the smoke, another figure. A tall woman in a helmet, her hand pressed to her ear, trying to hear the radio. There was a gun in her hand. She raised the gun.

Thuds on the sound track. Tear-gas canisters, fired at short range. One of them struck the woman in her armored chest and bounced off. It hadn't flown far enough to arm itself and it just rolled down the corridor. The woman fell flat.

"Just knocked the wind out of her." Captain Islam was grinning. "How about that for keeping our deal, huh?" Somebody ran forward and kicked the gun out of her hand. The camera caught a glimpse of her lying on the floor, her mouth open, trying to breathe. There were dots of sweat on her nose. Her eye makeup looked like butterfly wings.

"Now that's what I call poignant," Jesus said. "Human interest stuff. You know?"

The kids ran away across the parking lot, onto their fuelcell tricycles, and away, bouncing across the parking lot and the railroad tracks beyond.

"We're gonna spice this up a bit," Jesus said. "Cut in some shots of guards shooting at us, that kind of thing. Steal some suspenseful music. Make the whole thing more exciting. What do you think?"

"I like it," said Ric. He put down his untasted whiskey. Jacob and his neurotoxin had made him cautious. "Do I get any royalties? Being scriptwriter and all?"

"The next deal you set up for us. Maybe."

Ric shrugged. "How are you gonna move the Thunder?"

"Small pieces, probably."

"Let me give you some advice," Ric said. "The longer you hang on to it, the bigger the chance Folger will find out you have it and start cramping your action. I have an idea. Can you handle a large increase of capital?"

15

"Is this the stuff? Great." Marlene swept in the motel room door, grinning, with her overnight bag. She gave Ric a brief hug, then went to the table of the kitchenette. She picked up the white packet, hefted it in her hand.

"Light," she said.

"Yeah."

"I can't believe people kill each other over this."

"They could kill us," Ric said. "Don't forget that."

Marlene licked her lips and peeled the packet. She took one of the small white envelopes and tore it open, spilling dark powder into her cupped palm. She cocked her head.

"Doesn't look like much. How do you take it?"

Ric remembered the flood of well-being in his body, the way the world had suddenly tasted better. No, he thought. He wasn't going to get hung up on Thunder. "Intravenous, mostly," he said. "Or they could put it in capsules."

Marlene sniffed at it. "Doesn't smell like anything. What's the dose?"

"I don't know. I wasn't planning on taking any."

She began licking in her palm. Ric watched her little pink tongue lapping at the powder. He turned his eyes away.

"Take it easy," he said.

"Tastes funny. Kind of like green pepper sauce, with a touch of kerosene."

"A touch of stupidity," he said. "A touch of..." He moved around the room, hands in his pockets. "A touch of craziness. People who are around Black Thunder get crazy."

Marlene finished licking her palm and kicked off her shoes. "Craziness sounds good," she said. She stepped up behind him and put her arms around him. "How crazy do you think we can get tonight?"

"I don't know." He thought for a minute. "Maybe I could show you our movie."

16

Ric faced the window in the motel room, watching, his mind humming. The window had been dialed to polarize completely and he could see himself, Marlene behind him on the untidy bed, the plundered packet of Thunder on the table. It had been eight days since the hospital had been robbed. Marlene had taken the bus to Phoenix every evening.

"You should try some of our product," Marlene said. "The stuff's just ... when I use it, I can feel my mind just start to click. Move faster, smoother. Thoughts come out of nowhere."

"Right," Ric said. "Nowhere."

Ric saw Marlene's reflection look up at his own dark plateglass ghost. "Do I detect sarcasm, here?"

"No. Preoccupation, that's all."

"Half the stuff's mine, right? I can eat it, burn it, drop it out the window. Drop it on your head, if I want to. Right?"

"That is correct," said Ric.

"Things are getting dull," Marlene said. "You're spending your evenings off drinking with Captain Islam and Super Virgin and Krishna Commando ... I get to stay here and watch the vid."

"Those people I'm drinking with," Ric said. "There's a good chance they could die because of what we're going to do. They're our victims. Would you like to have a few drinks with them? A few smokes?" He turned from the window and looked at her. "Knowing they may die because of you?"

Marlene frowned up at him. "Are you scared of them?" she asked. "Is that why you're talking like this?"

Ric gave a short laugh. Marlene ran her fingers through her almost-blond hair. Ric watched her in the mirror.

"You don't have to involve yourself in this part, Marlene," Ric said. "I can do it by myself, I think."

She was looking at the darkened vid screen. Her eyes were bright. A smile tugged at her lips.

"I'm ready," she said. "Let's do it."

"I've got to get some things ready first."

"Hurry up. I don't want to waste this feeling I've got."

Ric closed his eyes. He didn't want to see his reflection anymore.

"What feeling is that?" he asked.

"The feeling that my time is coming. To try something new."

"Yeah," Ric said. His eyes were still closed. "That's what I thought."

17

Ric, wearing leather gardener's gloves, smoothed the earth over the plastic-wrapped explosive device he had just buried under a pyrocantha bush. He was crouched in the shadow of a vacation cabin. Drizzle rattled off his collar. His knees were growing wet. He took the aerial for the radio detonator and pulled it carefully along one of the stems of the bush.

Marlene stood next to him in red plastic boots. She was standing guard, snuffling in the cold. Ric could hear the sound of her lips as she chewed gum.

White shafts of light tracked over their heads, filtered by juniper scrub that stood between the cabins and the expressway heading north out of Flagstaff. Ric froze. His form, caught among pyrocantha barbs, cast a stark moving shadow on the peeling white wall.

"Flashlight," he said, when the car had passed. Moving between the light and any onlookers, Marlene flicked it on. Ric carefully smoothed the

soil, spread old leaves. He thought the thorns on the pyrocantha would keep most people away, but he didn't want disturbed soil attracting anyone.

Rain danced down in the yellow light. "Thanks," he said. Marlene popped a bubble. Ric stood up, brushing muck from his knees. There were more bundles to bury, and it was going to be a long, wet night.

18

"They're going to take you off if they can," Ric said. "They're from California and they know this is a one-shot deal, so they don't care if they offend you or leave you dead. But they think it's going to happen in Phoenix, see." Ric, Super Virgin, and Two-Fisted Jesus stood in front of the juniper by the alloy road, looking down at the cluster of cabins. "They may hire people from the Cold Wires or whoever, so that they can have people who know the terrain. So the idea is, we move the meet at the last minute. Up here, north of Flag."

"We don't know the terrain, either," Jesus said. He looked uncomfortable here, his face a monochrome blotch in the unaccustomed sun.

Ric took a squeeze bottle of nasal mist from his pocket and squeezed it once up each nostril. He sniffed. "You can learn it between now and then. Rent all the cabins, put soldiers in the nearest ones. Lay in your commo gear." Ric pointed up at the ridge above where they stood. "Put some people with long guns up there, some IR goggles and scopes. Anyone comes in, you'll know about it."

"I don't know, Marat. I like Phoenix. I know the way that city thinks." Jesus shook his head in disbelief. "Fucking tourist cabins."

"They're better than hotel rooms. Tourist cabins have back doors."

"Hey." Super Virgin was grinning, metal teeth winking in the sun as she tugged on Jesus' sleeve. "Expand your horizons. This is the great outdoors."

Jesus shook his head. "I'll think about it."

19

Marlene was wearing war paint and dancing in the middle of her condeco living room. The furniture was pushed back to the walls, the music was loud enough to rattle the crystal on the kitchen shelves.

"You've got to decide, Marlene," Ric said. He was sitting behind the pushed-back table, and the paper packets of Thunder were laid out in front of him. "How much of this do you want to sell?"

"I'll decide later."

"Now. Now, Marlene."

"Maybe I'll keep it all."

Ric looked at her. She shook sweat out of her eyes and laughed.

"Just a joke, Ric."

He said nothing.

"It's just happiness," she said, dancing. "Happiness in paper envelopes. Better than money. You ought to use some. It'll make you less tense." Sweat was streaking her war paint. "What'll you use the money for, anyway? Move to Zanzibar and buy yourself a safe condeco and a bunch of safe investments? Sounds boring to me, Ric. Why'n't you use it to create some excitement?"

He could not, Ric thought, afford much in the way of regret. But still a sadness came over him, drifting through his body on slow opiate time. Another few days, he thought, and he wouldn't have to use people anymore. Which was good, because he was losing his taste for it.

20

A kid from California was told to be by a certain public phone at a certain time, with his bank and without his friends. The phone call told him to go to another phone booth and be there within a certain allotted time. He complained, but the phone hung up in mid-syllable.

At the second phone he was told to take the keys taped to the bottom of the shelf in the phone booth, go to such-and-such a car in the parking lot, and drive to Flagstaff to another public phone. His complaints were cut short by a slamming receiver. Once in Flagstaff, he was given another set of

directions.

By now he had learned not to complain.

If there were still people with him they were very good, because they hadn't been seen at any of the turns of his course.

He was working for Ric, even though he didn't know it.

21

Marlene was practicing readiness. New patterns were constantly flickering through her mind and she loved watching her head doing its tricks.

She was wearing her war paint as she sat up on a tall ridge behind the cabins, her form encased in a plastic envelope that dispersed her body heat in patterns unrecognizable to infrared scanners. She had a radio and a powerful antenna, and she was humming "Greensleeves" to herself as she looked down at the cabins through long binoculars wrapped in a scansheet paper tube to keep the sun from winking from the lenses. Marlene also had headphones and a parabolic mike pointed down at the cabins, so that she could hear anything going on. Right now all she could hear was the wind.

She could see the cabins perfectly, as well as the two riflemen on the ridge across the road. She was far away from anything likely to happen, but if things went well she wouldn't be needed for anything but pushing buttons on cue anyway.

"Greensleeves" hummed on and on. Marlene was having a good time.

Working for Ric.

22

Two-Fisted Jesus had turned the cabin into another plastic-hung cavern, lit by pale holograms and cool video monitors, filled with the hum of machinery and the brightness of liquid crystal. Right in the middle, a round coffee table full of crisp paper envelopes.

Ric had been allowed entry because he was one of the principals in the transaction. He'd undergone scanning as he entered, both for weapons and for electronics. Nothing had been found. His Thunder, and about half of Marlene's, was sitting on the table.

Only two people were in the room besides Ric. Super Virgin had the safety caps off her claws and was carrying an automatic with laser sights in a belt holster. Ric considered the sights a pure affectation in a room this small. Jesus had a sawed-off twin-barrel shotgun sitting in his lap. The pistol grip might break his wrist but the spread would cover most of the room, and Ric wondered if Jesus had considered how much electronics he'd lose if he ever used it.

23

Where three lightposts had been marked with fluorescent tape, the kid from California pulled off on the verge of the alloy road that wound ahead to leap over the Grand Canyon into Utah. Captain Islam pulled up behind him with two soldiers, and they scanned the kid right there, stripped him of a pistol and a homing sensor, and put him in the back of their own car.

"You're beginning to piss me off," the kid said.

"Just do what we tell you," Captain Islam said, pulling away, "and you'll be king of Los fucking Angeles."

24

Ric's hands were trembling so hard he had to press them against the arms of his chair in order to keep it from showing. He could feel sweat oozing from his armpits. He really wasn't good at this kind of thing.

The kid from California was pushed in the door by Captain Islam, who stepped out and closed the door behind him. The kid was black and had clear plastic eye implants, with the electronics gleaming inside the transparent eyeball. He had patterned scarring instead of the tattoos, and was about sixteen. He wore a silver jacket, carried a duffel to put the Thunder in, and seemed annoyed.

"Once you step inside," Jesus said, "you have five minutes to complete our transaction. Go ahead and test any of the packets at random."

"Yeah," the kid said. "I'll do that." He crouched by the table, pulled

vials from his pockets, and made a series of tests while Jesus counted off at fifteen-second intervals. He managed to do four tests in three minutes, then stood up. Ric could see he was salivating for the stuff.

"It's good," he said.

"Let's see your key." The kid took a credit spike from his pocket and handed it to Jesus, who put it in the computer in front of him. Jesus transferred two hundred fifteen thousand in Starbright policorporate scrip from the spike to his own spike that was jacked into slot two.

"Take your stuff," Jesus said, settling back in his seat. "Captain Islam will take you back to your car. Nice doing business."

The kid gave a sniff, took his spike back, and began to stuff white packets into his duffel. He left the cabin without saying a word. Adrenaline was wailing along Ric's nerves. He stood and took his own spike from his left-hand jacket pocket. His other hand went to the squeeze bottle of nasal mist in his right. Stray novae were exploding at the peripherals of his vision.

"Look at this, Virgin," Ric said. "Look at all the money sitting in this machine." He laughed. Laughter wasn't hard, but stopping the laughter was.

"Twenty percent is yours, Marat," Jesus said. "Give me your spike."

As Super Virgin stepped up to look at the monitor, Ric brought the squeeze bottle out of his pocket and fired acrolein into her face. His spin toward Jesus was so fast that Virgin's scream had barely begun before he fired another burst of the chemical at Jesus, slamming one hand down on the shotgun to keep him from bringing it up. He'd planned on just holding it there till the boy's grip loosened, but nerves took over and he wrenched it effortlessly from Jesus' hands and barely stopped himself from smashing Jesus in the head with it.

Virgin was on her hands and knees, mucus hanging from her nose and lips. She was trying to draw the pistol. Ric kicked it away. It fell on muffled plastic.

Ric turned and pulled the spikes from the machine. Jesus had fallen out of his chair, was clawing at his face. "Dead man," Jesus said, gasping the words.

"Don't threaten me, asshole," Ric said. "It could have been mustard gas."

And then Marlene, on the ridge far above, watched the sweep hand touch five minutes, thirty seconds, and she pressed her radio button. All the buried charges went off, blasting bits of the other cabins into the sky and doubtless convincing the soldiers in the other buildings that they were under fire by rocket or mortar, that the kid from California had brought an army with him. Simultaneous with the explosive, other buried packages began to gush concealing white smoke into the air. The wind was strong but there was a lot of smoke.

Ric opened the back door and took off, the shotgun hanging in his hand. Random fire burst out but none of it came near. The smoke provided cover from both optical scanners and infrared, and it concealed him all the way across the yard behind the cabin and down into the arroyo behind it. Sixty yards down the arroyo was a culvert that ran under the expressway. Ric dashed through it, wetting himself to the knees in cold spring snowmelt.

He was now on the other side of the expressway. He didn't think anyone would be looking for him here. He threw the shotgun away and kept running. There was a cross-country motorbike waiting a little farther up the stream.

25

"There," Ric said, pressing the Return button. "Half of it's yours."

Marlene was still wearing her war paint. She sipped cognac from a crystal glass and took her spike out of the computer. She laughed. "A hundred K of Starbright," she said, "and paper packets of happiness. What else do I need?"

"A fast armored car, maybe," Ric said. He pocketed his spike. "I'm

taking off," he said. He turned to her. "There's room on the bike for two."

"To where?" She was looking at him sidelong.

"To Mexico, for starters," he said. A lie. Ric planned on heading northeast and losing himself for a while in Navajoland.

"To some safe little country. A safe little apartment."

"That's the idea."

Marlene took a hefty swig of cognac. "Not me," she said. "I'm planning on staying in this life."

Ric felt a coldness brush his spine. He reached out to take her hand. "Marlene," he said carefully. "You've got to leave this town. Now."

She pulled her hand away. "Not a chance, Ricardo. I plan on telling my boss just what I think of him. Tomorrow morning. I can't wait."

There was a pain in Ric's throat. "Okay," he said. He stood up. "See you in Mexico, maybe." He began to move for the door. Marlene put her arms around him from behind. Her chin dug into his collarbone.

"Stick around," she said. "For the party."

He shook his head, uncoiled her arms, slid out of them.

"You treat me like I don't know what I'm doing," Marlene said.

He turned and looked at her. Bright eyes looked at him from a mask of bright paint. "You don't," he said.

"I've got lots of ideas. You showed me how to put things together."

"Now I'm showing you how to run and save your life."

"Hah. I'm not going to run. I'm going to stroll out with a briefcase full of happiness and a hundred K in my pocket."

He looked at her and felt a pressure hard in his chest. He knew that none of this was real to her, that he'd never been able to penetrate that strange screen in her mind that stood between Marlene and the rest of the world. Ric had never pierced it, but soon the world would. He felt a coldness filling him, a coldness that had nothing to do with sorrow.

It was hard not to run when he turned and left the apartment.

His breathing came more freely with each step he took.

26

When Ric came off the Navajo Reservation he saw scansheet headlines about how the California gang wars had spilled over into Phoenix, how there were dead people turning up in alleys, others were missing, a club had been bombed. All those people working for him, covering his retreat.

In New Zealand he bought into a condecology in Christchurch, a big place with armored shutters and armored guards, a first-rate new artificial intelligence to handle investments, and a mostly foreign clientele who profited by the fact that a list of the condecos' inhabitants was never made public ... this was before he found out that he could buy private property here, a big house on the South Island with a view of his own personal glacier, without a chance of anybody's war accidentally rolling over him.

It was an interesting feeling, sitting alone in his own house, knowing there wasn't anyone within five thousand miles who wanted to kill him.

Ric made friends. He played the market and the horses. And he learned to ski.

At a ski party in late September, held in the house of one of his friends, he drifted from room to room amid a murmur of conversation punctuated with brittle laughter. He had his arm around someone named Reiko, the sheltered daughter of a policorporate bigwig. The girl, nineteen and a student, had long black hair that fell like a tsunami down her shoulders, and she was fascinated with his talk of life in the real world. He walked into a back room that was bright with the white glare of video, wondering if the jai alai scores had been posted yet, and he stared into his own face as screams rose around him and his nerves turned to hot magnesium flares.

"Ugh. Mexican scum show," said Reiko, and then she saw the actor's face and her eyes widened.

Ric felt his knees trembling and he sank into an armchair in the back of the room. Ice tittering in his drink. The man on the vid was flaying alive

a woman who hung by her wrists from a beam. Blood ran down his forearms. The camera cut quickly to his tiger's eyes, his thin smile. Ric's eyes. Ric's smile.

"My god," said Reiko. "It's really you, isn't it?"

"No," Ric said. Shaking his head.

"I can't believe they let this stuff even on pirate stations," someone said from the hallway. Screams rose from the vid. Ric's mind was flailing in the dark.

"I can't watch this," Reiko said, and rushed away. Ric didn't see her go. Burning sweat was running down the back of his neck.

The victim's screams rose. Blood traced artful patterns down her body. The camera cut to her face.

Marlene's face.

Nausea swept Ric and he doubled in his chair. He remembered Two-Fisted Jesus and his talent for creating video images, altering faces, voices, action. They'd found Marlene, as Ric had thought they would, and her voice and body were memorized by Jesus' computers. Maybe the torture was even real.

"It's got to be him," someone in the room said. "It's even his voice. His accent."

"He never did say," said another voice, "what he used to do for a living."

Frozen in his chair, Ric watched the show to the end. There was more torture, more bodies. The video-Ric enjoyed it all. At the end he went down before the blazing guns of the Federal Security Directorate. The credits rolled, over the video-Ric's dead face. The director was listed as Jesus Carranza. The film was produced by VideoTek S.A. in collaboration with Messiah Media.

The star's name was given as Jean-Paul Marat.

"A new underground superstar," said a high voice. The voice of someone who thought of himself as an underground connoisseur. "He's been in a lot of pirate video lately. He's the center of a big controversy about how far scum shows can go."

And then the lights came on and Ric saw eyes turning to him in surprise. "It's not me," he said.

"Of course not." The voice belonged to his host. "Incredible resemblance, though. Even your mannerisms. Your accent."

"Not me."

"Hey." A quick, small man, with metal-rimmed glasses that gazed at Ric like barrels of a shotgun. "It really is you!" The high-pitched voice of the connoisseur grated on Ric's nerves like the sound of a bonesaw.

"No." A fast, sweat-soaked denial.

"Look. I've taped all your vids I could find."

"Not me."

"I'm having a party next week. With entertainment, if you know what I mean. I wonder -- "

"I'm not interested," Ric said, standing carefully, "in any of your parties."

He walked out into the night, to his new car, and headed north, to his private fortress above the glacier. He took the pistol out of the glove compartment and put it on the seat next to him. It didn't make him feel any safer.

Get a new face, Ric thought. Get across the border into Uzbekistan and check into a hospital. Let them try to follow me there.

He got home at four in the morning and checked his situation with the artificial intelligence that managed his accounts. All his funds were in long-term investments and he'd take a whopping loss if he pulled out now.

He looked at the figures and couldn't understand them. There seemed to be a long, constant scream in Ric's mind and nerves, a scream that echoed Marlene's, the sound of someone who has just discovered what is real. His body was shaking and he couldn't stop it.

Ric switched off his monitor and staggered to bed. Blood filled his dreams.

When he rose it was noon. There were people outside his gates, paparazzi with cameras. The phone had recorded a series of requests for an interview with the new, controversial vid star. Someone at the party had talked. It took Ric a long time to get a line out in order to tell the AI to sell.

The money in his pocket and a gun in his lap, he raced his car past the paparazzi, making them jump aside as he tried his best to run them down. He had to make the next suborbital shuttle out of Christchurch to Mysore, then head northwest to a hospital and to a new life. And somehow he'd have to try to cover his tracks. Possibly he'd buy some hair bleach, a false mustache. Pay only cash.

Getting away from Cartoon Messiah wouldn't be hard. Shaking the paparazzi would take a lot of fast thinking.

Sweat made his grip on the wheel slippery.

As he approached Christchurch he saw a streak across the bright northeast sky, a shuttle burning its way across the Pacific from California.

He wondered if there were people on it that he knew.

In his mind, the screams went on.