



DELTA GREEN

DARK
THEATRES

CTHULHU MYTHOS
STORIES OF
MODERN HORROR
AND CONSPIRACY

EDITED BY
BOB KRUGER
& JOHN TYNES

TAKE YOUR SEAT.

Born of the federal government's

Delta Green: Dark Theatres

1928 raid on the degenerate

presents eight new stories of

coastal town of Innsmouth,

intrigue and horror, eight

Massachusetts, the covert agency

theatres in which desperate

known as Delta Green spent four

actors enact clandestine passion

decades opposing the forces of

plays for the grim amusement of

darkness with honor, but without

alien gods. Witness the horrors

glory. Stripped of sanction after a

of the Raid on Innsmouth, the

disastrous 1969 operation in

terrible secrets of World War II,

Cambodia, Delta Green's leaders

the tropical nightmare of

made a secret pact: to continue

Vietnam, the chill vacuum of

their work without authority,

Yuggoth, the asynchronous folds

without support, and without

of space-time, and much more.

fear. Delta Green agents slip

The usher takes your hand and

through the system, manipulating

leads you into the dark. The red

the federal bureaucracy while

curtain rises. A silence falls over

pushing the darkness back for

the audience. Are you ready?

another day—but often at a

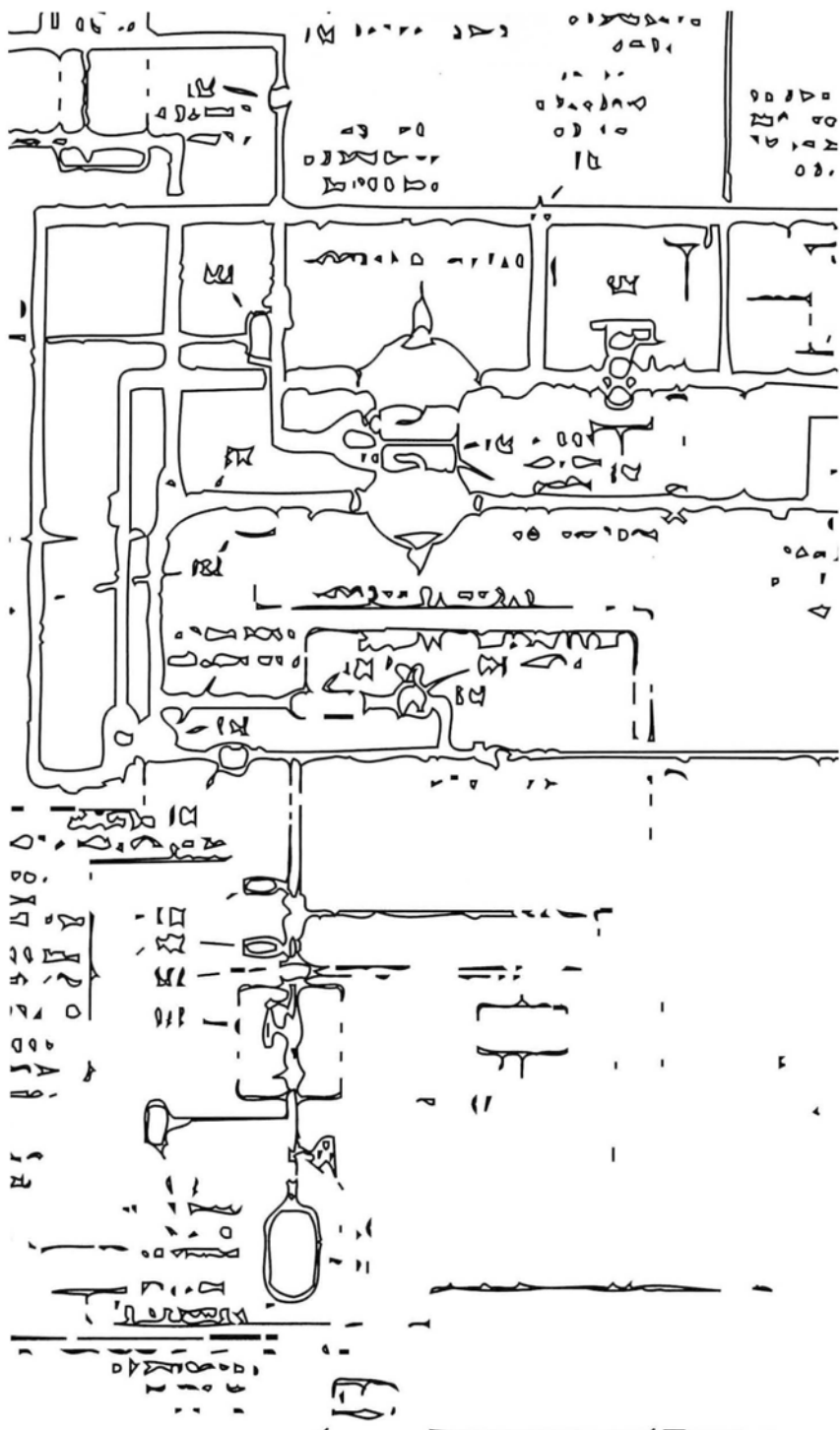
THE SHOW IS ABOUT TO BEGIN.

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EDITED BY

BOB KRUGER

&

JOHN TYNES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BENJAMIN ADAMS: "Good Night, Bach Ma, Good-Bye" is dedicated to Mai Anh Crowe, Jay Bonansinga (again, dude!), and Denise & Chris Feist, true friends who helped, whether they know it or not.

JOHN TYNES: "The Corn King" is dedicated to Dennis Detwiler and Scott Glancy, stewards of Enolsis.

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Published November, 2001, by Armitage House
5536 25th Ave. NE ▲ Seattle, WA 98105-2415

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First Trade Printing

ISBN 1-887797-17-3

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A WORD OF EXPLANATION

JOHN TYNES

This is a shared-world anthology. Each writer has drawn upon a communal well of concepts; some have drunk deep, while others have left but the slightest ripple. All, however, have been strongly guided in spirit by the same body of water: a roleplaying game book entitled *Delta Green*. Published in the spring of 1997, this book posited a world of secrets underlying the daily reality of human life at the turn of the millennium. The response of roleplaying gamers, magazine reviewers, and the roleplaying publishing community was of one voice: *Delta Green* was hailed as one of the best works ever produced in the field, and subsequently awarded the title of best roleplaying book of 1997.

The book covers a lot of ground, but a few key ideas are summarized on the following pages. If you have not seen *Delta Green*, these notes should serve to introduce the major concepts at work in this anthology. Also recommended, almost by default, is the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. His cosmic vision and the particulars of his fictive worlds were important inspirations in the crafting of *Delta Green* and in the writing of the stories collected herein.

DELTA GREEN

Born of the U.S. government's secret 1928 raid on Innsmouth (*c.f.* Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth") and the Nazis' occult studies of WWII, this organization was an anti-paranormal investigation and sanction group

that existed from 1942 to 1970. At that point, after a disastrous operation in pre-invasion Cambodia, Delta Green was shut down. Unwilling to accept this, many of the group's members continued their Delta Green activities on an *ad hoc* basis, investigating many paranormal events. However, owing to a nonexistent command structure and the lack of any central files, many operations resulted in failure. In 1994, following the assassination of a Delta Green veteran by NRO SECTION DELTA, the networks branch of Majestic-12, Delta Green reorganized into a classical cell-structure conspiracy. Today, Delta Green remains an illegal, unauthorized, unsupported conspiracy within the U.S. government, doing its best to ferret out instances of paranormal activity and protect U.S. citizens from their effects, but benefiting from a command structure and a centralized intelligence-gathering effort. Delta Green isn't some sort of super-secret group reporting to the White House; they are a *conspiracy*, with no more authorization for the things they do than Oliver North and the Iran-Contra operatives had in the 1980s but without the good publicity. Delta Green "agents" are actually employees of many different federal agencies and organizations whose allegiance to the illegal conspiracy of Delta Green is a grim secret.

MAJESTIC-12

Majestic-12 is a high-level, top-secret group formed to deal with the UFO phenomenon. Everything you've heard is probably true, and worse; in recent years, Majestic-12 has succeeded in making contact with the aliens, and has acquired valuable technological and scientific knowledge as a result. Majestic-12 has even negotiated a treaty with the aliens (known as "Greys") that provides governmental sanction for alien activities on Earth (even those that result in the injury or death of U.S. citizens) in exchange for information and cooperation. In truth, the wool has been pulled over Majestic-12's eyes right from the start; the Greys are constructs—androids, really—used as puppets by a different and far less friendly force. Even the incident that created Majestic-12—the Roswell UFO crash of 1947—was a sham, the kick-off to a decades-long program of psychological experimentation and governmental manipulation by the true masters of the Greys.

THE KAROTECHIA

Originally a Nazi program performing occult research during WWII, the Karotechia discovered practical applications of the occult, including reanimation of the dead and much worse. Among other horrors, a Karotechia attempt to summon a malignant deity—to be used as some sort of super-weapon against the Allies—was thwarted by Delta Green near the end of the war. Three veterans of the Karotechia survived the war, eventually coming together on a massive rubber plantation in Brazil known as La Estancia.

These three sorcerers plot the rise of the Fourth Reich, following the advice of a supernatural being they believe to be an ascended, godlike Hitler. Having assimilated the remains of ODESSA, the Karotechia is now extending its reach into racist hate groups in the U.S. and Europe. ▲

“TRUE NOBILITY
IS EXEMPT FROM FEAR:

MORE CAN I BEAR
THAN YOU DARE EXECUTE.”

-WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, HENRY VI

In the Delta Green anthology Alien Intelligence, Scott's story "An Item of Mutual Interest" first showcased his robust, confident prose style, great feel for character, and deep historical knowledge. For these reasons, we were pleased when he volunteered to write the following tale, which relates the U.S. Marines' operation that led to Delta Green's creation. However, his qualifications are actually unique: as the sourcebook writer who first outlined these events, he knows more about them than anyone else. Scott capitalizes on his setting to develop a theme of xenophobia, and demonstrates that the most effective soldier fighting our collective demons would in many ways be a demon himself.

ONCE MORE, FROM THE TOP . . .

A. SCOTT GLANCY

This is the fourth time," the old man grumbled, shifting his gaze out the window to the sparsely planted grounds of the VA hospital. "How many more times do we have to go through this?"

"Just a couple more, Sergeant Hennessey," said Levine, stooping to plug the power cord into the cracked and yellowed wall socket. "Your memory being what it is, we need to go through this as many times as possible. You added some details the second and third times through. Maybe you'll remember something more this time." As Levine busied himself with the camera, his partner, Henry Parker, unpacked the files and laid them out on the card table in front of Sergeant Hennessey, like he was dealing out a game of solitaire.

Hennessey angrily gripped the arms of his wheelchair with trembling hands. "It's been seventy years! That's more years than the both of you and 'Sambo' stacked together. You can't know what it's like trying to re-

member that far back."

"Of course, some things are harder to forget than others," Levine said as he laid his jacket over the back of a folding chair and loosened his tie. The staff kept the veterans' hospital uncomfortably warm. But that's why people retire to Florida, Levine thought. To warm their bones.

"Seventy years," Hennessey sighed as he ran a gnarled hand over his snow-white hair. "Why the hell is the Navy interested again after seventy years?"

"They didn't tell us," Levine lied as he sighted the video camera on Hennessey and hit the record button. "'Need-to-know' means they don't need us to know." Levine checked to see that the camera was running, then took his seat across the table from Hennessey. "After a lifetime in the Marine Corps, you must've learned that if you're not cleared for the answer, don't ask the question."

"I suppose," Hennessey said, eyeing the pair of men as they settled into their seats and continued unpacking their files. Levine reflected that Hennessey would be comparing him to his partner. Levine was thin and relatively young. People told him he had glasses like an accountant and fingers like a pianist. As part of his cover, Levine had cut his hair to military regulation for this op, but he figured Hennessey could tell he wasn't really Navy. Levine was a civilian from his scuffed shoes to his J.C. Penney suit. Parker on the other hand was military to the bone, thick-featured and barrel-chested, his ebony scalp cleanly shaven, but nonetheless a "land-lubber." If he was getting steamed about Hennessey calling him "Sambo," he wasn't showing it.

As he pulled out his notepad and pen, Levine could feel Hennessey dissecting them with his eyes, trying to figure out what they were really up to and who'd really sent them. Being kept in the dark was grating to Hennessey. Levine supposed it was almost ironic. Seventy years ago Hennessey and the rest of 42nd Marine Battalion walked into a small town in Massachusetts without a clue as to what they were facing. Somewhere up the chain of command somebody, probably someone who hadn't joined Hennessey and his fellow Marines on their little excursion, made the decision that the guys on the ground just weren't cleared to know what was going on. And here they were, seventy years later, debriefing Hennessey about a mission he never learned the particulars about and lying to him about who was asking the questions. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

Of course, thought Levine, if those men had told the truth, told Hennessey and the other Marines what was waiting in those piles of moldy stone, he never would have believed them. But if he had . . . if he had believed the unbelievable, he would have deserted before ever setting

foot in Innsmouth. Levine wondered what Hennessey would do if he knew the truth about why he and Parker were there.

"So? Ready to begin?" Levine asked without much enthusiasm.

"Ready?" Hennessey spit back. "Ready to dredge up the worst fucking night of my entire life? Ready to get the shakes and not be able to keep the swill they serve here down or even close my eyes all night 'cuz if I do I'll be right back there in the middle of it all, killing those things in the snow?" Hennessey tried his best to rivet the two of them with a withering stare. It may have worked on Marine recruits forty years ago, but it had lost much of its power since then.

Embarrassed and resigned, Levine quickly glanced to Parker. Parker remained as inscrutable as one of those Easter Island statues. With no apparent support from Parker, Levine answered weakly, "Uh, yeah."

Hennessey rolled his eyes, then bowed his head to pinch the bridge of his nose, as if warding off an impending migraine. "Sure," he mumbled. "Of course. Let's get to it then."

"When did you first get wind that your battalion was being tasked for something special?" asked Levine.

Hennessey shifted uncomfortably in his wheelchair. "We knew something was up when the entire battalion was assembled in Punta Gorda. Companies and platoons that were dispersed all over the country chasing Sandino were suddenly called back to the coast and immediately herded onto a Navy transport. Everyone knew the Big Brass had something in mind. Rumor was, even the Colonel didn't know."

Levine scribbled a few notes. "Do you remember the ship's name?"

"No. I told you that the last time. I thought Jews were supposed to be smart."

"I'm not Jewish," Levine said without looking up from his notes. Levine figured it was the only way the old bastard could get back at the two of them for making him go through the story over and over again. Since he couldn't intimidate them, he would suffice with insults.

"Yeah. Next you're going to tell me he ain't a nigger either." Hennessey laughed mirthlessly. Once again, Parker didn't even blink. Something in Parker's poker face told Levine the big man was thinking, "I bet you're going to die soon, old man."

"Where were you first briefed on the details of the Innsmouth operation?"

"The Boston Naval Annex; the same day our ship docked."

"And that day was?" Levine asked.

"It was February 23rd, 1928. They marched the entire battalion into a warehouse in the Annex and sat us down on these wooden benches. There were already about a hundred guys in suits in there, T-men we were told,

and nearly a dozen Navy officers in their faggoty dress whites. They had this big map of the town and all the approaches. Plus a screen set up for the movie and slides they showed later."

"Do you remember the name of the operation? What was it code-named?" Levine interrupted.

"Just what I told you before," Hennessey said irritably. "It was something biblical, like Project Moses, or Pharisees, or something. Y'know, Old Testament."

"And who gave the briefing?" Levine prodded.

"There was a Captain from Naval Intelligence and a T-man. I got the impression he was Secret Service. I don't remember their names 'cuz I never saw 'em again. There was one fella, though, I seen plenty of since."

"We know," interrupted Levine. "You already mentioned Hoover."

Hennessey glared at Levine and leaned forward onto the table. "Are you going to let me tell the damn story or not?"

"Sorry," said Levine, leaning back to keep the distance between them. "Please continue." Levine felt a flush of embarrassment at the clumsiness of his questions. He was an Elint Specialist, not an interrogator. Listen in while the Kremlin orders out for pizza, no problem. But interrogation? And Parker, hell; as far as Levine could figure, he was some DOD mechanic currently on loan to the Company. If this was the best debriefing team Alphonse could put together, it meant that either this was a low priority op, or things at Delta Green were well and truly fucked.

"'Military support for civilian law enforcement' he called us," Hennessey hissed. "But the operation the brass laid out was more like the kinda thing we'd been doing for United Fruit in Nicaragua."

"What exactly had you been doing for United Fruit?" asked Parker.

"Whatever we were told to do," Hennessey snapped, glaring angrily at Parker's interruption. But Hennessey's watery eyes couldn't hold Parker's cold stare and he quickly looked down to his own trembling, knotted hands. After a second, Hennessey cleared his throat and looked up. "'Bout the same thing our boys did in Vietnam. 'Cept we didn't have TV cameras breathing down our necks. We'd move into a pueblo that our officers said was supporting Sandino, round all the spics up, shoot those that gave us any trouble, burn the corn and rice in the field, torch the huts, and march everyone out to a 'controlled area' where they couldn't support Sandino. 'Course, often as not those same corn fields would be turned into banana plantations by the next time we marched through, but what the hell did we care. It ain't changed much since '27 as far as I can see."

"The film," said Levine.

"Huh?"

"Could you tell us again about the film they showed you." Levine

had not only undone his tie, but rolled up his sleeves. He could feel the sweat in his armpits and around his collar. Parker, however, didn't spill a drop—lotsa jungle work.

"Did I leave that out? Well, there was some film shot from an airplane. It showed the town and the surrounding countryside. The captain described the main features of the town, pointing out this road and that. The last part of the film showed a small, black, rocky island, or maybe it was the top of a reef poking out of the sea. But they stopped the film before that got too far along. The captain acted like it was something we weren't supposed to see.

"Then there were the slides. Someone, probably one of Hoover's boys, had wandered through town with a hidden camera in a suitcase. The shots weren't very well aimed and most were out of focus. The camera must've been hid real good and run real quiet because some of the locals were awful close when he snapped the shutter. One just about looked right in the camera lens. When that blotchy, goggle-eyed face flashed onto the screen, I guess I must've gasped along with everybody else. Everybody except Paskow, of course. Fucker's heart pumped ice water.

"But that face . . . it was like something out of Lon Chaney's makeup kit. The head was all wrong. During Korea I saw a kid in Seoul with the same kind of head. 'Water Heads' they're called. The skull's soft and bloated-looking. The guy's eyes were bulging and watery, and even though it was just a still shot, those eyes seemed not to have any lids. That's when I knew this was going to be worse than anything I could imagine."

"You Marines better get used to that face; you're going to be seeing a lot of that the next couple of days," roared the Captain from Naval Intelligence. "The federal agents who've been conducting surveillance of the town have reported a high incidence of . . . inbreeding." The Captain said the word "inbreeding" like he could taste it. "This town has been isolated from the rest of Massachusetts for nearly eighty years. The people up there have been marrying their second and first cousins for three or four generations. During the Civil War federal draft agents determined that over half the males of combat age in Innsmouth were unfit for military service." The Captain paused to let that sink in. "Do not be surprised by anything you see. Appearances to the contrary, they're not congenital idiots. They've used their appearance as part of their propaganda campaign to keep the uninvolved locals quiet and outsiders away."

Private First Class Robert Hennessey sat there in that drafty warehouse, on those polished benches, and listened aghast to that Navy prick spin a yarn about rum-running, drug smuggling, white slavery, murder, piracy and an elaborate scare-story crafted to frighten away the curious. The captain

pointed out the objectives with a collapsible metal pointer. As he ticked off each one, he struck the map like he was disciplining it for getting caught in the liquor cabinet.

"First Company will deploy along the docks on both sides of the Manuxet. Your mission will be to prevent anyone from fleeing the city by sea. First Company's second platoon will move with a detachment of Treasury agents and secure the Marsh refinery and the company offices. Second Company will be assigned to hold a perimeter along Southwick Street in the north while its third platoon will move to the Marsh estate and secure the mansion and assist the Treasury agents in serving the arrest and search warrants. Second Company, Second Platoon will move to secure the former Masonic hall on Federal Street, which now serves as the headquarters of a quasi-spiritualist group calling itself The Esoteric Order of Dagon. There are three churches—here!"—cracking the map again—"along Church Street. Current intelligence indicates that all three have lost their original congregations and are now used by the Esoteric Order of Dagon."

Hennessey hung on every unbelievable word. He'd done sweeps of hostile pueblos down in Bananaland, but this was Massachusetts, for Christ's sake. Hennessey turned to Lance Corporal Charlie Paskow, who was sitting with his elbows on his knees. A Camel hung limply from his mouth, slowly dripping ash. "Hey, Charlie?" Charlie turned and pushed a lazy cloud of smoke out of the corner of his mouth. He raised an eyebrow to invite the question. "Are they serious? Are we really going to attack a town here in America?"

"I certainly hope so," Charlie hissed. His thin mouth was wrinkled into something akin to wry amusement. Once, outside Bluefields on the Mosquito Coast, Hennessey had seen Charlie shoot a ten-year-old kid out of the saddle from two hundred and fifty yards. Charlie's only comment, as he ejected the spent round from his Springfield, was, "Spics oughtn't give rifles to kids." Charlie was as cold-blooded a fish as Hennessey had seen in the Corps. It should have come as no surprise that he was getting a chuckle out of doing to an American town what they'd been doing to Nicaraguan pueblos.

The Captain had already run through the information on the "Esoteric Order of Dagon." Some kind of creepy South-Seas religion as far as Hennessey could follow the Captain's lecture. Like something out of a Fu Manchu pulp. Idolatry. Secret initiations. Murder and human sacrifice. It was all too much. Maybe this kinda thing could happen in Borneo or the Amazon, but this was America, less than thirty miles from Boston Common.

Hennessey's head was spinning by the time the lecture was done. His company, the Third, was to cross the Manuxet to the north side of town,

then cut west along Martin Street to Phillips Place. There they would break into four platoons and begin internment operations. They were to round up everyone in a four-block area and march them to the old railway station, where battalion HQ would have a processing center set up with the Bureau of Investigation to sort out the "criminal aliens" from the rest of the townsfolk. When their blocks were cleared, the company would work its way eastward, clearing the next four blocks and so on until they reached the harbor. To the north, Second Company would be doing the same, while on the south side of town, Fourth Company would be spread out along Garrison Street clearing blocks and moving north. The noose would be drawn tighter and tighter until everyone in town was accounted for and "sorted out." A company of combat engineers was standing by and would begin "excavating certain structures" once the population was clear. Hennessey figured that when the Captain said "excavate," he probably meant "blow up."

After the briefing, the Battalion was marched out by platoons to a staging area. Cold-weather gear, helmets, and winter camouflage were passed out. Then the weapons. It looked like jungle warfare all over again. Most Marines were issued a pump-action Winchester trench gun or a Thompson submachine gun, with only a few bolt-action Springfields thrown in. After all, if they were going to be operating in a town, there wasn't going to be much call to shoot anyone two or three hundred yards away. Everyone was also issued four grenades, and a Colt .45 sidearm, too. Clearing blocks of teetering old tenements room by room would be claustrophobic work, often without the luxury of enough space to maneuver a rifle or shotgun. It looked to Hennessey like the Brass had put some thought into the weapons mix.

Which is why the flamethrowers really scared him. Hennessey counted at least six flamethrower teams. Plus the quartermaster was handing out white-phosphorus grenades and satchel charges like it was the Battle of Beallue Wood all over again. "They wouldn't be handing those out unless they were expecting us to have to burn the locals out their houses."

Hearing Hennessey's comment, Charlie Paskow looked over at the Marines strapping the tanks of jellied gasoline onto their backs. Paskow's bayonet-thin figure was practically swallowed with the heavy winter greatcoat and steel helmet. He shrugged noncommittally as he shouldered his trench gun. "I s'pect so." Paskow turned away to join the rest of Third Company, Third Platoon by the four military trucks that would soon be bearing them north up the Ipswich road to the doomed town of Innsmouth.

The drive north was bitterly cold. Snow was fresh on the ground and shone pale in the moonlight. The sea winds blowing in along the shore cut right through the canvas-covered truck. It froze the Marines' helmets to

the tops of their ears. The draft tugged at their clothes and swept their steaming breath away like the exhaust from the rattling tailpipe. A few silently cursed the T-men, who were making the trip in a long train of big, black Packards. The others gripped their weapons upright between their knees, curled up inside their fear and adrenaline, and tried to focus. Focus on not getting killed.

As their truck crested the top of yet another hill, Lieutenant Cobb shouted a warning from the cab to the men bundled in the rear. "We just topped the last hill. We'll hit town in three minutes! Nobody does nothing until we deploy." The driver ground the gears as he down-shifted for the descent into town. That's when the stench hit them.

At first Hennessey thought they'd passed some road kill, some dog or farm animal. But the smell was more like rotten fish than any other smell he could think of.

"Jeezus," choked Deerborn. "What the hell is that?"

"Smells like the crack on a two-pesos whore!" Lyman gasped, holding his nose.

"Shut the hell up, Marine," barked Sergeant Miles. The Sergeant preferred to dispense discipline with the butt of his Thompson. No one said a word after that, even though the eye-watering stink just kept getting worse.

Hennessey's first glimpse of the town was lost in the glare of the headlights of the trucks behind his. Now and again he could see windows staring back, like the empty sockets of a skull. It just seemed incredible that any of the buildings could possibly be inhabited. They were crumbling heaps. Regardless, they were going to have to clear those heaps room by room. Clearing an intact building is hard enough, but when the walls look like Swiss cheese and you can see the attic while standing in the basement, there's just no way to know where that next shot is coming from. No way to know if that wall to your back is going to give way to a sniper's killing zone. It made Hennessey's guts twist just thinking about it.

Suddenly they were crossing a large square. The Gilman Hotel leaned drunkenly to the right, on the left the First National Grocery. In the blink of an eye, the trucks were rattling across the Federal Street Bridge and into the north side of town. Just across Dock Street they sped past the columned façade of a Romanesque building. Its granite pillars and steps were fleetingly illuminated as one of the trucks from the convoy peeled off and began disgorging troops. Hennessey could just make out the building's graven title above the door: "The Esoteric Order of Dagon." The building was out of Hennessey's sight even before the Marines began vaulting up the front steps, their bayonets flashing in the passing headlights.

As their trucks drove deeper into Innsmouth, the buildings along Federal Street grew even more dilapidated; some were little more than four

hollow walls cradling collapsed roofs and floors. Crossing Church and Martin Streets, more trucks veered off to their targets. Hennessey's truck and three others made a hard left onto Martin and gunned their engines. "First squad!" barked Lieutenant Cobb from the front cab. "You will move south and secure the southwest block. Round everyone up and get them ready to move to the train station. Have you got that?"

"Yes, sir!" came the chorus. Hennessey looked across the truck to Charlie Paskow. Hennessey knew that faraway look meant that Paskow was winding his clock springs. Hennessey loved having Charlie with him in a firefight: the guy moved like a wind-up soldier. No hesitation, no frenzy, just one fluid action after another.

The truck turned right again, shot forward maybe thirty yards, and jammed on the brake, skidding slightly as snow chains bit into the icy cobblestones. "Go! Go! Go!" barked Sergeant Miles as he jumped down from the truck, hoisting his Thompson in one hand while waving the men forward with the other. Hennessey jumped down, holding the barrel of the Thompson skyward, slipping slightly in the ice. "Corporal Paskow! take Hennessey, Lyman, and Boyle and clear that house there!" Miles indicated a sagging heap that had once been a quaint, gambrel-roofed Georgian home. In any small town in America, it might have passed as a haunted house. Here in Innsmouth, a city of haunted houses, its intact windowpanes made it look upscale.

Paskow got to the door first and began pounding with his gloved fist. "Open the door! This is the U.S. Marine Corps! Open up!" Hennessey hung back with Lyman and Boyle at the foot of the steps, keeping an eye on the windows. Boyle, a steady Tennessee farmboy, had been in Hennessey's company for six months in Nicaragua. Hennessey had no worries about him. Lyman, on the other hand, had just gotten off the boat from Camp LeJune when the battalion was turned around and sent back to the States. He was nervous as a cat and kept dancing around, shifting his weight from one foot to the other like he had to pee.

The owner was fairly slow to come to the door, but that was to be expected. It was 2:00 A.M., after all, and his reactions were dulled from having to wrench himself out of a warm winter slumber. For a half-awake fella, dressed only in his nightshirt and facing four armed Marines, the man took it fairly well.

"Waht th'swayt Jay-sus is gowan ahn!" he shouted. Hennessey sincerely hoped the ol' fella didn't give Paskow too much trouble. Last fella who did, Paskow put out most of his teeth with the butt of his Springfield.

"Town's being evacuated. You and anyone else you've got in there are going to have to go with us. Right now," Paskow said flatly. It wasn't much of an explanation. For a second Hennessey thought the old man was go-

ing to give Paskow an opportunity to do a little more dental work. Instead he smiled. It wasn't much of a smile, what with more than a few teeth missing or gone gray with rot, but his face lit up like they'd just reported the end of Prohibition.

"Yar Mahreens? Yav come ta clear tha tawn?" he beamed.

"Yes we are and yes we have," Paskow answered.

"Thank th' Lawd! Ah just need ta get dressed!" Without closing the door the man turned and ran back into his bedroom, leaving the four slightly puzzled Marines on his doorstep.

"Maybe we won't need to burn 'em out after all," Hennessey said hopefully.

In less than four minutes the old man had himself, his wife, and his two sons dressed and out the door. Then it was on to the next house. This time when Paskow pounded on the door, the only answer he got was a curt "Go ahway!"

"We are authorized to use whatever force is necessary to evacuate the inhabitants of this town, sir!" Paskow bellowed back through the door. "If you don't open up right now, we're kicking the door in!"

"Dammit ta Hell, Jawsef!" the old man cried from the street behind the Marines. "Thar from tha guvment! Thar her ta help!"

Paskow was just about to tell the old man to keep quiet when the front door unbolted. "Ah cahn't believe it," said the weathered face that peered out. "Afta all this tahm. Yav cum ta put it raht then?"

Paskow gripped his trench gun a little tighter in frustration. "I don't know nuthin' 'bout that. My orders are to move everyone to the train station for evacuation."

"Ever'one? Even tha othas?" the man asked tentatively.

"I don't know anything about any others, but if you don't open the door this second, my men will smash it in." The man looked resigned and cast his eyes to the floor.

"What'll ah need ta bring?"

"Warm clothes is all," Paskow urged. "And make it fast." Once the weathered face disappeared back into the house, Paskow turned to Hennessey. "It'll be a damn shame if we don't get to use the flamethrowers." Hennessey was fairly sure this wasn't meant in jest.

As the weathered man bundled his wife and daughter down to the sidewalk, he turned to Hennessey and hissed, "Be cahfall av tha Sahgents. Ah ain't seen his waaf far bettah ahn far manths. Ah think she's begenen ta turn." Hennessey hadn't the slightest clue what the fella was talking about, but he could still see the genuine fear in the man's watery gray eyes.

"Thanks, sir. We'll watch out for that."

By 2:30 A.M., Third Company had cleared all the blocks north of

Pierce Street and west of Phillips and was ready to move south towards the river and east towards the bay. Now the situation was beginning to rapidly change. Lights were on in many of the windows on Hancock Street. It made it a lot easier for the Marines to pick out which doors to knock on, only now the inhabitants were beginning to resist. Up and down Hancock Street Marines were kicking in doors and smashing open windows with their buttstocks. Despite the quality and state of repair of the houses on this street, the attitude of the locals was one of defiance and loathing. At one house, Hennessey saw a woman standing at her front door brandishing a frying pan and screaming, "Ah won't stand far it!"

"Gitoff mah yaad," was the reply from the first house they came to.

"Open this door or we'll smash it in!" Paskow said loudly, but without a hint of anger.

"You gat no raht ta be tuhnin' us awt t'var hahmes in tha dead of naght!"

"I've all the rights I need right here." Paskow worked the action on his trench gun with a resounding "cha-chak!" The door opened without much more to-do about "rights." The man who greeted them was stooped and bowlegged. His age was hard to determine, being somewhere between thirty and fifty. He had big bulging eyes and a wide, thick-lipped mouth that probably turned down at the corners even when he wasn't being rounded up in the middle of the night. His fat eyes were filled to the brim with fear and loathing for the men outside. Hennessey could not help but think the hate wasn't for the unbridled power of the government. Instead this parody of a man hated the Marines for being straight-backed and clear-skinned. He hated them for being normal. His wife and children showed many of the same signs as their father: over-large eyes; rough, scaly skin; too-wide mouths. Even his fat wife showed signs of encroaching baldness. As she called the children together, her throat sounded badly scarred. Maybe it had something to do with the thick wrinkles on her neck? The family had to be prodded and pushed down to the street where a crowd of equally repugnant locals was being gathered together.

The name on the mailbox of the next house read "Sergeant." A rickety-looking motor coach, dirty gray in color, was parked at the curb. The half-illegible sign in the windshield read "Arkham-Innsmouth-Newb'port." Whoever was inside the house was awake with a light on. He croaked at the four Marines before they even got to the first step. "Ah can't leev tha haus! Mah wife's vera sick. She can't be moved."

"We'll have a doctor look her over," Paskow called back.

"She can't walk. She's an inval-ahd."

"We'll get a couple of medics to carry her on a stretcher."

"No, she's too sick. Go awah, d'ya he-ah? Ah've got a shotgun and

ah'll use it!"

Paskow stepped to the right side of the door and motioned Hennessey and Lyman to take the left and Boyle to join him on the right. "You shoot at us and we'll damn well toss a grenade in there with you. You want to be blown to Kingdom Come?" Paskow took the silence to mean that Mr. Sergeant was thinking about it. "Now open the door and toss the shotgun out!" The four held their breaths as they listened to the bolts turn in the door. The hand that held the shotgun barrel and placed it on the doormat was as dry and scaly-looking as any from the last house full of inbreds; only this one was webbed up to the second knuckle.

As Sergeant released the shotgun, Hennessey, with a nod from Paskow, threw himself against the door. At age twenty, Hennessey was a horse of a man: six-foot-two and two hundred and twenty pounds of combat-honed muscle. Under that kind of force, the door swung open like a spring-loaded trap and struck Sergeant in the chin. He stumbled backwards and landed hard on his rump. Hennessey put a boot in his chest and shoved him down on the floor. "Stay down! Don't get up!"

True to what his hand had suggested, Sergeant presented another fine example of Innsmouth's poor breeding habits. He was thin, with stooped shoulders. Like his neighbors, he had the same flaky, peeling skin, almost like he'd been sunburnt. His eyes, mouth, and lips were disproportionately large, and his sloping forehead and chin seemed to simply fall into his strangely creased neck. "Where's your wife?"

The question filled Sergeant's bulging blue eyes with terror. "Ya cahn't take her. She's too sick ah tell ya."

"We'll be the judge of that," Paskow said as he coolly surveyed the interior of the house. The furnishings seemed oddly antiquated, as if Sergeant lived in a house full of his grandfather's belongings. The room was lit by a single oil lamp. "Boyle, check the rooms on this floor. Lyman, check upstairs." Boyle quickly set off, but Lyman hesitated a moment. Paskow's bark of "Get a move on!" sent him scurrying up the stairs.

"Don't go ahp thar!" Sergeant croaked from the floor. As he began to pull himself off the floor, Hennessey put him back down again with the boot.

"Stay there!"

"Ya don't unnerstand!" Sergeant looked absolutely panicked now. "Ma wife, she needs me!"

"If he tries to get up again, shoot him," Paskow said with finality. On that note Hennessey pulled back the action lever on the Thompson's bolt and aimed the muzzle right at Sergeant's face. His complexion, already quite gray, grew considerably less healthy.

From upstairs Lyman called down, "I think I found it, Corporal. There's

a padlocked door."

Paskow looked down at Sergeant. "Where's the key?" Sergeant just looked away at the floor. "Fine. We'll break it open. Boyle! Get back here and watch the prisoner." As Boyle came back in through the dining room from the kitchen, Paskow turned and trudged up the stairs.

"Just sit still," Hennessey warned. "We'll have your wife down in a jiffy." Despite the reassurance, Sergeant looked like a coiled spring. Hennessey could hear the crunching thuds of a shotgun butt smashing at the padlock upstairs. Once. Twice. The third crack was followed by a sharp crash, and then a scream.

No, not a scream. More like a roar.

What *followed* was a scream, like nothing Hennessey had heard since the time his uncle gelded one of the horses on his Oklahoma ranch: high-pitched and piercing, almost like a whistle. Both Hennessey and Boyle reflexively looked up to the source of the sound. That was when Sergeant made his move. He swung his leg with speed and strength so shocking that Hennessey had no time to comprehend before he landed flat on his back. Sergeant gained his feet in a flash, and just as fast jumped across the room to grab Boyle's trench gun and try to wrench it away. Boyle was a strong man, strong as an ox, and he swung Sergeant around and sent the two of them crashing into the dining room table.

Hennessey rolled to his feet just in time to jump clear of two figures tumbling down the stairs together. One was a Marine; the other, something out of a sideshow. Sparse strands of hair were plastered to a head the size and shape of a pumpkin. A sheen of moisture extended from its scalp down its back. The thing had rubbery, bloated skin, mottled gray in color, gone green in patches, and peeling like someone had been halfway through skinning it. Its feet were huge with widely splayed toes that showed more of the curious webbing between them. The same was true of the hands, except these were tipped by hideously curved nails over two inches long. The Marine it had locked itself around screamed hysterically and beat at its back and sides with his fists. Hennessey couldn't open up with the Thompson for fear of shooting the man to pieces. Instead, he swung the machine gun's buttstock down onto the thing's skull. The noise was like Joe Jackson hitting a home run, but it didn't let go. He brought the weapon down again and again. Still nothing. Then the Marine's screaming cut off with a wet tearing sound.

"Get th'hell outta the way." Paskow's voice was strangely calm. He stood at the top of the landing, taking careful aim with his trench gun, blood running from a pair of long scratch marks that began just under his left eye and streaked down to his jaw line. Hennessey jumped back and Paskow blew off the back of the thing's upturned rump. The thing sat bolt

upright, its huge, lidless eyes and its mouth locked open in an almost comical look of surprise. Rows of pointed teeth hung clotted with bits of Lyman's throat. Hennessey could plainly see the blood-red gills on the sides of its greasy neck open and close spasmodically. Then most of the head above the eyes exploded in a fine mist as Paskow put it down.

Over in the corner of the dining room, Boyle still grappled with Sergeant for the trench gun. Paskow calmly walked down the stairs, stepped over the two corpses, and bellowed, "Boyle! Hit the deck!" Boyle got the message and let go of the shotgun, dropping to the floor. Sergeant looked up just in time to see the muzzle flash before the contents of his chest splashed the dining room's brown, peeling wallpaper.

Hennessey looked away and boggled at the thing sprawled atop Lyman. Now that he could see the front of it, he noticed details of even more terrible proportion. It wasn't that it was inhuman. No, the problem was that it was so *very* human. Pendulous breasts would seem to signify a mammal, but the other features suggested a mix of fish and frog, as did the rotting, nearly choking stench.

Suddenly Hennessey remembered to see if Lyman were still alive. Most of the kid's throat had been torn out. His esophagus was laid wide open and his gleaming vertebrae were clearly visible. No blood pumped from the severed veins.

Someone appeared at the door.

"What the hell's—" Sergeant Miles' demand was cut short when he saw the bloated woman-thing. "Jesus! I . . . I'd better go get the lieutenant."

After pulling up a chair at the overturned dinner table, Paskow plopped himself down. "Yeah. I'm sure Cobb'll know just what to do," he muttered sardonically.

"Christ Almighty," Boyle whispered after retrieving his shotgun. "What is that thing?"

"That guy on the other street knew," Hennessey muttered. "He said to watch out for Mrs. Sergeant. He said she was beginning to change."

"Change into what?" Boyle sounded shaky.

"Nothing good," Paskow added as he lit a cigarette with his lighter.

Just then, Lieutenant Cobb strode in and boggled at the sight of the thing that had torn the throat out of one of his Marines. It took him a second to compose himself enough to ask Paskow what had happened.

Without bothering to put out his smoke, Paskow stood and faced Lieutenant Cobb. "This fella on the floor barred our entry, so we had t'force our way in. Then this thing over here, which the first fella had padlocked in a room upstairs, busted out. It opened up my face and tore out Private Lyman's throat with its teeth. I had to kill it and the other fella since he was trying to take Private Boyle's weapon away from him."

"It think it's his wife," Hennessey added weakly.

"What?" snapped Lieutenant Cobb.

With all the eyes in the room on him, Hennessey felt himself shrink. "One of the other folks on the last street said something about Mrs. Sergeant changing and that we ought to watch out for her."

"And you think this, this . . . aberration is his wife?" Lieutenant Cobb shot back.

"He did say his wife was in the house, sir," Paskow said, tapping his ash. "And there's nobody else here but him and her . . . or it, if you prefer."

"She must have slipped out of the house while you were fighting with this . . . thing."

"I don't think this is the only one of these things we're going to find, sir," Paskow continued painfully. "I think we're going to find one of these in every attic."

"Don't be ridiculous," Cobb said, without much conviction. The Lieutenant's rejoinder was cut off by the sound of gunfire out in the street. Facing something as mundane as bullets was infinitely preferable to puzzling over the dead heap on the floor. "C'mon, men, let's go!" Lieutenant Cobb turned and bolted out the door. They followed him into the yard and were greeted by the sight of three Marines spraying the front of a brick house with their Thompsons. Sergeant Fields was stumbling around holding a glove to a bullet-hole in his upper left arm. The gunfire quickly subsided and the three Marines charged up the front steps and kicked in what was left of the bullet-ridden door.

"Got 'er," one called down after a quick look inside.

"Sergeant! What's the situation?"

"The woman shot me, sir!" the Sergeant roared. "She pulled out an honest t'god revolver and started shootin'!"

"Did you provoke her?"

Sergeant Fields looked sincerely insulted. "No sir. We told her we were comin' in and she started shootin' is all."

Just then they heard a hoarse caterwaul from the basement window to the left of the front steps. As the Marines peered into the darkness, they were startled by the sound of breaking glass. A long, rubbery-looking arm groped through the window's clinging shards and rattled the bars beyond. "Mah-ree!" it croaked. "Mah-ree! Whar's mah waaf? What ave yoo dun t' mah waaf?"

Again, those nearest the window hit a choking, fishy odor. Lieutenant Cobb's face wrinkled in an expression of confusion and disgust. He turned to Sergeant Miles and gagged out the order, "Get the Captain."

Captain Kardashian didn't exactly look like the guy on the recruiting poster. He was short but straight-backed, with olive skin and a bad com-

plexion. His black eyes and mustache could have been found on a Hollywood villain. Rumor was, he'd come up from the ranks with a battlefield commission during the Great War. He was accompanied by one of the T-men bundled in a dark topcoat and fedora.

As soon as he approached, Cobb said, "There's one in that basement, sir. My men killed another one across the street in that house there." "Let's have a look at this one here, Lieutenant."

The creature bellowed and cried for its wife, Mary, and shook the bars with its webbed hands. After a few moments of staring noncommittally, Kardashian announced, "I'll see the dead one now."

Hennessey and some other Marines had begun to follow the entourage across the street when Sergeant Miles turned and roared, "What the hell d'ya think yer doin'! Don't stand around like a bunch'a ducks in a shootin' gallery! Spread out and form a perimeter to secure this block!" The Marines scrambled into position instantly.

Although they were supposed to be watching the streets and windows, many of the Marines were asking each other what was going on and trying to get Boyle, Hennessey, or Paskow to tell them what they'd seen in the Sergeant house and what had happened to Lyman. Paskow kept his views to himself, but Boyle and Hennessey ended up repeating the story about a dozen times.

Then, from the east, towards the docks, the sounds of a full-scale battle shattered the calm. The avenue echoed with the clattering of Thompsons and the booming of shotguns. All the Marines looked east like dogs catching a scent. It wasn't like the earlier gunfire. Once or twice before they'd heard the odd angry shot, but this was something else. Those who'd seen the fields of Flanders in the Great War had heard the sound before: a "Big Push," hundreds of men charging across No Man's Land into the blazing muzzles of enemy machine guns and barbed wire. But it wasn't quite the same. Instead of the roaring hurrah of the advancing troops, there was another sound. Something like a swamp filled with frogs, only deeper and fuller. Then they saw the flare pop high to the east. Under its parachute, the white magnesium mass threw stark, crazily jumping shadows down alleys and through hollow windows. Hennessey stood transfixed, watching it drift behind the building and into the midst of the still-raging battle.

"Marines! Listen up!" It was Captain Kardashian standing atop the hood of the dilapidated motor coach in front of the Sergeant house. "These are your new orders concerning evacuation. Any local who looks abnormal is to be treated as a hostile. Take no chances. If they resist for even a second, shoot 'em. If you come across any locked or padlocked doors, don't open 'em. We'll just keep the things in there bottled up until we're ready for 'em. Mark every house where you find one of those things with

an 'X.' Carve it in the front door and move on to the next house. Do you understand?"

The cry of "yessir" went up all down the line. Just then a young Marine came charging up Martin Street and onto Phillips at a dead run.

"Captain! Captain Kardashian!"

"What is it, soldier?"

"Captain Frost sent me, sir," he gasped. "First Company is under attack on the docks. We need reinforcements immediately!" A spatter of blood marked his white winter camouflage.

Kardashian spun around on Lieutenant Cobb. "That'll be you, Bill. Get your platoon down there right now! Double-time!"

"Yessir! Third Platoon to me!" Cobb shouted. Hennessey and the rest of the men quickly converged and set off at a jog down Martin Street to the sea. As they ran, the pounding of thirty pairs of boots thumped in counterpoint to the rattling bullets in the Thompsons' drum-magazines. Even above that din, Hennessey could hear the battle raging in front of them. Another parachute flare arched skyward. Even eight hundred yards away, down the sloping hill to the harbor, the Marines could see flashes of gunfire.

As they crossed Lafayette Street, the brooding shape of the Marsh Mansion loomed above them to their left. The grounds stretched all the way along Martin between Lafayette and Washington, while the mansion itself, with its wide-terraced parterres, towered three stories. Its top was crowned by an iron-railed widow's walk. Big black Packard sedans and military trucks filled the driveway and yard. Flanking the front gate and door, pairs of dark-coated T-men in fedoras cradled their Thompsons. Marines were lifting some kind of stone statue into the back of one of the trucks while a nervous T-man kept saying, "Easy! Go easy with that!" More Marines prodded a handcuffed figure down the front walk with their bayonets. Whatever it was, it wore a bloodied nightshirt and stumbled along with a curious hopping limp. Four Marines had been laid out on the front lawn, side by side, their helmets placed over their faces, their white camouflage torn and crusted with blood.

The docks were five more blocks ahead, nearly four football fields away, down a corridor of crumbling warehouses and office buildings, obviously long-abandoned. Hennessey's lungs burned as he ran. He could now hear screams, shouted orders, and cries of agony. And all the while, that chorus of croaking and braying. Suddenly out of the blackness a baby-faced Marine emerged running straight for them. His face was as white as his camouflage. He didn't slow down for a second, just swerved to the right and flew right past Hennessey's platoon, tears of mindless panic streaming down his face.

On Water Street, right in front of the wharf, Thompsons and Brown-ing machine guns fired such long bursts they should have melted the barrels into slag. Marines ran this way and that. It appeared at first as if every Marine in First Company was trying to spend every last round as quickly as possible by firing into the blackness under the docks. A wild-eyed corporal ran past Lieutenant Cobb, a can of belted machine-gun ammo in each hand, screaming, "They're under the docks! Get 'em! Get 'em!"

The air burned with cordite. Every breath scalded the lungs. But even above the scent of war, a more ponderous stench asserted itself, the old rotting smell of dead fish, now grown monumental. It displaced the air and seemed to steal the last usable oxygen. Hennessey almost believed that his stomach would surrender its contents to the stink, when he noticed the croaking, bellowing chorus rising from the wharves of Innsmouth blending with the splashing of hundreds of flailing limbs. The men of Third Company, Third Platoon stumbled forward to the edge of the sea wall, peering down among the jumble of ships' masts and pilings. Hennessey followed, straining into the dark tangle. And at that moment, everyone wished he was back in the jungle with Sandino.

Below the docks, outlined by the strobing muzzle flashes of nearly a hundred weapons, clinging to wharf pilings, hanging from the masts and rigging, and crouched on the listing decks of Innsmouth's worm-eaten fishing fleet, squirmed an army out of drowned nightmares. Two arms, two legs, and a rugose, lolling head—each stood like a man with a cork-screwed spine. But the similarity to terrestrial life ended at that, for these were creatures of the deep. The white gleam of the flare reflected in hundreds of pairs of fat, oily eyes mounted on the sides of scaly heads, the eyes of creatures crafted by evolution to strain every last particle of light from their environment. Wet, lazy gills opened and closed on the sides of their stout necks. Their taloned, webbed hands and feet, like baseball gloves, were splayed wide. Their bottom jaws dropped open like the cavernous mouths of sea bass and again those barking croaks issued forth. "IÄ! IÄ!" came the war cry from the deep. "IÄ!"

Nobody had to give the order to open fire. It erupted in a spasmodic fusillade that sent dozens more of the barking horde tumbling into the black waters. Hennessey brought his Thompson to his shoulder and began firing bursts into the thickest knot of them, chopping through rubbery hide, sending gouts of scarlet and other colors over the rotten timbers. They fell, only to be immediately replaced by a dozen more. The Marines, Hennessey included, were all screaming now, nearly drowning out the croaking of the fish-men. But they could not slow the charge. Pump-action shotguns worked with blinding speed, Thompsons raked over the braying throng, but it was not enough. Within seconds the things gained the sea

wall and began to climb.

As the clouds of burnt powder partially obscured the leaping, flopping carnage, Hennessey saw some of the creatures haul themselves atop the docks and begin running toward the wall. He sighted the Thompson and fired a burst. Two of the things dropped like stringless marionettes, but eight more leapt forward. To his right, Charlie Paskow was calmly racking round after round through his trench gun, ejecting spent casings that sizzled in the snow. Hennessey could see he'd never get a bead before the things crashed into the Marines. "They're on top of the docks!" he screamed. Paskow jerked his head up and put his next 12-gauge round into the closest thing's chest, blowing it off its feet and into the bay. PFC Grodin, a tough kid from Pittsburgh, snapped off a load of buckshot that caught the next beast in the leg, nearly severing it at the knee. And then they were among the Marines, webbed, talon-tipped fingers raking into winter coats.

The mayhem was total. Private Franklin from Second Squad went down under two of them, his Thompson crushed to his chest. Razor-sharp talons sliced divots out of his jawbone and tore open his equipment harness. One clawed at his face and neck as he struggled to kick away and bring his weapon to bear. The other thing threw itself onto his legs and sank its fangs into his groin. Franklin's keening scream was broken as the first tore out his throat. A private by the name of McVeigh, his bayonet driven up to its hilt in the belly of an onrushing fish-man, danced in circles as the beast tried to claw its way up the Springfield rifle to get him. After desperately chambering a fresh round, McVeigh blew it off the end with a resoundingly wet report. Grodin put a load of buckshot into the head of the beast shredding Franklin's throat and, with a scream, drove his bayonet through the neck of the other locked to Franklin's crotch. He twisted the trench gun, wrenching its jaws open as it gargled madly, spraying angry red blood from its twitching gill slits. "Die! Fucking die!" He stepped over the thing, straddling its back, jerked out the weapon and thrust it into the thing's spine, quelling the spastic twitch of its limbs. Meanwhile, Paskow held his trench gun to the side in his left hand and serenely dropped one charging nightmare after another with careful slugs from his .45.

Hennessey brought his Thompson to bear in time to catch the second wave, which was running—no, hopping—across the docks. He held the trigger and hosed them down with a twenty-round burst, barrel low, the barrage knocking seven off the dock as they croaked in shock and anger. Hennessey's mind was running on little more than adrenaline and boot-camp training. The fifty-round drum was empty and there was no time to change magazines. He dove to his left, rolled the slippery monstrosity off the corpse of Private Franklin, scooped up the fallen Marine's Thompson, and spun on the icy cobblestones to loose another stream of fire.

Privates Bromley and Helms thrust their bayonets at the creatures scrabbling up the stone sea wall, bursting the soft, fat eyes like egg yolks. One screamed an almost human wail, clutched its oozing eye with both claws and pitched backwards onto its fellows. A creature straddling Private Dean's back sunk its teeth into his shoulder, and tore loose a bloody chunk of meat and wool just a second before Paskow blew off the top of its skull with the .45. Meanwhile, McVeigh and Boyle were finishing off two wounded creatures. The flopping abominations croaked and brayed pathetically, gagging on their blood as the Marines thrust and twisted their bayonets. Boyle jerked his bayonet out of the creature at his feet just in time to turn, reverse grip, and swing the butt like a golf club into the face of one struggling to hoist itself over the sea wall. Grodin loosed another's grip on the wall by pulping its head with a load of buckshot.

Hennessey had exhausted a second drum when the things gave up rushing along the tops of the tattered docks. But they were still scrambling up the wall. Most of the trench guns had quickly emptied their five rounds and were slow to reload. With the onslaught coming so fast, there was little time to properly shove the shells into the tube. The battle at the sea wall was rapidly coming down to butt stocks and bayonets against raking claws and dripping fangs.

A rushing sound and rising light caught Hennessey's attention as a ball of flame rose up from one of the fishing boats, splashing gasoline over the rotten timbers. At the northernmost end of the docks, a Marine from First Company was pouring a can of gasoline over the sea wall onto the scaly, flopping horde while another lit them with a flare pistol. Burning, keening beasts tossed themselves back into the bay, extinguishing the flames, and then scrambled right back over the mounting dead at the wall's base. Another Marine tossed a gas can onto the deck of a fishing boat that was followed by a shot from Lieutenant Cobb's flare pistol, sending it up with a cheerful *whump*.

Hoskins, a private from Second Squad, held tight to his trench gun as one of the creatures below grabbed the barrel. He went over the side like a Vaudeville comedian getting the hook, shrieking loudly. But not for long. Within seconds something at the foot of the sea wall tossed his head back up onto Water Street, still seated in its helmet and trailing a few links of spine. Hoskins looked more surprised than upset. The demonstration had its effect. All along the wall the Marines backed away, just long enough for the things to haul themselves up. It was one thing to kill the monsters from atop the wall while they tried to climb, but another to face them on equal ground. All along the edge, the sea wall was topped by another wall, this one made of slippery green flesh and glittering talons, rearing up as if in triumph. Or, at least, until the Browning opened up.

The first tracer Hennessey saw looked like it passed about a half-foot in front of his nose. He slipped and scrambled on the icy cobbles, trying to backpedal in time to avoid getting mowed down. To Hennessey's right, in front of the Marsh fish-packing plant, First Company's air-cooled Browning gobbled belt after belt of ammunition, turning Water Street into a shooting gallery. The things hopped forward into the crossfire like a wave, dozens and dozens of them. Bullets and tracers ripped down Water Street, a wall of invisible razors shot through with lightning. The charging beasts simply came apart. Everywhere, monsters burst from a thousand miraculous stigmata. Most squawked and croaked as they crashed to the ground. But even stitched with dozens of bullet wounds, a few crawled forward, sliding over the bodies of their brethren, dragging themselves on hemorrhaging stumps and trailing ropy intestines. Marines desperately reloaded their weapons and blasted any lucky enough to cross the barrier of flying lead and magnesium.

"Grenade!" bellowed Sergeant Miles, holding one of the metal pineapples over his head. "Grenade!" With that, he lobbed it over the sea wall. The grenade exploded with a dull, wet thump, punctuated by inhuman shrieks of agony. Mud and other less wholesome semi-solids flew into the night air. Marines began tearing grenades from their harnesses, ripping the pins out, and hurling them after the first. Hennessey ripped a grenade off his harness and tossed it clear into Innsmouth Bay. Then the air was torn apart by a staccato barrage of ear-splitting explosions. It looked to Hennessey as if a dozen photographers beyond the wall were snapping flashbulbs at some Broadway celebrity. The Marines kept throwing their grenades over the side, some laughing hysterically. Within thirty seconds, the only thing answering the explosions was the sound of debris pattering to the earth or splashing into the harbor.

Nothing climbed up the sea wall now. No tracers screamed down Water Street. There was no movement except the slow, painful wriggling of the dying. Slowly the Marines began picking their way through the tangle of carnage. Hennessey felt drunk, lightheaded. As he inched through the dead, he jumped at the crack of gunfire as here and there a Marine delivered a perfunctory *coup de grace*.

In the light from the fires, Hennessey could now see that the area beneath the dock was awash with broken bodies. Fins, scales, and gills glistered in the orange flames. They'd killed far more of the creatures than Hennessey had suspected. The scene was almost like that of a beach after a red-tide fish-kill. And at the base of the sea wall, in a bloody pyramid, the pile of gutted and boned fish-men had brought the shoal at least six feet higher. Hennessey had never seen such a slaughter, not even in picture books about the Great War.

A few of the fishing boats moored beneath the drunkenly listing docks still had fuel in their tanks. As they cooked off one by one, they sent fireballs roaring skyward. It wouldn't take too long for the docks to turn into a twisted maze of blazing timbers and planks. Hennessey strained for any movement in the thick gray haze. There was nothing. The fish-men had had enough. For the moment.

"Sound off by squads, you fucking apes!" bellowed Sergeant Miles. "First Squad!" Only five out of eight men barked out their names. As the rest of the platoon sounded off, Hennessey took a quick mental inventory of the remaining men in his squad. Lyman . . . he was still lying at the foot of the stairs at the Sergeants' house. Paskow was dropping the magazine from his .45 and slapping another in place. He didn't even look out of breath. Boyle's pants were torn open at the left knee and his boot was wet with his blood. McVeigh and Grodin were panting like dogs but unmarked. The other two, Baldwin and Rhodes, had ended up on the north end of the defense line and had come through unscathed.

The rest of Third Platoon was mauled. Four Marines were dead, including Franklin with his throat torn out and balls bitten off. Eleven men were wounded, two so badly they'd soon be joining the dead. Out of the thirty-two men who comprised Third Platoon, only twenty-one were still able to fire a weapon. By some miracle, seven of them were in Hennessey's squad. There was a platoon from Second Company stumbling about with just seventeen men still standing, and the two platoons from First Company who'd begun the defense of the sea wall couldn't even form a full platoon between them. The wounded screamed and moaned; the others prayed and even wept. The only sounds of sanity came from Sergeant Miles bellowing orders to the survivors, policing up weapons and the dead.

At that moment, Lieutenant Cobb was standing next to First Company's Captain Frost. The Captain was screaming and gesturing wildly with his .45. "They came out of the sea, goddammit! Right out of the sea! They were all over us before we knew what was happening. It's a goddamn miracle it was only a dozen or so to start with. If they'd hit us with that second wave first . . ." Frost's quavering voice trailed off and then rose hysterically again. "We gotta get the Navy! We gotta get depth charges!"

"Sir! Sir!" Cobb hissed, shaking the man. "Calm down, sir. I need to know what you want us to do?"

"Do?" Frost shrieked. "What can we do? We've got to get out of here is what!"

"Dammit, sir, if we pull out, those things will overrun the town." Cobb held the Captain's shoulders in a vise-grip. "The battalion will be overrun. We're all spread out policing up the locals. If we're overrun, it'll

unravel. It'll be a slaughter!"

"Fuck them!" Frost giggled hysterically. "We've gotta get out of here!"

Suddenly, the loudest noise on the docks was the sound of Lieutenant Cobb slapping Captain Frost's face. Frost trembled with anger, his red-rimmed eyes jumping in their sockets. "I'll see you broken for that."

Cobb drew in a measured breath and set his jaw. "Yes, sir. And if you run, or do anything to incite others to run, they'll be trying me for murder as well." Then he turned to Sergeant Miles. "Put the Captain someplace where he'll be out of the way, Sergeant."

For the next ten minutes, Lieutenant Cobb turned into Blackjack Pershing, barking commands in rapid succession, imposing order through his own force of personality. He sent the severely wounded off in a truck to the Battalion HQ with a situation report and request for reinforcements. He got the rest of the men to police up the extra ammo off the dead, tip the slain creatures back into the bay, and set the Browning machine gun up in the second-floor window of an abandoned warehouse at the end of Pierce Street.

On the other side of the river, the south side, Hennessey could see a couple of Brownings raking back and forth across the docks and shore. Then a tongue of liquid fire leapt out and showered the docks with jellied gasoline. As soon as Hennessey saw that, he knew that the fish-men would quickly figure to give the north docks another try.

"There they are!" A stout Montana Sergeant named Dollins stabbed a trembling finger towards the bay. Bobbing on the surface about a hundred yards out, scores of squat heads listed atop powerful shoulders. Their fat eyes reflected the orange light from the fires.

"Let 'em have it!" roared Cobb. With that, the Brownings cut loose. The fusillade peppered the water, tore open misshapen skulls and sent the rest of the creatures diving under the waves. "Cease fire!" Cobb called up to the machine-gun nest. "Hold your fire!"

Hennessey waited silently. None of the Marines spoke. No one breathed. The sounds of the little battles behind them in Innsmouth faded from their perception as they focused on the black waters of the bay. Every fiber of their beings reached out to pick up a sound, a movement, anything that would tell them where the attack would come. But nothing came, nothing moved but the waves lapping against the shore and the horrible bodies stacked along its edge. Hennessey waited in the snow with the rest of the Marines and listened to the waves breaking.

Charlie Paskow broke the silence. "Tide's comin' in," he whispered. Hennessey, lost in concentration, didn't bother to answer him. "Tide's not due till dawn," he continued gravely. Hennessey was about to shush him when he caught Paskow's eye. He was looking at the waves cresting against

the shore. They were strong and insistent. And they didn't wash back out. They just kept pushing one atop the other. The tide was coming in all right. In one single surge of water. Then Hennessey saw it. One of the fishing boats, nearly burned down to the waterline, rose as if a whale had just passed beneath. Before he could even register what he'd seen, Hennessey saw one of the dock's still-standing pilings plow under, like a road sign struck by an out-of-control truck.

"Under the water!" Lieutenant Cobb bellowed. "They're under the water!" Marines surged forward to the edge of the sea wall to fire down into the submerged beasts. But it wasn't a horde of sea devils.

It was just one.

Hennessey would later describe it to his Naval Intelligence de-briefers as being like an avalanche. An avalanche of tar that jumped up out of the sea.

A fair description. Except it was far more than that. An avalanche may be animate, but it is lifeless. The thing that erupted from the sea was anything but lifeless. It veritably boiled with life, like a steaming, maggot-filled turd. There were the eyes, and the mouths, the teeth, the tongues, the tentacles, the pincers, the claws, the talons. It was the whole Bronx Zoo boiled down to a thick, viscous paste and then filled with lightning. Even the parts that looked like little more than fibrous snot moved and coiled with a terrible strength. Within a second, it rolled straight up the sea wall. Private Rhodes was standing right on the edge when it reared up like a wave cresting in reverse and then slapped its weight on him. His helmet slammed down onto his bootlaces and most everything in between shot liquidly out the sides.

Mere feet away, Sergeant Dollins screamed, along with almost everyone else who could find their voice, and opened up with his Thompson. A slimy rope jerked him into a gaping mouth and for a second the Marines nearby could see his muzzle flash through the semi-transparent slime. Then the bulk coiled up and Sergeant Dollins was squeezed back out an aperture roughly the size of an egg, like the suppurating contents of a lanced boil. About half the guys in Dollins' squad were now either running blindly or trying to get their Sergeant out of their eyes.

All the while, every Marine blasted away with everything he had. Bullets splashed into it and vanished with no more effect than firing into a lake. Hennessey was trying to seat a second drum magazine when he was jerked backwards off his feet. "Waddaminit! Waddaminit!" he screamed. Charlie Paskow didn't wait a minute. Swinging Hennessey around by his equipment harness, Paskow dragged him stumbling down Water Street towards the boarded-up customs house at the corner of Elliot. Hennessey couldn't believe what the hell he was doing. "Why am I running?" he won-

dered as he fled along the loading docks.

Behind Paskow and Hennessey the other Marines were scattering in every direction. Most weren't fast enough. As the thing sucked Sergeant Miles into its obscene bulk, he pulled the pins on the two grenades on his belt. He died quicker than Lieutenant Cobb, who was being used by a tentacle to smash a military truck's cab into junk.

Hennessey lost track of where he was for a second. For some reason, he thought he saw McVeigh put his .45 under his chin as he was being sucked into the monster. Then Paskow shoved him through the front window of the customs house. Inside was blackness, the floor a maze of broken furniture and coated with shards of glass. Paskow kept pushing Hennessey forward until they emerged out the back, onto the corner of Church Street. Hennessey looked over his shoulder towards the docks. Paskow was right behind him, his eyes burning like magnesium. "Don't look! Keep running!"

They were passing something like a churchyard when a shot from one of the second- or third-story windows kicked a piece of the cobblestones loose just a foot or two to their left. With no time to slow down, no time to determine where the shot came from, they ran straight for one of the abandoned office buildings on their left. Not even slowing to try the door-knob, Hennessey threw his shoulder into the darkly stained wood, which burst apart like a rotten log, spilling him inside onto the floor. He got up, took a step, and fell screaming into open air. He pictured twisted machinery rising out of the blackness, a dozen lethal points.

Hennessey was wrong, of course. Nothing waited but a stone floor. He landed extremely well, keeping his feet together and rolling forward. Even so, he could feel something stab his left ankle and he cried out as he rolled on his side.

From above Paskow yelled down, "Bob! Bob!"

"I'm okay, I think," Hennessey added weakly, suddenly realizing that he couldn't see his Thompson anywhere.

"Stay put. I'll find the stairs." Hennessey could hear Paskow picking his way over the creaking timbers above. Alone in the dark, he began groping for the submachine gun. His gloved hands ranged back and forth over the cold stone for what seemed like forever. Then he lit on the still-warm barrel and pulled it to him, hugging it like a lost child. For a moment, Hennessey almost sobbed his relief. Then he heard the movement.

Something was with him in the dark.

He backed up until he hit the wall, bringing the Thompson up to his hip, but there was nothing to see. Nothing but blackness. Even so, he caught that fishy smell again, pricking at his nose. "Charlie! Don't come down here!"

"What?"

"There's some of those things down here! Stay upstairs!" Hennessey tested the weight of the weapon and figured he had better than forty rounds left in the drum. Plenty for what he was going to try. Holding tight on the foregrip to keep the barrel low, Hennessey squeezed the trigger and swung the barrel in a long arc from left to right. Suddenly the cluttered basement was illuminated by the strobing muzzle-flash. Then the things started jumping and moving, scrambling from between the rotten crates and collapsed shelves. Hennessey swung the Thompson and hosed them down. First one, then another, then two more went down howling. Then nothing. Silence.

"Bob? Bob are you okay?"

Hennessey felt dizzy with relief. "Sure. I'm fine. C'mon down." To his right Hennessey could hear the stairs creaking under Paskow's weight. After peeling off the exhausted drum, Hennessey replaced it with a thirty-round stick and began to pick his way through the rubble to the stairs. A moment later the room was bathed in white light by another parachute flare, gleaming through the Swiss cheese holes of the roof. Gaping craters in the floors above were plainly visible for the second it passed overhead. And so were the four bodies of the family Hennessey had slaughtered.

The mother and father had the signs. The bulging eyes, the fish-like mouths, the skin that seemed too dry. But the two kids—the girl maybe six, the boy just a toddler—they looked just fine. It was hard to tell, of course. Firing from the hip, Hennessey had caught each in the head with a whopping .45 round. "Ah Jesus!"

Paskow looked down at the scene just before the flare drifted away and took their light with it. "C'mon, we gotta go."

"Jesus, Charlie, I fuckin' killed 'em."

"Nice shootin'." Paskow grabbed Hennessey's equipment harness and pulled him up the stairs. "Now move it!"

"But—"

"They ain't people," Paskow hissed. "They're deviates. Sub-human. Understand this, Bob: we ain't Marines tonight. We're exterminators. This town, and everyone in it . . . We're gonna hafta burn it all." Paskow looked positively gleeful at the prospect. "But first we gotta get out of here." With that, Paskow pulled Hennessey up the steps and out a door onto Fall Street. To their left was the Manuxet River, and the Federal Street Bridge back into the south side of town.

All around them the operation was coming apart. Men ran every direction, screaming, firing their weapons at who knows what. At the intersection of Fall and Dock Streets, Paskow and Hennessey were nearly run down by a careening truck full of Marines. It took the turn onto the

Federal Street Bridge rather poorly and slammed into the railing at about forty miles an hour. The driver shot out through the front window like a human cannonball, arching through the air, his arms pinwheeling until he slammed into the frozen Manuxet river with a crack that was part ice, part bone. The Marines on the truck fell over themselves pouring out the back.

Then there was a crash like thunder behind them. Six feet tall and spread across Dock Street like an enormous black mound of dough, the horror from Water Street rolled into the fish-packing plant five blocks away and splintered the loading docks like dry kindling. It was a freight train. An avalanche. A tidal wave. Hennessey was distantly aware he'd shat himself. Tears ran down his face.

"Don't look! Run!" Paskow screamed. On the bridge, Paskow stopped. "Waddaminit!" His iron grip brought Hennessey to a sliding halt. Then Hennessey saw it too. Downstream, past the ruins of the Fish Street Bridge was a second bridge, one linking both sides of the wharf across the Manuxet. The mountain of slime wasn't crossing that bridge; in fact it was moving away. Someone down there had a pair of flamethrowers going. The long geysers of fire shot out and bathed the creature, driving it back against the fish-packing plant, collapsing the outer wall like something built out of a child's blocks. The plant disintegrated as the thing rolled through its interior, smashing walls and support beams. It was coming their way now. Right towards their bridge.

"Fire," Paskow hissed. "It don't like fire! We gotta seal off this bridge with flamethrowers!" Whirling around, Paskow stopped and stared at two Marines stumbling out of the crashed truck. They were shrugging their flamethrowers off their backs and turning to run.

"You!" shouted Paskow. He let go of Hennessey's equipment harness, sending him sprawling into the snow. "Get over here with those torches!"

"Fuck you!" screamed the ashen-faced kid, his acne scarlet against his snow-white skin. Paskow shot the kid right in the face. Paskow turned the .45 on the second Marine and marched over to him.

"Are your tanks full?"

He nodded furiously. Paskow shot him through the heart for good measure. Jamming the .45 in his belt, Paskow jerked Hennessey to his feet and hurled him towards the first flamethrower. "Strap that torch on!" Hennessey was weeping with exhaustion, but did as he was told. Meanwhile dozens of Marines raced past them, heading for the Arkham road and out of town. Out of Massachusetts if they could manage it. Fuck Innsmouth. Fuck Massachusetts. Fuck New England. No fucking way were they slowing down before they hit Tierra del Fuego.

Paskow snapped the chest buckle from the second tank in place and ran to the truck. He flipped up the canvas flap and began rummaging in the back. Hennessey was just shrugging the tanks full of liquid fire onto his shoulders when Paskow said, "Bob! Heads up!" Hennessey turned in time to catch a pineapple-sized white phosphorus grenade. Paskow tossed him two more. Then, shouldering a satchel charge, he craned his neck and looked back behind them; his pupils widened. "Move your ass, Bob!" Hennessey saw the rolling obscenity coming down Dock Street right towards them. It wasn't alone. Right behind it, hopping and leaping around the fat, greasy bag of slime were more of the sea devils, barking and croaking. One carried a human arm as a club. And alongside them were men, men like Mr. Sergeant, carrying shotguns and rifles and cleavers and scooping up the weapons of the fallen Marines.

Paskow pulled the fuse pin from a second satchel charge and tossed it into the back of the truck. It landed right between the three cases of white phosphorus grenades and the six cases filled with bricks of TNT. "Runrunrunrun!" Paskow and Hennessey tore across the bridge with fifty pounds of jellied fuel sloshing on their backs. *Just one hot fragment! Just one!* was the only coherent thought in Hennessey's head. As they reached the south end of the bridge, they peeled off to the right around the grimy Waite and Sons' Restaurant, with its swinging placard showing a fish-head impaled on an enormous barbed hook. A moment later, Hennessey saw the searing flash of light just as an earth-shaking concussion sent the placard airborne, flying over New Town Square.

The blast wave surged outward like an invisible wall of cement traveling at the speed of sound, trailing a cloud of debris that included head-sized cobblestones. Lying flat on their faces, their hands over their ears, Hennessey and Paskow would have been torn to rags if not for the thick walls of the Waite and Sons' restaurant. As it was, over a hundred yards away, they still felt the concussion suck the air out of their mouths and noses. When the wind subsided, Hennessey heard the townsfolk screaming, heard the fish-men braying and then a horrible, unearthly keening, louder than the rest. They dragged themselves off the cobbles and emerged in Federal Street to find that most of the abandoned mill, which had been just yards from the truck, had disintegrated and its water wheel blown out of the ice. The Esoteric Order of Dagon was gone. The side of the building facing the explosion had smashed through the opposite wall, squeezing the shattered interior onto Federal Street. Flaming shards of its timbers lay all about amid far more magnificent fires: the three cases of white phosphorus grenades, with the assistance of the TNT and satchel charges, had spread their contents over most of the area in front of the north end of the Federal Street Bridge. Those made of bone and meat who hadn't been

disintegrated by the concussion had been showered with a downpour of burning metal; everywhere figures flopped amid the rubble, skin and clothing ignited by white-hot fragments like a thousand little suns.

The source of the keening revealed itself then, as the polymorphous horror emerged from the wreck of a nearby warehouse, a hundred mouths boiling out of its flesh amid blazing chunks of phosphorus. It rolled towards the river, crushing the faint life out of a dozen or so maimed and burning townsfolk. The faster it sped, the more the air whipped its coat of stars to new brilliance. The thing somehow knew it had to get back to the sea; it crashed into the ice and poured like lightning through the hole.

Unfortunately, phosphorus burns just as well with the oxygen in water as it does with the oxygen in air. The water under the ice began to boil.

Hennessey began laughing like a fool. It was so fucking beautiful. The whole north end of the bridge was an inferno. All along Dock Street blazing scarecrows that used to be men, and less wholesome things, ran back and forth trying to extinguish themselves. Some rolled down the embankment to dive into the river, its uniform sheet of ice now a broken tangle of bergs. "Burn! Burn, you sonzabitches! Burn!" Hennessey sang as he danced in a circle waving his arms, the nozzle of his flamethrower clattering against the cobblestones at his feet.

But then the groan of the rending ice brought him back.

"Light your torch!" shouted Paskow. Charlie's eyes were still black and hot, and Hennessey dared not disobey. Cranking the ignition nozzle to full, he lit the blow-torch-like stream of gas off a burning fragment of the mill's water wheel. Over the thick granite railing on the bayward side of the bridge, about fifty yards from where they were, Hennessey could see a two-foot-thick sheet of ice being levered out of the river by a muscular pseudopod. The thing began flowing out onto the ice like a rope uncoiling in reverse. Glittering black eyes winked open across its steaming surface. Alone but for Charlie, not a single Marine in sight, Hennessey wasn't even remotely scared. *They burn*, he thought gleefully. *They burn and they scream!* The fifty pounds of jellied gasoline on his back didn't scare him anymore, either. He loved it.

Paskow ran to the railing's edge. The shiny black thing was done shitting itself out of the hole it had punched. "I'll get its attention," he grunted. First, he pulled his .45 out of his belt and emptied the magazine at it. The bullets dimpled its plastic flesh with no effect other than to send it rolling towards them. They each uncorked a phosphorus grenade, Paskow barely breathing, Hennessey giggling like a girl.

"Hold," murmured Paskow. The thing was at the river's edge and rolling up the bank. Sweat stung Hennessey's eyes.

"Closer," Paskow hissed. At twenty yards, Hennessey could see mouths

and eyes rolling over the surface of its twenty-five-foot-wide amoeba-like surface.

The black tide hit the bridge supports and flowed upwards, grasping and reaching hungrily. "Now!"

Hennessey hurled his grenade after Paskow's down into the flabby bulk and then ducked behind the bridge's stone wall. The splash of phosphorus was followed by the sound of the world's largest cheeseburger frying on the hottest griddle in hell. The thing screamed like a pipe organ made from burning men. Rising up to bring his flamethrower to bear, Hennessey could see tongues waving like snakes in dozens of mouths. Despite the phosphorus, the thing rolled forward. Some of those mouths were no longer screaming; instead, their teeth were bared in what could only be a grimace of hate. Hennessey laughed as he hosed it down with blinding flame.

Like burning water, the incendiary fuel filled every open orifice. At first, the thing kept coming, stupid with hate and pain and wanting to kill the tiny thing that was hurting it. Suddenly it must have realized that it was not just hurting, but dying. It hesitated in Hennessey's shower for a second, before retreating under the bridge.

"Keep it under there!" Paskow yelled as he ran to the opposite side. Paskow let loose a blast of fire a moment later. "It's coming back your way!" The thing's wailing peaked, hit an octave that was too human. Hennessey greeted it with flame the instant it poked out.

Then the shooting started. A stuttering fusillade of bullets peppered the bridge, knocking razor-sharp chips of masonry loose with their impact. Somewhere across the river, the freakish townsfolk were rallying to the defense of their aquatic angel. One slug missed the fuel hose on Hennessey's flamethrower by about half an inch. Both Marines dropped to their knees.

"Did you see where it—oh fuck!" Paskow cut himself short. The white phosphorus grenade clipped to his belt was missing a spoon. It had been shot away in the hail of bullets. The fuse was lit on Charlie Paskow. With two grenades, a satchel charge of TNT, and at least forty pounds of gasoline on his back, it pretty much meant Hennessey was fucked, too.

Charlie stood up and, without even meeting Hennessey's horrified gaze or uttering a word, vaulted over the side of the bridge. Neither the creature nor Charlie Paskow had time to scream.

The concussion threw Hennessey face down on the stones. Twin fireballs rolled out from either side of the bridge, flashing the snow and ice into steam and blackening Hennessey's white winter greatcoat. Forcing himself up onto his knees, his bones still ringing with the blast, Hennessey immediately thought, *I hope Charlie's okay*. With shame and horror, he realized

then that he was alone. No, not alone. Those fuckers who'd killed Charlie were out there somewhere.

Hennessey shrugged the tanks of jellied gasoline off his back and cast around for a discarded weapon. There were plenty to be had, and he crawled forward to pull a Browning machine gun to him by one of its extended bipod legs. He checked the belt hanging out of its receiver. Not jammed. Never even fired. He poked his head over the bridge's upstream wall for a second. The shots came fast, from somewhere downstream. The Marsh refinery. Hennessey loped to the opposite side of the bridge and hugged the wall. He poked his head up again and this time at least three rifles opened up on him. Still, the shots did little more than reveal their positions. The snipers were on the roof, no doubt huddled together for safety. *Good*, Hennessey thought warmly. *Grouped nice and tight*.

Hennessey crawled forward about ten yards and then came up again, this time with the Browning. He set the bipod down as a bullet bit the masonry right in front of him. He had his sight picture and then he opened up. Hennessey's first burst got him his range to the refinery; the second found the roof and the snipers' roost. Then he poured it on. All three flopped like rag dolls. One lost his weapon over the side.

More weapons opened up on his position from the black shuttered windows and doorways across the Manuxet. Hennessey had forgotten all about dying. He was too angry. Angry that these things had wiped out his platoon. Angry that he'd shit his pants with fear. Angry that Charlie was dead. Angry that he'd felt bad for killing the basement family of abominations. He fired back, chewing through dozens of rounds as he swung the barrel across the buildings. He wasn't trying to hit them, just make them duck. It was only after they poked their heads back up that he went to work.

First, the one on the crumbling roof at the corner of Fall Street. Then the two down by the shore to the right. Then the one in the doorway nearly a hundred yards along Federal Street. A hunched thing broke for cover on the left and got about two hopping steps. Then back to Federal Street, where four of them tried to advance around the burning debris from the Esoteric Order of Dagon. Then another at the window a block over on Church Street.

Now they were running, turning tail and running. Just like Hennessey had minutes before. Running like women. But not from a monster. Not from a living mountain of shit that gobbled men and shrugged off bullets. No. *They're running from me!* Hennessey thought. *They're afraid of me!*

"Run!" he screamed, laughing. "Run!" He held the trigger down and chewed the rest of the belt up in seconds. "Run, you fuckers!"

Somewhere he could hear a Browning machine gun chattering away.

Turning back around, he felt a little disappointed to see the bridge filled with Marines, all of them firing past him and advancing by squads. All around him Marines were firing and charging forward. Suddenly two grabbed him by his numb arms and began to pull him back to the south bank.

Are we winning? he thought, and then blearily asked the question aloud to a Marine on his right.

"Jay'sus, lad!" the guy sounded like they'd just whisked him out of County Kildair. "If'n we ahrn't, it'll be no fault'a yar own. Who'dya tink yar? Sah'gent Yark?"

"What're you talkin' about?"

"Bout half d'battalion saw you two on d'bridge," said the mustached Marine sergeant, grinning foolishly. "I heard d'old man himself just say you fellas looked like Horatius times two out there. He wants tuh see you afta'ward." Some kind of triage station had been set up behind the First National Grocery. Hennessey was gently lowered to the ground. "Congressional Medal of Honor, f'sure," the grinning Marine said. "You just sit tight and a corpsman'll be 'long tuh check you out, okay?" Hennessey could do little more than dumbly nod his assent. The night was passing like a blur. Someone came and looked him over, but Hennessey had no idea whether the guy was checking him for wounds or rummaging through his pockets. Sometime later he noticed that his face and neck were burned, and his greatcoat was actually smoldering. He leapt to his feet to shrug off the flamethrower before he exploded like a Roman candle, but suddenly remembered he'd ditched it back on the bridge.

Swaying on his feet, Hennessey could see that he was not alone in the square. It had become a sort of rally point for the battalion. Trucks were rolling in and out. Wounded and dead were being sorted in front of the Gilman Hotel. And there on the southernmost side, two Marines with trench guns were standing guard over twenty or so battered-looking townsfolk.

It only took a few seconds for Hennessey to cross the square to the prisoners. As Hennessey walked along the knot of men and women, he carefully studied each of the bloated, inhuman faces. The only thing he saw in their fat, bulging eyes was hatred. From the mother clutching a wailing brat to her fat breasts, to the men, tattered, bloodied, and bruised from the beatings the Marines had given them, all Hennessey saw was red-rimmed hatred. They didn't hate the Marines for burning their temples and smashing their idols. They hated them for what they were: normal, clean, and human.

Hennessey didn't want their hate. He wanted their fear.

He returned a few minutes later with a Thompson he got off a dead

sergeant at the triage station and killed them all. The two Marines who had been guarding the civilians were so shocked they almost let him load a second drum into the Thompson before they tackled him and wrestled the empty weapon away. Hennessey was cuffed and placed under arrest.

Major Walsh, the battalion's commanding officer, was a bit disappointed that his nominee for the Congressional Medal of Honor was now a "baby-killing sonuvabitch." But, as Hennessey heard one of the T-men explain to the Major, "How're you going to court-martial the man when none of this ever happened and we were never here?"

After Hennessey was taken under guard to the Battalion HQ outside Innsmouth, he sat and watched a mortar battery dump hundreds of shells onto the north side of town where things were still flopping and twisting in the rubble. Next a convoy of motor coaches arrived. Hennessey watched as Navy doctors carefully examined the captured townsfolk and directed them onto the waiting buses. Some people got to go on the buses on the right; others were sent to the left. To Hennessey the folks going to the left seemed a good deal more squamous.

Hennessey soon found himself joined by three other handcuffed Marines: a captain by the name of Houseman, a sergeant named Dylan, and a private who claimed his name was "Death." The feeling of kinship was immediate and mutual. After the debriefing back at the Boston Naval Annex's brig, Hennessey was assigned to the 2nd Marines Division. He never again saw the men he'd spent the night handcuffed to in that truck. Except for one, decades later, at the Chosin Reservoir. That had been even colder than Innsmouth. Maybe the coldest place this side of Hell. Hennessey saw Private "Death," this time sporting a gold oak leaf and quartering a Chinese soldier with an entrenching tool. For a second, recognition passed between them, but nothing was ever said. By the end of that day, the Chinese, like the monsters of Innsmouth, had learned to fear them.

And their fear was all he'd ever wanted.

"Sergeant Hennessey?" Levine thought the old man was dead. The way he started stuttering and then slumped over with that outrush of breath, Levine was sure he'd just had a coronary. He reached forward and grasped Hennessey's stick-thin wrist to search for a pulse. As soon as he felt the bird-like bones, Hennessey jumped to life again and snatched his hand away as if the young Delta Green agent were made of red-hot coals. "I'm sorry!" Levine stammered. "Are you all right?"

The question tugged an involuntary and terrible giggle out of Hennessey. "Aul'right? Shit no! I'm not all aulwright at all! How many more times I gotta go through that fucking nightmare with you?"

Nearly as soaked with perspiration as Hennessey, Levine glanced to Parker and noted the big Army major's nearly imperceptible nod. "I think this will be the last time, Sergeant," Levine said. "We've got all we need, I think. You've been extremely helpful, and your government appreciates the service you've done us today."

"And did for us back then as well," Parker added flatly. That was about as many words as Levine had heard Parker speak at one time.

"That was it?" Hennessey looked more surprised than relieved. "You won't be coming back?"

"No, sir," Levine said as he moved to turn off the video camera.

"Are you sure, son? 'Cuz you know, I might remember more next time." The voice went thin with desperate entreaty.

Levine turned and looked at the old gnarled root of a man coiled in the wheelchair in front of him and instantly recognized that he wasn't the same man he'd spent the last four days with. That man was filled with hate and jealousy for the men who were still young enough to walk to the bathroom and have a regular bowel movement. This new man was filled with fear, fear that he would die alone in this VA hospital with no one to even notice.

"I'm . . . I'm afraid we have other duties waiting for us back in Washington."

"That's not the only time I saw them fish men, y'know," Hennessey blurted out.

That stopped them cold. "I thought you said you never saw where they took the prisoners?"

"Not the prisoners," Hennessey chattered. "Others. And others sorta like them. During the war in the Pacific I got picked up by a section of the OSS. I went on a dozen missions in the Marshals, the Philippines, Manchuria, and even French Indochina. I saw stuff. I could tell ya all about it."

"Really?" Parker's voice sounded like the earth moving.

Hennessey took a deep breath and let it out slow. "Maybe you can answer me one question first? Why is the Navy coming to me for answers? Why ask me when you guys have a whole filing cabinet full of debriefings on this? I ain't telling you anything I didn't tell the Naval Intelligence guy who debriefed right afterwards. So why ask me all over again seventy years later?"

"Sergeant Hennessey," Levine said evenly, "please believe me when I tell you that I truly wish I could tell you what this is all about. But it's national security. You understand, don't you?"

Hennessey apparently tried to look angry, but instead he just looked tired, old and tired. His head lolled on his stumpy neck and he rubbed

his eyes with his swollen-jointed fingers. "Maybe you can't tell me who sentcha, but I can sure as hell tell you who you smell like to me. You smell like those OSS guys. Answered every question with 'Sorry, that's Delta Green clearance only.' I know you ain't gonna tell me whether I'm right or not, but before I tell you one more thing, there's something I gotta know. And dammit, you owe me. I've done a lot of hard shit for my country. Forty-two years in the Marine Corps: Guadalcanal, Saipan, Tinian, Iwo Jima, Chosin. And those are just the ones I can talk about, if there was even anyone around to listen. After forty-two years in a business where doing anything, including doing nothing, can get you killed, somebody or something should have punched my ticket.

"Instead I'm propped up in this fuckin' chair, my legs next to useless, my back and fingers twisted with arthritis. Everything's failing except my memories. From breakfast to bedtime, all I do all day is wait for my heart to stop.

"So I've paid my dues and done my duty thirty times over and you assholes owe me something back. I'm too old to threaten. The only reason I'm still alive is that I'm still a devout Catholic and suicide's a one-way ticket to Hell, so killin' me would be doing me a big fuckin' favor. I'm too old to bribe, either. There's nothing you can promise me that I've got the capacity to even enjoy anymore. So don't even try.

"There's only one thing I've got to know."

"What is it?" Levine asked.

The old bastard looked up. He looked terribly small and frail just then.

"Are we winning?" he asked.

Levine knew the answer to that question. Everyone in Delta Green knew the answer. Some more than others. Some wouldn't admit it, but they knew. What the hell could Levine tell him? The truth? That rather than face what Innsmouth meant the government had chosen to ignore it? That when others formed a force to fight the war anew, they were disbanded, not once but twice? That all those precious files were either misplaced or destroyed? Could he really look the old man in the eye and tell him that the Delta Green Hennessey knew was now a pack of renegades having to beg, borrow, and steal to fight a war for the very survival of the human species, all because nobody wanted to believe in the things Hennessey fought seventy years ago?

Levine knew that he sure enough owed the old bastard. He'd fought the first battle in a war that raged behind the shadows even today. A war with no end in sight. Hennessey won the first battle and made the first advances. He'd beaten the ugliness back. And then some other assholes had pissed it all away.

Levine owed the old bastard a few restful nights, a few nights of sleep where he could lay his head down and know that he had not sacrificed in vain. That the world was safe. That Jerusalem was delivered from the infidel.

"We're winning, Sergeant. Of course we are." ▲

Delta Green co-creator Dennis Detwiler has a strange fixation with measured, cold-blooded narratives, as readers of Delta Green: Alien Intelligence may recall from his story "Drowning in Sand." His characters possess a quiet desperation balanced with a gritted-teeth willingness to do anything for the sake of some compromised ideal, qualities that give his fiction a diabolical sort of grace. When coupled with his fascination for the grubby details of past times and places, as in the following story, the result is historical fiction with teeth and claws.

NIGHT AND WATER

DENNIS DETWILLER

I'm Colonel Stillman."

"I don't give a fuck who you are. What do you want?" The sergeant coughed, glancing up from the laborious task of scraping a thin, gray fungus from his powder-soaked foot with a Swiss army knife. He glanced up only long enough to project a contemptuous wave of disinterest at the new arrival. Deciding to duck this situation, the hunched wet ghost of a soldier who had led Stillman to the MP command tent of the Twelfth Army Group disappeared through the flap into the night like a figment of the imagination. From the noises outside the tent Stillman garnered a feeling of endless, crazed movement, like a huge football game of a million men or more maneuvering in total darkness, of transports full of fuel and troops rumbling to ever-widening perimeters of battle in the east.

Stillman was dressed in rain-soaked Army fatigues but wore no insignia. After waves upon waves of German commandos dressed as American

soldiers had poured through the lines during the Ardennes offensive, it didn't really matter what you wore up on the front anymore. He could have been done up as a thirteenth-century samurai and received the same reaction. *This way sir, watch your step . . .*

The soldiers near the front were too tired to deal with subterfuge. They had much more direct problems to contend with.

Stillman's once-plain face was marred by two meandering lines of a single, healed scar which looked pink and smooth, like a patch of baby's skin. One of those lines had missed his left eye by less than an inch and the eyesocket looked uneven, as if it had been broken and set poorly, giving his green eyes a crooked stare. Clutching a bundle of damp files, he looked like a deformed paperboy. His boots were thick with mud, and a Thompson submachinegun was slung at his thin shoulders. The sergeant ignored all this and continued to pick at his foot, teeth clenched, eyes drawn down to a squint.

The stench inside the command tent was terrible: shoe leather, wet wool, and body odor, and the relentless pounding of shells in the distance sounded like drums from some jungle movie. It was abundantly clear to Stillman—and to anyone with half a brain—that the natives of Europe were indeed restless. All you had to do was look around at the bodies piled like cordwood or catch a whiff of the high, sweet smell of rot which floated in the heavy March air. Fortress Europe had been under siege now for more than eight months, and its cities were aflame with tanks and Allied men. The Americans, Russians, and British were poised on the fringes of Germany, surrounding it on all sides, entering its borders with stabbing movements, subsuming it like a virus seizing a sickened cell.

From outside came the cacophony of a rattletrap jeep, passing nearby in the dark and the rain. Stillman turned away for a moment, trying to pierce the gloom beyond the tent flap. He saw nothing to attach to the ruckus.

"What the *fuck* do you *want*?" the sergeant reiterated in a fouler tone, still intent on his project.

"Here's my orders," Stillman said, his voice quiet and controlled.

"I don't want your fucking orders. I want to know what the fuck you *want*. Did I fucking *stutter*?" The sergeant stood and hopped over to a makeshift table, constructed from a half-intact door laid across a broken stone birdbath that looked older than the United States itself. He hunted around the table, digging under piles of maps and field manuals until he came out with a small pair of surgical scissors. Plopping back down on the cot he continued fiddling with his foot, absently dropping his Swiss army knife on the floor. It bounced from the precarious planks which passed for a floor and through the gap between them, then down into the mud below.

"The SS Officer. Schanburg." Stillman declared steadily.

The sergeant glanced up and really saw Stillman for the first time. Something in the sergeant's face changed and his jaw slowly clenched and unclenched as if he was chewing on some particularly resilient piece of food. With a smooth motion he slipped a new olive-drab sock on and pulled his boots up, but did not lace them. Stillman watched in silence as the man extinguished the lantern, mumbling to himself.

"Like a fucking butler," the sergeant sneered.

The two exited into the rain. Shells sailed through the air and fell seven miles to the east over and over again, screaming through the dull rain, trying to coax General Model and Army Group B back to their homeland through negative reinforcement.

"You intelligence guys are damn spooky," the sergeant mentioned in a vaguely buddy-buddy tone, as they marched through the dark towards an assortment of lights to the east of the camp near what remained of the French town of Trier. Patton had rolled through and over it in under three hours and the Germans had conceded ground only after a nasty skirmish which had almost completely leveled the small village. That same battle separated Army Group B into two pockets, surrounded on all sides by the American Twelfth Army. Where Patton and his army were now was anyone's guess. Leipzig? Berlin? It wouldn't surprise Stillman.

The rain was just enough to turn the ground to mud and to obscure vision beyond ten feet. In some places the mud was up to Stillman's knees, but the sergeant seemed immune to it. Jeeps and tanks and more vague and unidentifiable shapes, nothing more than shadows in the rain, were laid about seemingly at random, not so much parked as abandoned. There was no real road, just the ever-present mud, tents, and some ruined foundations which were marked with picket poles so you wouldn't fall into them at night. Stillman caught the sight of two men at the edge of a foundation, and it took him a moment to realize they were pissing into it. The smell of ammonia, cordite, piss, and rot were rich in the air despite the cleansing rain. Soon the rain would be sun, the ground grass. Hopefully.

"Here he is," the sergeant said, and pulled back the flap of a tent guarded by a thin, drenched, pimply faced private who gave a half-hearted salute with his left hand as he finished eating a handful of wet crackers with the other, a ration kit perched in the crook of his arm to keep it from the rain. The sergeant glared at the kid for a few seconds and stepped aside, holding the flap open for Stillman. Stillman handed his Thompson over and said, "Hold this, kid." He walked into the tent as the soldier dropped his ration kit into the mud while fumbling with the submachinegun.

Inside the small tent, a single SS officer sat behind a folding card table reading from what looked like a tiny bible by the soft red light of a glass

lantern. A second private, standing guard inside the tent, snapped a perfunctory salute which the sergeant didn't return. He didn't even look at the private, and eventually the kid dropped his arm, bored or tired.

"He turned himself over to Patton's boys," the sergeant explained. "But they had a bug up their ass to get to Eisenhach or Liepzieg or wherever. So they handed him over to us. We kept him separate from the other prisoners." The sergeant spat a rich green glob onto the ground and considered his prize.

The Nazi's face and black uniform had been stained with blood and mud in varying amounts and his hat was gone, giving him a wild, hunted look. His thin brown hair was sticking almost straight up due to dried mud and his uneven lips mimed along with the words as he read them in the book—he didn't look up as the sergeant spoke of his capture. Despite his uniform and demeanor, his plump form made him look somehow harmless, like someone's grandfather or next-door neighbor, but Stillman knew better. The man was a butcher, a sly killer.

The Nazi finally looked up and locked eyes with Stillman. A mild smile creased his round face.

"Hello, Major Stillman," the Nazi said in perfect English.

All eyes turned to Stillman, who calmly walked into the room and sat down opposite the prisoner, placing the wet files on the card table. A puddle soon began to form around the pile.

"Actually, it's Colonel Stillman," he stated blandly.

An uneasy silence descended.

"Give me those orders after all," the sergeant barked after the moment passed. Stillman handed over a wet bundle of papers which had taken the shape of his clenched hand. The sergeant glanced at the bundle once, not really reading them, but just registering their presence before he began to walk out.

"Aren't you going to check them?" Stillman asked, not really caring either way.

"No. I don't think I want to know what you're here for after all," said the sergeant and stalked off, limping back into the night.

Outside the tent, to the east, the shells kept falling like the rain.

"Get out of here, kid," Stillman rasped, and the private left without a backwards glance, probably envisioning putting his feet up somewhere warm and dry, if there was such a place to be found in this nightmare of mud.

The SS officer leaned back in his chair and showed his teeth in a broad smile. His teeth looked yellow and too straight to be real. Stillman now noted the chair he was sitting in was an old water-logged leather and mahogany antique recovered from some derelict building.

"You remember me, of course?" the SS man laughed. It wasn't even really a question. His voice was rich and penetrating. It was the voice of a good friend, one you could not help but trust. Stillman didn't trust him.

"Yes. Fécamp. 1943."

"Yes, yes. And you think you've won now? You think this is all?" The SS man's eyes opened comically wide and his eyebrows bunched his forehead into numerous folds. The question hung in the air.

"Yeah. You're about done. A month or two at the most." Stillman could hear the doubt in his voice, and found himself despising his own lack of belief. He wanted to believe that the war was nearing its end. He wanted to believe in something. Instead, things just happened and then, as if by reflex, he acted. It was like everything he said was being transmitted remotely from some foreign locale, only to be broadcast from his mouth. He reacted to things. He never did things.

"You do not believe this. I can tell." Another laugh. "Do you have a cigarette?"

"No," Stillman lied.

"The Reich has some secrets left in it." The SS man giggled, eyeing Stillman's nicotine-stained fingers with contempt.

"Yes, *Sturmscharführer* Schanburg, we know." It was Stillman's turn to smile.

"What do you mean?" The plump little killer's face darkened with inquisitiveness.

"Nothing."

"Your scar. It gives you . . . character." Schanburg didn't smile, but his eyes followed the arc of the gash in Stillman's face greedily.

Silence in the tent.

"Let's talk about Fécamp."

"Certainly, what could stop us? Why don't you begin?" Schanburg sighed, fingering his bible. He looked bored or distracted, Stillman couldn't tell which.

"I don't remember much." Stillman said, hoping to draw the Nazi out. In truth he remembered it all. He would never forget it.

"What is the first thing you recall, then?"

"Night and water," Stillman spat out, another reflex. The words seemed completely alien to him, and the memories which came back to him now seemed equally so. But they were always there. Night and water, he had said. But even that wasn't it. He could clearly remember it all, almost. But never before had he *tried* to think about it. As he pushed his mind back in time, he felt something in the depths of his consciousness stir. There was something in there with him. The memories came back to him like a rushing wave of living darkness.



The beach at Fécamp which faced the channel was freezing. Gray and tan sand and stones, with the yellow reeds and the relentless blue-gray surf, covered by a completely overcast purple sky which hung improbably above to set the scene. Night and water. It was winter in France, and as the four black-clad men clambered ashore from their rubber raft the wind whipped at their backs. The only thing clearly visible was their glistening white eyes, searching fruitlessly for their fate, trying to penetrate time itself to see the end of their lives as it approached them. All would be claimed, some sooner, some later.

But the beach appeared undefended except for several anti-tank constructions which blocked the only solid incline past the edge of the sand. A million things could prove that theory wrong in practice, of course. A mine, a sniper, a machinegun nest. Intelligence suggested the Germans considered the beach an unlikely invasion point, since the gentle scoop of land which jutted out into the channel was known to sailors for centuries as a treacherous zone. There were rip-tides, cross-currents, jetties, and underwater sandbars and rocks. It was why the Allied team had chosen to come aground here, in the hopes that their targets would not expect it—the waters were just far too dangerous for normal amphibious assault.

The beach itself seemed harmless enough. Anything could be in the dark, but the team of commandos rushed ashore anyway.

Major Michael Stillman felt the freezing water splash up into his crotch as he struggled ashore. The three other men followed. The second-to-last man quickly deflated and secreted the raft among the large rocks near the high-tide line. The constant, all-pervasive sound of the waves crashing, a sound which Stillman associated with his childhood in Cape Cod, drowned out all other noises. When the craft was hidden, one of the men flickered a burst of light flashes at the ocean from a hooded lamp. Stillman knew the British submarine *Dauntless*, which had carried them here, would now be sinking back beneath the waves. But the craft was not visible from the shore. Hopefully the team would be here to meet it again in three hours with something to show for its troubles.

The British and Americans struggled past the rocky beach, running clumsily up the rise to the safety of the yellow and dead high grass beyond the tank traps. The men settled in, squatting on their haunches like animals on the thinner, softer sand. A distant, hollow sound drew their attention to the north. Otherwise the area felt abandoned, empty.

"There," O'Brien whispered. The little British man, a thin-muscled figure in his black suit, pointed through the reeds with a black leather glove to the north, while pulling his silenced Sten MK II around from his back to

rest the muzzle on his forearm. With his black woolen cap pulled down and his rat-like face made up with black face paint, O'Brien was nothing more than bad teeth and blue eyes to Stillman.

Past the edge of the weeds the team could spy a single well-lit road which traced its way up to the cliffs, deserted. The beach they had arrived on became a series of jagged chalk cliffs about a quarter-mile to the north, and the recently laid road they looked upon meandered up to its peak. Remote lights atop the cliffs shone in the fog which shrouded them and made them glow like distant stars. They had trained for three days on the sister cliffs across the channel in England, simulating the assault, but even after having so much time to work out the mission on a facsimile, the beach, road, and cliffs now seemed totally unfamiliar, like they had somehow mistakenly been dropped on some alien planet instead of a beach only a hundred miles from England.

Stillman fished a small pair of binoculars out of his pack and spied the guardhouse which straddled the road, a thin structure that looked like an old-fashioned outhouse emblazoned with yellow and black stripes. A square glassless window opened onto the guardhouse's one room, which appeared to be empty. Atop the peaked roof, a small dynamic swastika danced in the wind, glowing in the night like a blood-red eye.

"There's nobody there," Stillman whispered back.

The door to the little shack hung wide on squeaky hinges, slowly swinging forward and back in the freezing wind, occasionally banging on the striped black-and-white barricade which prevented motor traffic from using the road. This was the noise which first drew their attention.

O'Brien considered the structure with his binoculars.

"Bullet holes, Mike," the man said in a stiff British accent.

The two watched the shack for a moment. The window of the hut was shattered and spread out on the tar road in a million different glittering pieces. Small black bullet holes traced a line up the door in a zigzag—a burst most likely fired from a submachinegun. But something was strange. Stillman couldn't place it.

"Bleedin' partisans," Garrity cursed under his breath with a northern English accent. He was small, too, like O'Brien, but seemingly without any muscular bulk. Delicate as a dancer. Like the others he was dressed all in black, and like O'Brien he carried a silenced Sten and a large pack. The coal-black paint on his usually ruddy face was thick with drops of what Stillman took to be perspiration. His red hair poked from beneath the cap in tight curls.

"You think it was some of the *Maquis*?" Stillman whispered. The idea of being killed by Germans was one thing; the idea of being killed by Frenchmen who were also killing Germans was quite another. "From where? LeHavre?

Dieppe?"

"Perhaps. I don't know," O'Brien responded.

"Fuck it all. I hope not," Garrity whispered to himself.

"What are we doing?" Filky piped in, in too-loud a voice. The others glared at him.

The biggest one in the group, Filky obviously didn't fit. He was the last to arrive every time the team moved, and his attempts at stealth were poor, even when he was at his best. A small pair of glasses with a jeweler's loupe embedded in them rode his fat American face. The box on his back clattered when he moved and set all the others on edge. Tools for the mission.

"We're going in," Stillman murmured in response.

Filky moaned and rolled his eyes.

"Just stow it, Filky."

"Listen," Stillman began. "I know you've all been briefed for DELTA GREEN clearance. I know you've seen the photos and files. But I've seen the real thing. I've done all this before. Let me tell you now. It's all real. Don't fuck up."

His words lingering behind him, Stillman began to inch forward through the high grass, heading north along the ridge on his hands and knees with his Delisle carbine slung at his back. He projected a surety in his movement and a conviction in his voice he did not feel inside. Truthfully, now that the enemy seemed strangely absent, Stillman was at a loss as to what to do.

The rising cliff road had been cleared of vegetation some time in the past, leaving a vast track of dead ground between the guard shack and the main building on the crest of the hill, but much of that ground was in a blanket of darkness. The road was a line of light, slightly curved, tracing a path from the checkpoint at the base of the cliffs to the hazy, distant cement building which was lit in half-a-dozen places by flickering amber and white lights. There didn't seem to be any other structures within the fenced enclosure on the hill except for a second guard cupola just before the fence. The fence was constrictive, drawn tight around the cement bunker like a second skin. Razor wire was visible both at its base and on its top, glinting like sharks' teeth. A single gate hung open next to the second guard cupola. A single courtyard past the fence came face-to-face with the bunker. No movement could be detected there, even after three minutes of observation.

It looked like an easy ride, and it was for precisely this reason that Stillman believed it wouldn't be.

The Allied commandos squatted at the edge of the high grass and watched the facility for some time through binoculars. Stillman thought back to the

briefing by Commander Cook and considered all the angles. It was his first mission in command. He could feel the mistakes waiting for him, predatory, indistinct. Stillman longed for more training, for more reconnaissance, for more information.

"According to the files recovered at the Cap de la Hague raid," Cook had said, "the weapon, this so-called *Donnerschlag*, is being tested by the Karotechia for widespread production. We are counting on their group's natural inclination towards privacy within the Reich itself to help us. The facility at Fécamp seems to be self-contained and ignored by the outside hierarchy of command."

Onboard the submarine *Dauntless*, as they prepared the raft to paddle ashore in the turbulent surf, Stillman and the men had spied the *Donnerschlag* for the first time: a vaguely reflective blue-gray dome a hundred feet across, carved into the side of the chalk cliffs and filigreed with a spider-web array of steel cables. The center of the dish was punctured by a single black orifice, the interior of which could not be seen. Anything could be contained within the cliff face.

Stillman's team was not here to destroy the device, but to steal any relevant data or personnel they could recover during a brief and hastily organized commando operation. According to the files that Delta Green had recovered from the Nazi occult organization, the Karotechia, the *Donnerschlag* was in its earliest testing phase. Unfortunately, the files said little else on the device and just what it was supposed to do. Regardless, it would never survive long enough to see warfare. The facility had been discovered by the Royal Air Force before it could be fully reconnoitered by Delta Green.

In less than five hours, Stillman knew, seven RAF Wellington bombers would erase the cliffs, the *Donnerschlag*, and the facility at Fécamp from the face of the Earth forever. The Allied command who had organized the raid knew nothing of Stillman and his commandos, and it was thought best by those really in control that this remain the case.

For it was up to Stillman and his team to find out what the Allies were about to erase. Anything found would only be for those few within the Allied command structure who knew what a tiny occult-oriented portion of the Third Reich was really up to. Only a handful of British and American men, including Roosevelt and Churchill, knew that the Karotechia was making startling progress in the application and exploitation of things most people thought to be hogwash: magic, sorcery, the secrets of the occult. Hidden within the tapestry of the human obsession with the mystical was a very real and ultimately deadly power. The leaders of the free world were not about to let Hitler pull an ace from up his sleeve without a fight. The *Donnerschlag*—"Thunderclap"—was thought to be one such ace.

Stillman had been on another French beach less than a month before, on Delta Green's first mission to upset the plans of the Karotechia. The mission had proven successful beyond the group's wildest expectations and had given the obscure OSS project a bargaining chip to cement ties with PISCES, its British counterpart. The two groups, like the Karotechia, were interested in the exploitation of the occult for military purposes. But PISCES and Delta Green differed from the Karotechia in one vital way: they only wished to exploit the occult insofar as was needed to contain it. They were wise enough to see behind the curtain of claptrap and mumbo-jumbo which history had laid over the reality of the supernatural, and wise enough to realize that this curtain must stay closed, or the world might perish. Hitler and his henchmen had tried God knows how many times to pull that curtain away to gain power. Stillman had helped stop one such attempt only twenty-two days before.

On that mission, where Stillman and another commando group had erased a similar camp of Nazis who were communing with things that lived beneath the ocean, he had seen sights he would have sworn could never be true, could never be *real*. But both the blunt and subtle realities of the situation had settled in his skull and taken root, especially when further horrors were forthcoming after the assault, when they returned to England and the intelligence they had recovered during the raid blossomed into a whole new bouquet of fears. During the operation they had recovered over forty classified files from the Karotechia, files that Delta Green and PISCES examined with mounting dread. Each file was a horror story worse than the last, done up in black and blood red, emblazoned with swastikas and runes.

He had read them all.

"The lights are going down," O'Brien mumbled, bringing Stillman back.

Filky, the electronics man, fumbled for his own pair of binoculars, and considered the building with the squinty-eyed stare of a myopic. The hazy lights began to grow more and more dim.

"They're charging the batteries . . . probably," the fat man said, dispirited.

"Garrity, check the guard booth," Stillman ordered and Garrity was gone in a heartbeat, silently. The lithe man streaked across the road and into the booth in seconds. Inside the booth, Garrity could be seen poking around rapidly, his glistening eyes lit red by some type of internal lighting. He was back just as rapidly but his eyes held confusion in them.

"Empty except for a change of uniform. Boots, the whole kit. And an MP40, recently fired. There's a red light on the console labeled '*Gerat Aktiv*.'"

Everyone spoke German except Filky, but the fat man had already guessed what the light meant.

"Device Active." Stillman felt something hard and cold settle in his

stomach. What did the uniform and bullet holes mean? He had no idea. But the Donnerschlag was charging and time was rushing past. Who knew what the device could do? A vision of the last mission swam into his mind's eye like a nightmare, Nazis on a beach with inhuman things stumbling in from the waves to make Faustian pacts.

"We go in, now," Stillman barked, and headed up the hill at a full run, his carbine in his hands. For a moment the three other men remained in the grass, watching Stillman's silhouette disappear into the dark on the hill.

Then the others followed, Filky taking up the rear, wheezing and moaning.

The second guard cupola they spied from the dark was empty also, but had no bullet holes in it, as far as they could tell. Beyond the cupola and the fence (whose gate was open) the lights on the blocky concrete building slowly began gaining intensity, as if more power were being allotted to them from some internal power source. The smell of ozone drifted down the mountain.

"The batteries are . . . almost done . . . charging," Filky wheezed, hands on his plump knees, trying to catch his breath.

"The whole place is abandoned," O'Brien thought aloud.

Everything had taken on a soft glow, and light played strangely in the fog. The building, less than thirty yards away, looked indistinct and harmless. Two large squares of cement with no windows. The four men spied it at some length.

"Clothes," O'Brien whispered, pointing. In the dark of the hill, just before the curve of its surface disappeared into the sky on the eastern slope, were several dozen pieces of cloth. Glints of white and gray, folded and crumpled pants, shirts tossed lightly in the wind. It took Stillman a moment to realize that they were laid out in a parade formation, more or less, as if the clothes were carefully placed, one next to the other, by some unknown party.

"Does anyone feel . . . strange?" Filky whispered. But before he could continue, the noise of wind-blown cloth drew the groups attention to the north.

"More clothes and a motorbike," Garrity whispered, his voice solemn. They all looked. At the southern face of the building a door hung wide and a white bundle of cloth, almost definitely a coat of some kind, lay on the cement where it was caressed by the wind. A single boot stuck up next to it like an exclamation point. Next to it a gray BMW motorcycle lay inexpertly on its side. It looked like it had been dropped.

"Blimey." O'Brien's face was full of fear.

"What the hell is going on here?" Garrity whined.

Something tangible and electric was in the air.

The bunker was seamless, except for the open door and several small lamps which spotted its upper walls. Its curved cement ceiling arched gracefully in a half-dome painted green and tan. Its walls were wrought with perfect interconnecting German lines, defiantly rewriting nature to the whim of the Reich. It looked efficient, secretive, and deadly. But the gaping door ruined its illusion, that of invulnerability. It looked like the head of some fossilized giant turned on its side, with its mouth agape.

Above the door an amber light suddenly began flickering in ever-quickening intervals. All eyes turned to Stillman for direction. German words stenciled above the light and illuminated by the bursts caught his eye, and his breath seized in his chest.

Gefahrenzone. "Danger Zone," he silently translated. A terrible second passed, pregnant with any possibility.

"Move!" Stillman snapped and with all regard for stealth gone he rushed towards the building. Something primal and new within him screamed a warning that his body believed without question. He went from a tense calm to complete panic in less than a second. His higher functions sat back and watched as on some survival level his body attempted to avoid a disaster it somehow sensed was forming around him.

A humming began to carry in the air, like the sound of a huge tuning fork, and it throbbed in his ears along with the pounding of his heart. It felt like the vibration of an immense engine embedded in the ground grinding to life, but as it sailed up and down in pitch, lost in teeth-rattling crescendos and bowel-shaking lows, it began to cycle quicker and quicker. The purple of the sky began to dance in a glowing haze around Stillman's eyes, tracing strange arcs of rainbow colors in the fog. His lungs burned and his chest heaved as the crest of the hill loomed closer. Vaguely, past the sound of blood in his ears, Stillman could hear his men behind him, packs rattling, breath rushing in and out. *Faster* was all he could think. *Faster*.

The concrete building was backlit with a soft light which seemed to bleed from out of the air itself. Past the guard booth, gone in an instant—more clothes and a flashing red light. A discarded submachinegun on the pavement, ringed with spent, ejected shells. His own feet ringing on the concrete walkway inside the fenced perimeter. Rushing towards him the white coat, boot, and motorcycle. Beyond them, less than fifty feet away, the open door. The finish line.

Somewhere a klaxon began to sound, lost beneath the roar of his own heart.

Stillman could feel invisible shapes slip past his skin as he ran, more than the wind, like the air itself was congealing around him in a thousand transparent filaments.

From the black of the gaping bunker door a young man's face sud-

denly appeared, looming out of the dark like a ghost. Blond, blue-eyed, wearing a tattered, blood-stained lab coat. The young man saw Stillman and the German's eyes, already wide with fear, locked on him. Stillman never even slowed.

With a hurried glance towards his wristwatch, the young man's face shifted to a crazed, pleading look as he waved Stillman forward.

"*Schnell!*" the German shrieked, his blue eyes searching the air behind Stillman, seeing something. Something other than the commando team. In an instant, in that look, Stillman knew.

Something terrible was coming. Something terrible was already here. Something behind him in the air.

Never slowing, Stillman shot through the door like a rabbit running to ground, tripping over the threshold as he crossed it. His knee connected painfully with the cement and he rolled over, smashing his other knee and crashing into the door on the far wall with a hollow clang.

A second later the steel door he had run through slammed shut behind him but he was too weak to protest.

Then a sound Stillman would take to his grave. O'Brien's voice—just O'Brien—shrieking and firing his weapon, which coughed rounds out, sounding like a cat choking up hairballs with mechanical precision. Bullets connected with the cement, the door, the fence. O'Brien screamed as if he was being burned, as if he was being eaten alive. These sounds quickly died, stolen away by a muffled humming—then, silence beyond the door.

Stillman rose to his hands and knees and then collapsed in the small concrete room, completely unconcerned about everything but catching his breath and the screaming pain in his knees. His carbine dropped to the ground and he shed his pack with his last ounce of energy. The klaxon sounded echoey and strange in the room. An amber light flashed on and off in time with the siren.

The thin young German sat down, squatting next to the shut door with his hands over his eyes. With a hitching, sobbing breath the German began to cry. He looked very young and very scared.

"*Scheisse. Scheisse. Scheisse!*" he choked, over and over again. The klaxon suddenly ceased to sound and the amber lights clicked off. Immediately, before the darkness could take hold, a fluorescent bulb on the ceiling glowed with a buzzing, clicking light. A thrumming, pressured silence pushed in on Stillman and he slowly looked up. The room was a featureless gray cube with two doors, one to the interior, one to the exterior.

It took a minute of silence for Stillman to realize that there were no sounds outside the door any longer and that none would be forthcoming. Garrity, O'Brien, and Filky were somehow . . . gone. Whatever had come had taken his men. Somehow he knew that nothing living was now outside

except what had been drawn here by the Karotechia's infernal machine.

In his mind's eye he could see three sets of empty black clothing laying unattended outside on the cement.

"You are British?" the German said cautiously in English, his voice high-pitched and whiny. His thin, sharp-cheekboned face was red and wet with tears. His white coat was covered in a fine spray of dried blood. He wore French loafers and tattered white socks.

"American." Stillman coughed and stood up, retrieving his carbine. The German made no move to stop him or stand up.

"American," the youth repeated, looking at his hands. "Outside, I thought you were SS."

"What—" Stillman began, but was cut off by the German rapidly standing and looking at his watch.

"Haag was wrong. The powering cycle is not a set interval," the kid muttered in German. A thin, near-transparent blond beard had begun to grow on his young face.

"Was Haag wearing a coat like yours and boots?"

"Yes, that was Haag you saw there on the ground." The young man fished a thin pair of glasses out of his breast pocket and slipped them over his big ears. His eyes were wide and wet and crazed.

"My name is Stillman."

The German looked up with a startled glance.

"I am Doctor Weichs."

"What the hell have you done here, Weichs?" Stillman barked.

"We just do not know," the boy replied, eyes downcast.

"Who's we?"

Echoing footsteps sounded from the inside of the building beyond the steel door, answering the question. Stillman leveled the carbine at Weichs and backed into the corner next to the door. He raised a gloved index finger to his lips and smiled cold-bloodedly at the scientist. Weichs looked expectant and scared, but said nothing and remained still.

The door slid open slowly, flooding the room with a warm yellow light.

"Weichs? Did Haag make—" the SS officer began in German, but fell into silence as his brown eyes focused on Stillman. The Delisle was pointed directly at the officer's groin. Weichs pushed his back up against the wall, but made no other moves.

The SS man was rotund and well-groomed. A perfectly trimmed brown goatee rode his large mouth and his slicked-back hair was rich with pomade. He resembled a younger, better-looking Heinrich Himmler. Two *Sonnerad* runes, cast in silver—stylized curved swastikas—were pinned at

his lapels. The Sonnerad was the chosen symbol of the Karotechia.

"Remove your pistol—slowly—with your left hand," Stillman said in German. His voice was flat with implied violence.

"I am left-handed." The officer replied in a calm voice.

"Then use your right hand."

The officer did so slowly, and dropped the gun to the cement floor with a clatter. Weichs watched this all with disbelieving eyes. Stillman kicked the Walther away towards the far wall.

"I am *Sturmscharführer* Schanburg. I am in command here."

"Not anymore. Weichs, sit down." Stillman motioned with the muzzle of the carbine for Weichs to cross the room and sit next to the officer. The young German did so, terror in his eyes.

Weichs sat next to the officer, skirting the pistol in a wide berth. Schanburg's eyes darted between the young scientist and the muzzle of the carbine.

"Now. Since I am the commander, make a report," Stillman demanded.

"Yes sir, Commandant," Schanburg replied in accented English, clicking his boots together. A faint smile rippled over his pudgy face. Weichs let out a startled, strangled laugh which he silenced with both hands.

Schanburg spun a sparse tale in simple, straightforward sentences, deftly avoiding any mention of the Karotechia or the Nazis' pursuits into the occult sciences. It was simple. The *Donnerschlag* machine was constructed to sink ships and knock planes out of the air with waves of focused sound. That focused sound was created by two unique electromagnets embedded beneath the cliff itself. It had not been fully powered up or fired before except in scale tests. Yesterday, during its initial power-up phase, something had happened. All personnel outside the command bunker had *disappeared*. Anyone venturing out of the command bunker suffered the same weird fate.

Schanburg claimed he did not know where the personnel had gone, or what had taken them. But Weichs eyes were full of knowledge.

"Weichs, what took them?" Stillman asked.

Although Schanburg said nothing, his eyes were imperious. He glared at the young scientist, his gaze full of silent commands.

"Th-thi-things," Weichs stuttered finally, and looked down at the floor.

A silence filled the air.

"American, I suggest you surrender now. By dawn this place will be filled with SS men from the Third Jagdivision." Schanburg's voice had found its authority once more, and all the humor was gone. It was so ripe with command that Stillman numbly glanced down to make sure he was still holding the carbine.

Weichs' eyes played between the two like a child watching its parents

in the midst of an argument.

"I got you beat there, Schanburg. Before dawn this place will be filled with nothing but smoke and craters. The device, us, and Weichs' things will be erased. The RAF is going to remake this cliff into the surface of the moon. And nothing can live on the moon. Not even the high and mighty SS or the American army. Unless we can figure a way out of here, we're all going the way of the dodo in just under"—Stillman considered his watch—"three hours now."

Weichs stood so suddenly that Stillman brought the carbine around to bear, but the youth had just realized his situation. His mouth open and shut like a grounded fish and his eyes bounced between the two doors endlessly, as if he was half-expecting a third option to appear miraculously as he searched. Then, as suddenly as he stood, the youth collapsed to his knees and let out a coughing, gagging stream of vomit.

Time passed, and the sour smell filled the room.

"Then I turn myself over as a prisoner of war," Schanburg said in a reasonable voice, unfazed, all pretense of command and subterfuge gone. Weichs looked up with assenting eyes and wiped orange flecks of vomit from his lips.

"What do we do now?" Weichs moaned.

Stillman didn't know.

They stood in the command bunker, a chamber located almost fifty feet into the earth beneath the concrete building. Schanburg had lead them from the surface through a rat's warren of staircases, tunnels, and shafts. The small set of rooms they were in now was apparently the command center of the Donnerschlag and were located a mere four meters behind the huge dish set into the cliff face, thirty feet down into the earth. All around him were banks of switches, knobs, and other more-baroque constructions which meant little to Stillman. This was the late Filky's department.

Stillman had forced a tour of these six chambers at gunpoint, carefully searching them for anyone lying in wait, but the two prisoners insisted they were the last of the staff to survive. All others had died in the incident or in attempting to escape. A large portion of the construction staff had been up top during the weapons-charging phase for some reason Schanburg refused to elaborate on.

Weichs and Schanburg considered a tattered series of blueprints on a large steel table which sat beneath a bank of huge, glowing vacuum tubes. The room smelled of seared copper, drying paint, and sweat.

"What are we looking at, Weichs?" Stillman demanded. The blueprints were nothing but a baroque interaction of white lines marked with numbers, German phrases, and measurements.

"You wished to know where the electromagnets were, *ja*?"

"Yes. Yeah."

"Tell him, Weichs," Schanburg growled.

"We are separated from them by a large portion of rock. They are located, along with the power generators, on the far side of the cliff to the east. The shut-down procedure does not seem to be working from the command center. We assumed some sort of fault occurred in the wiring between here and there. That is where Haag was . . . going to . . ." The youth's voice trailed off. Weichs' finger had traced a single long line of white out into a vast open blue space on the chart. The line connected two complexes of room with a thin tether of wire.

"So that's the generator complex?" Stillman pointed at the smaller compound of rooms on the diagram. According to the measurements it was over a half a kilometer from the command bunker.

"Yes."

"Is that usually manned?"

"Yes," both Schanburg and Weichs answered.

"Has there been any contact with its crew?"

"No."

"You assume they're dead."

"Yes."

"Now the machine is cycling randomly," Schanburg concluded.

"Weichs?" Stillman looked to the kid.

"It is venting power to maintain a peak charge, but there appears . . ."

". . . to be a fault in the system," Stillman finished.

"Yes." Weichs' eyes seemed to be peering through the blueprints.

"So you haven't fired the weapon yet?" Stillman piped in.

"No," Schanburg replied, cutting Weichs off with a subtle hand gesture. But something was behind Schanburg's eyes.

"So it's the electromagnets causing the . . . problems."

"Yes," they both confirmed.

"Why? What's so special about them?"

Schanburg scowled at Weichs, and the youth remained silent. Stillman's eyes traced the outline of the blueprints and found the name of the device: *The Eisenbein Resonator*. What the hell was a resonator?

"So fire the weapon. Won't that kill the charge?"

"That wiring, too, appears faulty," Weichs confessed.

"Great," Stillman spat. His brow furrowed. "Now look, I made it here overland at a full run. We can dash for it."

"No!" Weichs cried. "You were lucky—just lucky. The cycles are random. Some short, some long. We cannot predict. Haag gambled. He lost."

Stillman frowned in frustration. They considered the blueprints again

for some time in silence. The second hand of the clock on the wall swept round and round.

"Okay." Stillman rose from the chair and faced his two charges. "We have to get to the beach and we have less than two hours to do it. How?"

"You have a vehicle on the beach?" Schanburg glanced up with sly, brown eyes.

"No," Stillman replied, suddenly wary. "I have a two-man raft in my pack."

"Do we have to go through the beach to get to the water?" Weichs asked, his eyes far away.

Schanburg ignored him and spoke over him: "Extraction by ship I assume?"

"What did you say there, Weichs?" Stillman waved his carbine at Schanburg, who shut up instantly. Stillman fixed the young scientist with a stare: "What did you say?"

"There is another way to the water," Weichs murmured.

"How?"

Weichs cast a scared glance at Schanburg.

"Ignore him. How else do we get to the water, Weichs?" Stillman demanded.

"Through the sounding chamber. It opens onto the dish in the cliff. Some of the guide wires run down to the rocks at the base."

Something like unease spilled out onto Schanburg's face.

"What?" Stillman demanded of the SS officer.

"Nothing," Schanburg blurted back.

"Okay, that's it. Lead the way, Weichs."

The three marched back to the stairwell and then down, further into the earth.

Eventually they reached a large steel door painted red in a plain cement room. The feeling of burial here was complete. They had come through three similar rooms to get here. The sensation of hundreds of tons of stone on all sides with no way out grew as each door shut behind them, despite the fact that Stillman had memorized the way to the surface, for all the good it would do him.

The white words on the red steel: *Gefahr Hoch Neiderfrequenz Sund.* "Danger, Low Frequency Sound."

"Weichs, open it up."

The scientist cast a frightened look at Schanburg and then undid the complex locking mechanism of the door. He gave Stillman a questioning shrug.

"Open it?" He murmured.

"Yeah. Go ahead."

Weichs pushed on the heavy door, putting all his weight behind it.

The hinges squealed as the three-inch-thick steel slab began to slowly pivot inward.

The sound filled their little chamber, and it took almost a minute for Stillman to realize what he was hearing: waves mercilessly pounding stone, and a grated, crazed voice, screaming at the top of its range, echoing and reverberating strangely. Screaming a song. Words. Over and over again. Memories from training came back to Stillman then, language school at Camp X. Russian.

He was hearing someone outside singing the Soviet national anthem.

"You fucking animal!" Stillman roared. His green eyes locked on Schanburg and his plain face was set in hard lines. The fat SS man seemed to shrink beneath the stare. The carbine slowly found a bead on Schanburg's plump face.

"I should snuff you right now." Stillman found that his voice sounded strange. The room had taken on an unreal quality, and with this feeling came the surety that anything was possible. He could kill Schanburg and Weichs and make the rendezvous. He could wait for the bombs to claim him. Anything.

From the sounding chamber outside the singing continued. The Nazis were going to test their device on POWs; that poor bastard outside would have been the Donnerschlag's first victim. A hatred black and perfect fell over Stillman and he embraced it like the first effects of a beloved drug. Weichs had retreated to the far wall, his eyes confused and full of fear, and Stillman knew the boy had no knowledge of what lay beyond the threshold—otherwise he never would have suggested the chamber as a possible escape route.

"I remind you. I am a prisoner of war . . ." Schanburg began, his voice full of panic as he saw the look on Stillman's face. "By the articles of the Geneva—" The rifle butt struck him in the stomach first and then in the jaw, completing a rapid and well-practiced move Stillman had never before attempted on a real subject. It worked admirably. The SS man crumpled like a marionette whose strings had been suddenly clipped. He lay unconscious on the ground, blood pouring from his chin, lips, and nose in a growing stream. Only then did the feeling of unreality fade from Stillman's vision.

"You've already broken the Geneva convention, you inhuman son of a bitch. *Why shouldn't I?*"

Weichs slid to the ground in the corner and stared in disbelief as Stillman glowered over the wheezing Schanburg. Then the American turned his attention to the young German.

"Get up, Weichs."

Weichs eyes didn't blink, couldn't blink. The little scientist pushed him-

self back against the wall and stared at the unconscious SS officer. Schanburg was a mess. His jaw had shifted, grown black, and swollen to twice its size. Blood from his temple continued to flow, though the torrent from his mouth and nose had stopped. His chest rose and fell at uneven intervals.

"Get up. I'm not going to hurt you."

Weichs stood, pushing himself up from the knees. A harsh icy wind blew into the small concrete room, whistling through the open door. Above the sound of the distant surf, the mad, desperate singing continued.

"Weichs, don't worry about Schanburg. He can't hurt you now."

Weichs clutched his sides to warm himself and looked down on the unconscious man.

"Yes," he said in a small voice.

The two men entered the sounding chamber. A strange ululating echo would repeat every noise they made, fading down the spectrum to nothingness. But the singing drowned most of the noises out.

Shaped like a bell turned on its side, the rounded room was about fifty feet from top to bottom and stared out onto a perfect view of the sea. Whitecaps breaking in the darkness of the French night, a sharp, high whistling wind which was bitterly cold, and the cool dull purple of the sky. It faced England, and the point at which Stillman and his men came ashore from the *Dauntless*. Several steel cables dropped over the edge of the room to the uncertain rock face below.

"These are the sounding boards," Weichs mumbled through chattering teeth, while rapidly rubbing his arms for warmth.

The door opened in a dead space on the wall, but on either side of the wall, odd silvery shafts of material which did not look like normal steel tracked forward to the edge of the precipice. They could be seen to vibrate minutely with each loud sound in the chamber. They shook violently when the mad singing reached its peak.

"The electromagnets vibrate them at speed and the sound waves are focused there." The scientist pointed at a large bowl-shaped device the size of a small car set plainly in the center of the room. The bowl face opened on the sea, like a radar dish tilted forward. The singing seemed to come from inside it.

"First things first." Stillman inched around the dome, sticking his head gingerly onto the open side. Inside the shell was a stick figure of a man wearing a single gray coverall, without shoes, gloves, or hat. His face was nothing more than skin stretched tautly over malnourished bone—all his hair was shaved. His blue eyes, yellowed through age, were sunken into his eye sockets and those teeth that remained in his mouth were rotted black. Despite his grave condition he sang anyway, his pigeon chest somehow heaving in and out to continue his odious racket, but a rumbling in his

lungs made it plain that he was very, very ill. His thin hands were fastened to the inside of the bell by leather straps and his legs were bolted to the ground in a strange harness-like contraption. His face was covered in a dried, frozen glaze of snot and tears.

Focusing swiftly on Stillman, the man's eyes narrowed down to furrowed slits, and his song died in a coughing fit rich with spit and mucus. When the wave of coughing passed, the man launched into a speech in Russian. A hail of syllables shot by Stillman, too jumbled and crazed for him to pick apart with his limited repertoire. Something about joining a party. Then, before he could react, the stick man let loose an amazing spray of phlegm which landed squarely on Stillman's black jacket, gloves, and gun. The Russian's yellowed eyes were filled with an absolute defiance.

Stillman held up his first two fingers in a victory sign, tried his best to smile and yelled: "American!"

To demonstrate his point he held up the carbine, a device of British manufacture.

Something like a religious frenzy came into the Russian's eyes.

"American! American! My Friend! *Tovarisch!* American!" His voice was hoarse and almost gone from fatigue. Once he was free of the bonds, the limp bundle of bones that was the Russian tumbled into Stillman's arms, weakly clutching at him like a baby. Crying.

The thin body was warm. Too warm, with fever and dysentery and God knew what else, but Stillman held on to him anyway.

Over his shoulder, Stillman watched as Weichs stood near the door, his face full of fear. He was looking at his watch.

"Eh . . . We only have one hour twenty minutes." Weichs chided.

Stillman had finally gotten the Russian to stop thanking him and had dressed the stick man in assorted lab clothing. His name was Nikolai Manchenkov. And from what Stillman could decipher from his basic Russian, he had spent seven months at the Natzweiler Concentration Camp. He had been sent to Fécamp along with a *Todt* slave labor construction crew. Most of his comrades had perished during construction of this facility.

It was only when Stillman realized that Manchenkov was competent in German that real communication began to occur between the two men.

"One hour nine minutes," Weichs reminded.

"They choose me for the experiments, yes?" the sickly Rus mumbled in accented German. "A Sergeant Major, he choose me and some of my men. He put me in the cliff."

"What was his name?" Stillman quietly prodded, nodding his head in a supportive fashion.

"Schanburg! The bleeding man," Manchenkov shouted, pointing back

towards the room where Schanburg lay unconscious.

"You said tests, Nikolai? They tested the weapon already?"

"Yes. One time. Then they bring in whole new men. New commander. New Soldier. Same old prisoner." He giggled through black teeth.

"Okay, Nikolai, here it is," Stillman reiterated in German. "We have to get out of here in less than . . ." He looked back at Weichs.

"One hour three minutes," the German flatly intoned.

"So you will have to gather your strength." Stillman handed the Russian a ration pack and his canteen. "Don't eat too much."

The Russian saluted with two sore-covered fingers.

Stillman stood up and dragged Weichs into the next room in a frenzy of movement.

"What the hell is he talking about, Weichs?" Stillman spat out, slamming the German against the wall.

"I . . . do not know. What?"

"The first test. Why didn't you mention it?" Stillman shook the little German and Weichs' glasses fell to the ground with a clatter. All the fear Weichs had gathered and lost in regard to Stillman suddenly leapt back to him.

"I . . . I arrived just the other night! I swear it! Everyone but Schanburg is new!"

Stillman knew the scientist was telling the truth.

"Fine," Stillman grumbled and let the kid go.

The American stalked back to console the Russian in the other room. He didn't see the hatred drift into Weichs' ice-blue eyes like clouds passing over the sun.

Amazingly, Manchenkov was capable of moving under his own power. The force of will which shone through his weakened form dwarfed anything Stillman had ever seen. Seven months without adequate food or water, seven months in hell without respite, and the man was still moving—still *trying*. Even still smiling.

Stillman knew then that he would do whatever he had to do to save the Russian. The German officer had become expendable. Anyway, their mission was to recover technical data. Certainly a Nazi scientist would prove more useful than some officer.

The SS officer's jaw was broken, and Stillman didn't expect him to wake up in time to see the fireworks. All in all, he thought this was rather a merciful way for the sonofabitch to clock out. With Weich's help, Stillman had shifted the bulky man to the secondary control bunker and laid him across a steel desk.

"Stillman, we have to go now!" Weichs whined.

Forty minutes until the submarine surfaced off the coast and as far as

the Germans knew, forty minutes until the air raid. Why he had lied to them, he had no idea. Still it felt good to let them sweat it a little. What was an extra hour to live between friends? Stillman gathered all the technical specifications for the device he could locate in the maze of rooms. Weichs helped, carefully folding page after page of blueprints before placing them in a leather attaché, eyes wide with fear. This seemed to be a gesture of placation, an attempt to hurry Stillman along, but the American took his time.

"Weichs, go and get my pack," Stillman ordered and the little German skittered away, up the stairwells to the main entrance. Stillman knew the kid was more afraid of what could be outside on the surface than anything else. He wasn't going anywhere. Besides, he needed a moment alone with Manchenkov.

"Nikolai." At the sound of his name the battered Russian slumped to attention, rising from the hardwood chair with a desperate effort. With a deft movement Stillman released a small commando knife from its wrist sheath and felt the warm metal drop into his hand. The wicked-looking blue-black blade was shaped in a triangle and had a deadly, effective weight to it. Its edge, honed to a razor sharpness, caught the light.

Stillman held the knife, pommel out to the Russian.

"Watch Weichs," was all he said, and Manchenkov nodded wearily. The pain of an entire people stared back at him through yellowed half-dead eyes.

Stillman guessed it was more than forty feet to the uneven spray of jagged boulders below the sounding chamber. The boulders were solid, and there were enough of them to traverse a thin path back to the beach he had landed on, but they looked treacherous. Waves continuously pounded them, splattering the cliff face with sheets of white spray. The water would be freezing, the waves relentless.

Stillman stepped back to the focus and began fishing the nylon line out of his backpack. Manchenkov sat near his former prison gathering his strength, wearing a thick wool coat Stillman had located in one of the bunker rooms. Weichs watched blandly as Stillman looped the line on his forearm, measuring out fifty feet. The German had obediently brought the pack back from the surface room without comment.

Something briefly played across Stillman's mind and was gone. He couldn't shake the feeling it was something important.

Then he secured the line and threw it over the side.

"Twenty minutes," Weichs groaned.

Stillman helped Manchenkov to his feet.

The struggle to the base of the cliff was terrible. Weichs traversed the line without difficulty and stared up, a white shape on a gray rock, tiny and indistinct. He didn't attempt to run. Stillman would have preferred to go first, but he had to go down beneath Manchenkov, to support the Russian as they slowly inched downward. Twice, the Russian's arms gave way and only Stillman's shoulders and iron grip saved him from the rocks below.

"Apologies!" was all Manchenkov would shout over the whistling wind and crashing waves. "Apologies!"

Finally, they found themselves in the freezing spray of the surf. Verbal communication was not possible above the roar of the ocean, and Stillman waved his right arm madly to the south. Weichs began inching his way along the treacherous wet rocks towards the beach with his back to the cliff face. Manchenkov and Stillman followed at a snail's pace. Water ran into all orifices, inching its way into his suit, into his eyes, his nose, stinging, biting. The Russian was a shape of pure exhaustion, a caricature of human endurance. Coughs and fever wracked his frail body, water seared his already weary eyes.

Stillman clutched the shivering Russian and continued forward.

When they reached the beach Stillman felt the Russian's legs give way. Manchenkov fell face forward before Stillman could grab him. The stick man landed face down in the sand with a thud. Stillman spun him over and listened for breath, dropping his carbine to the ground.

Weichs, clutching his sides, stared off in the distance in wonder as Stillman squatted next to the ruined form.

Above them, a hazy aurora borealis played on the peak of the cliff.

"Manchenkov!" Stillman shouted, but the Russian didn't stir.

"The water must dampen the field effect," Weichs mumbled to himself, eyeing the strange lights on the cliff.

"Nikolai!" Stillman screamed, gently slapping the unconscious man's face. No response. The Russian's chest rose and fell, weakly, and his pulse was thready and faint.

"Weichs, help me move him to the boat." Stillman gestured vaguely towards where O'Brien had stored the raft.

A metallic click sounded behind him.

"For the Reich," Weichs announced bravely. Stillman spun from the Russian, lifting his carbine from the sand—too late. The little German scientist stood three feet away with Schanburg's pistol pointed at his chest. Stillman dropped his carbine to the sand.

I forgot the pistol, Stillman thought calmly to himself.

"Weichs, I can get you out of all this—"

The gunshot was sharp and echoed off the cliff face and rocks in a

million directions. Stillman dropped to the ground suddenly. It was not a matter of sapped strength. It just was not possible for him to stand after the lancing pain shot through his chest, where the bullet had carved a hole and blown out through his back. Face down in the sand he felt completely helpless, unable to move. The noise of the surf seemed inordinately loud. The sand beneath his head trembled with every wave break.

"You stupid American!" Weichs shrieked in German and stumbled, half-crazed, towards the rocks where O'Brien had stashed their raft.

Stillman had been foolish but he was experienced, skilled in ways the soft scientist would never be. Weichs had put one through his chest, but the ruined Russian had survived God knows how many tortures and debasements at the hands of the Nazis—and Stillman had not spent months in a concentration camp. Something in Stillman stirred, some desperate force of will. A reservoir of perfect calm and power brought Stillman up to his knees. His body was numb with adrenalin as he shambled up behind Weichs like a pulp-magazine monster. The surf roared as he fell on Weichs, who never even knew what hit him. Stillman looped his elbow around the little German's neck and locked it in his other arm. He popped Weichs' skull from its base by throwing his weight behind his arm and dropping the scientist backwards onto the ground. The German twitched once and was still.

"*Cocksucker*," Stillman groaned. The two forms remained still on the sand for a long time, Stillman unable to rise from the pain. Eventually he shouted, when he freed his arm from around the German's neck, and then was quiet. The pain rose and fell in waves like the surf. Stillman struggled to his feet and swayed. His shadow was cast out ahead of him on the beach by the aurora on the hill.

He heard the footsteps behind him in the sand, but by then it was too late.

"*Kill you Weichs!*" the Russian shrieked in German, his voice echoing off the cliffs. Manchenkov's mad blue eyes tracked Stillman but saw nothing. The fever and fatigue had taken the Russian, transporting him to a world where everyone was a bitter enemy. Where everyone was German.

Manchenkov's claw-like, sore-covered hand was raised in a martial stance. Then he was on Stillman.

The knife he had given the Russian, his own knife, sunk into Stillman's left cheek before he even knew what hit him. His eyes instantly closed and no force on earth could open them. The pain was intense and grinding and then faded into numbness and shrieking and struggle. Warm liquid began to spill down his throat, forcing him to breathe madly just to stay alive. He spit blood out of his mouth in between plumes of vapor from his nose.

The Russian was insanely strong, impossibly strong, and he was on top of him. The knife tip struck Stillman's face twice and then the pommel smashed into his head. The exact sound of a walnut being cracked erupted in the center of his brain—more than sound. Manchukov smashed the knife again and again into his head, shrieking insanities. The Russian had seemingly forgotten how to use the knife, and now swung it like a hammer, blunt end first, cutting his own fingers to ribbons as he madly gripped the blade.

Stillman struck out blindly and connected with the Russian's shoulder. Manchukov spilled to the sand and all fight left him as instantly as it had come. Stillman tried to open his eyes but could only open one to a sliver. The right side of his head felt numb and fat and wet. The world looked sandy and red.

Stillman staggered towards the rocks moaning, dragging the helpless Russian behind him.

"And then we met the *Dauntless*," Stillman finished. The shells outside the tent had stopped falling sometime in the past. A point which had gone by unchecked.

"It is funny, Major—excuse me, *Colonel* Stillman. But when I crawled from the bunker and found Weichs on the beach, I assumed you had lied about the air-raid."

"I didn't. I lied about the time." Stillman coughed.

"I know it. I know it. I saw the planes. You were true to your word, if not the letter of it," Schanburg finished, holding his hands up in a mock gesture of surrender. "What happened to the Russian?"

"He died of pneumonia," Stillman grated.

"It is a good lesson. Russians can never be trusted."

"That Russian was worth more than your whole shitty country—even before we burned it to the ground."

Schanburg looked like he had been struck.

Stillman remained silent. Brooding.

"Listen, *Colonel* Stillman. We met under circumstances beyond our control. I understand that. We know now who is going to win this war. I did as I was ordered to do. I wish to cooperate with your Army. When your counter-intelligence men return, I will be moved to England for debriefing. Soon, I will be working and *living* in your homeland. We will be, how do you say—*countrymen*. Then perhaps you will show me the proper respect." Schanburg's lip quivered over his yellow teeth. Sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Who did you speak to?" Stillman asked incredulously. The disbelief in the American's voice pleased the German, who smiled.

"The CIC men with Patton's force. They are interested in me, I have connections with the *Abwehr*, the *Gestapo*, and obviously the SS. They, unlike you, seem to understand the gravity of the situation in the east," Schanburg curtly replied, his voice full of contempt. "Something your naive mind can't seem to grasp."

It made sense. It was the CIC men who'd dumped Schanburg's name in the files of captured German officers. That's how he had come to the attention of Delta Green.

"Schanburg, you'll never be an American," Stillman smoothly intoned.

"Ah, I see. I will be beneath you somehow, yes? Even though we will share a single flag. I thought all men in your country were equally created?"

"No. You'll never make it to America at all."

Something like fear spread over Schanburg's face as he realized Stillman was serious. The German's eyes played back and forth rapidly around the tent, like an animal marking escape routes.

"What—what do—you are here about Fécamp? The Resonator? I will tell you about these things, I will cooperate . . ."

"You've misunderstood my purpose here. I don't give a shit about that device." Stillman smiled.

"What?"

"We have diagrams of it back in London, hell, we've even got Eisenbein himself. I don't need some second-rate intelligence officer's ideas on such a thing. Nope. You're here, or that is, I'm here, for another reason."

"Let's talk about the Karotechia, shall we?"

All the color drained from Schanburg's face.

"So the word means nothing to you?" Stillman continued.

"No. Nothing," Schanburg replied stiffly.

"Where are the *Sonnerad* runes you used to wear at your lapels?"

"What?" Schanburg stalled.

"The curved swastikas, what did those markings mean?"

"They were just . . . symbols."

"Fine. Let us talk about *Aktion Gotterdammerung*."

Schanburg's face fixed itself into a mask of horror. All pretense of his cool calm had fled the instant the word Karotechia had been muttered. Now, with *Gotterdammerung* on the table, his eyebrows rose until his forehead was a mass of wrinkles. His uneven mouth opened once, and then thinking better of it, shut solidly.

"No comment, then?" Stillman sunnily asked and stood. "Fine. I'll talk about it. We probably know more about it than you do, anyway."

"*Aktion Gotterdammerung* is the last gasp of your compatriots, the Karotechia. It is a research project which uncovered a formula which could

call things from outside. Things like you called at Fécamp, but much more powerful. The experiment at Naudbaum castle was a practice run. A threat to the Allies . . ." Stillman glanced at the German, whose mouth now hung open.

"But of course, you'd know nothing about that. You're just a peon in the big scheme of things.

"The higher-ups, your bosses, wanted to get the Allies' attention. They filmed one of their attempts at the use of this formula, at Naudbaum castle in Bavaria. Naudbaum is nothing more than a crater now.

"They were stupid enough to believe that we would negotiate with madmen. They were foolish enough to think this evened the playing field. We let some of them think that . . . but others . . ." Stillman smiled—and then frowned suddenly, as if some thought just struck him.

The shells began to pound outside once more. Stillman sat back down and put his foot up on the card table. The lamp vibrated once and was still.

"Well, Gotterdammerung. Gotterdammerung is a group of specially trained Karotechia personnel, waiting for a signal. These men will surrender to Allied forces, and when the news comes down that Germany has finally fallen, these men are to call those *things* once more, the things that leveled Naudbaum castle. This time, though, those things will be brought fully into our world. Their manifestation would make the disaster at Naudbaum castle look like a trifling. There would be nothing left. No cities, no people. No Earth."

"How . . ." Schanburg croaked, but Stillman held up one thin finger. The SS man fell back into a moody, stunned silence.

"The problem with this plan . . . and trust me, very, very few people know this, even on our end. The problem with this plan is that the texts that contain the 'calling formula,' which are disguised as Red Cross pocket bibles . . ." Stillman dropped a wink at Schanburg as the German clutched his tiny bible in both hands convulsively. He then continued: ". . . are flawed. They were altered on purpose. The ritual at Naudbaum and the ritual in those bibles are just a little bit different. Just a touch. Just to make sure they don't work."

Schanburg's eyes had grown so wide that the whole of his pupils were visible.

"How?" he sputtered.

"Someone on the inside. One of the men who made the Naudbaum castle incident happen, and who also knew we would never stop until every Nazi laid down his weapon and the Reich was a memory. It was simple, really. Someone in your precious little group had a family. We got them out to Switzerland. In exchange, he turned on your group and altered the rituals during the printing. Right now there's fifty men just like you, men who

think they hold the key to the world in their pocket, in POW camps in France and Belgium, when in truth all they have is a crappy *faux-bible*. How does that get you?"

But Schanburg couldn't answer.

"Anything you want to say?" Stillman asked, sated.

"How?" Schanburg replied, voice hoarse.

"What are you, an Indian?" Stillman retorted. "That was a joke."

"A joke," Schanburg repeated numbly.

"So here we are again after all these years. Some would call it *kismet*, fate, synchronicity. But I like to think Manchenkov would call it justice . . ." Stillman clapped his hands and glanced around jauntily. He stood, grimacing as his knees popped. He unholstered his .45 pistol, a bulky silver-black weapon, and chambered a round with an adroit gesture.

"I'm gonna enjoy this."

Schanburg stood suddenly, kicking the chair he'd sat in back into the mud with a wet thud.

"Hold it," Stillman said and leveled the pistol at Schanburg's chest. The German froze instantly.

Stillman's anger slowly gathered in the tent, silently, like a summer storm. Twice as the minutes ticked by, a tiny contented smile played across his lips. Schanburg trembled before him, eyes downcast in the mud.

"*Are you a member of the Karotechia?*" Stillman finally bellowed, spit flying from his lips and his eyes shrinking to tiny martial slits. Schanburg held his hands inanely up in front of his head, as if to protect it from the gunshot. Strange high-pitched squealing sounds erupted from his mouth randomly, the sounds of a wounded child.

"*No! No! I do not know this group!*" he shrieked, shaking his hands in the air.

Stillman grinned.

"Well, that's too bad there, Schanburg. See, I only have a shoot-to-kill order on *suspected* members of the Karotechia." The gun found its bead on Schanburg's head. The hammer was cocked. "If only you had confirmed my suspicions I wouldn't have the authority to shoot you now . . ."

"WAIT I AM—"

Schanburg's voice was lost in the roar of the pistol.

Outside, in the rain, the shells continued to fall. ▲

Until recently a professor in France, Rob—Doc Furey, “Man of Tin”—is a zoologist currently living in Virginia with his French-native wife and young daughter. A hard-bitten Irishman with biceps and balls of steel, he’s braved the plagues of Africa and the predators of the Amazon. In this remarkable and ghoulish tale, Rob looks in on the UFO group SaucerWatch, who in the larger Delta Green mythology have gotten too close to a government cover-up of alien activity. However, the aliens are themselves a cover-up, for a far darker and stranger conspiracy forthwith described . . .

RUSSIAN DOLLS

ROBERT E. FUREY

<<DELTA GREEN EYES ONLY>>

CASE FILE: 00987

SUBJECT: Youngerman, Dorian (see attached file); member of civilian UFO special-interest group known as SaucerWatch

BASIS FOR COMMITMENT: Catatonia

RELEVANCE: Found by op team researching UFO phenomena in desert outside Gila Bend, AZ; his companions confirmed missing

NOTES:

11/5/97 Patient easily prompted from apparent catatonia into a fugue state, in which he relates the appended story with surprising recall; note the almost word-for-word correspondence of transcripts from recordings taken days apart. Appears to have been programmed, but for what purpose, we have no idea. One notable event: early this morning Dr. N asked me what

symbolic meaning the Greys might have. We were in earshot of the patient, who responded (or seemed to be responding to us): "Tools, transmitters, for the people of Yuggoth." Then followed with something incoherent.

"For *whom*?" I asked.

"For us. Vermillion mounds bilaterally symmetrical amid fluid-filled bottles and metal pans. Eospace comprises no colors. Lines race unstoppable through distant events. . . ." He then continued with the transcript monologue. We could get nothing more out of him. Tomorrow, we'll re-examine the circumstances that triggered this exchange. . . .

For several nights before the voyage, Dorian experienced disturbing, synesthetic dreams from which he couldn't awaken:

Eospace comprised no colors and supported even less. Lines raced unstoppable through distant events until finding their origin, twisting into spheres encompassing as much volume inside as otherwise. Cyclopean boulders of adjacent realities pulverized worlds caught between interfaces where no physical laws existed. Here they looped in transit between a place. For wasn't all of the universe paraphysically alike?

<Human occupation of physical space is—present declarative/logical derivative tense—an issue of pending irresolution> they said.

<Time feeds—present declarative/logical derivative—itself. Destruction approaches—future imperative/logical unity—unstoppable> they replied.

Ahead of them a probe squeezed from behind and replaced a unity of eospace. They shuttled down the ray and twisted the birth cluster of the first to domesticate fire. That species remained a scavenging night creature. The probe never existed.

<Our dealings—past declarative/logical constructive—with their power of state proceed—present declarative/logical derivative—at a rate in danger of failure.>

<Maintaining a single source of data hinders—present declarative/logical constructive—success.>

<Pity they exist—illogical paradatum—as linear temporal entities> they said. They immediately forgot the previous, unimportant phrase.

<A second data source would augment—future addendum/logical assumptive—the speed to a conclusion of necessary observations.> They weighed parallel realities along strings yet unstrung.

<The power of state reacts—present declarative/data presentative—in predictable ways. Individuals react—present declarative/data presentative—less so, and in more interesting ways.>

<Anarchistic tendencies of single humans should be—logical assumptive—

more applicable to the study.>

<Competition, suspicion, and duress provide—logical progressive—impetus for action, reaction, and interaction among humans.>

Reaching forward with a puff of spores, they exchanged metaplasms. Logic accordance reached completion as they allowed space to fall in around them. The solar system would not realize that it re-existed with no experienced past save for memories guarded by them, and the painfully unnatural lateral flow of human neurotransmitters through one-way synapses.

In the preconscious moments afterward, it occurred to him this was bleed-over noise like you got at times on the telephone, when you'd hear snatches of someone else's conversation. After he woke, of course, this seemed absurd. They were merely bad dreams not worth mentioning to the group. He kept this attitude, even when Rick revealed that he had spoken with the aliens.

It was a clear night, as most nights are in the desert. The group stood silently, waiting in the chill that had fallen over the sands; scrub brush and cactus reared darkly against the horizon and sky like ghosts at the edge of perception, lit only with the ephemeral hush of starlight under a new moon.

Then a point of shadow far above resolved rapidly into a small saucer craft, descending with the silence of drifting snow. In moments, it touched the desert, then extended its ramp-door in an expansive, languid salutation. They waited. Nothing. It was just as Rick had informed them—this was their ship; *they* were to be the delegation—a gesture that recognized the equality of their two species.

The group clustered almost reverently around. The darting lights above Area 51 were forgotten, questions and doubts buried forever. All previous proof of visitors—poorly lit video footage, fuzzy photographs, odd snatches of radio noise and communication—were nothing now, here in the physical presence of this craft.

Rick displayed his pleasure, shaking as if with the adrenaline of profound discovery. Arms crossed and clearly having second thoughts, Joyce stood farther back than anyone, near the small pile of supplies. Agnes, in bright nylon hiking vest and heavy hiking boots, had already hefted her daypack to her shoulders, ready to go. Brice's lips were pressed tightly together. He had been a rancher; his relatively small herd had been mutilated by extraterrestrials, sending him to bankruptcy, and making him a believer. Dorian, who for some reason was experiencing intense *déjà vu*, suddenly found his mental preparation for this moment insufficient to the final thrust of reality.

"All my life I've been waiting for them. Everything that comes after will be a reflection of this moment," said Rick. "Look around; don't forget what you see, it will be a pivotal point for everything that comes after."

Something made Dorian take notice of Rick's philosophical musing. Exactly what, wasn't clear; it was often Rick's wont to muse. Nevertheless, a shiver rose uncomfortably from inside Dorian. A swelling, nameless emotion squirming at the bottom of a very deep well.

Suddenly it dissipated. Dorian laughed, giving Rick a fraternal clap on the shoulder. "For once, I wish I'd said that."

In some unspoken yet communal realization of moment, the group collected their small pile of daypacks and supply containers and entered the enigmatically waiting craft. Once they had boarded, the door self-sealed behind them.

It had all begun with Rick's vivid dreams of deep space and Pluto, dreams that with time had clearly become direct communication with an alien presence. Why not talks with Washington? The alien had explained that communication was difficult; only certain individuals were able to hear, and fewer still able to understand. Rick's consciousness perfectly catalyzed its nearby space to allow communication; once he was discovered, they wanted closer contact.

Even the rank and file of SaucerWatch, those not trained in the scientific method, had been skeptical. Most of the close encounters thus far recorded had been from surprised and even unwilling abductees. This was different. This was explicit, a direct invitation to the stars, by the stars.

The aliens offered the use of a starship, exploration of the sky by a small group of SaucerWatch volunteers. However, the offer came with one small stipulation, that the maiden voyage be limited. . . .

But the incredible limit they had placed on the crew was "no farther than Pluto." Pluto! "One giant leap for mankind" would be a forgotten footnote after their voyage from the American Southwest was revealed to the people of Earth.

They looked out the blister window in the spare circular "lounge." Without feeling any tug of acceleration, they witnessed the ship dive away from the earth. "Don't worry, it's the autopilot, as promised," Rick said, then laughed. "I don't feel a thing. There's proof positive of how they can change direction and speed so damn fast." Dorian, however, tensed at the incongruity of perceptual information. The others seemed to share his unease. They shuffled their feet, and watched.

Once in space, all perception of movement came from observed parallax shifts of objects in the heavens. The moon, which had been new on the desert floor, blazed full now from its far side. There were no vast gray-blue lunar "seas" here, only a finely pock-scarred face. The Earth shone as the clichéd blue marble that nevertheless elicited not a few tears from each member, including Dorian.

The moon and Earth diminished visibly in size after just a short time. The sun itself moved through the Zodiac with the speeding passage of the craft. Rick calculated that their speed would best be measured in AUs, astronomical units, per day. Given that, he said, they might have only a few weeks before climbing to Pluto's orbit, six billion kilometers higher in the solar gravity well. Rick often shook his head, explaining, whenever asked, that he was thinking about their velocity. Eventually, even apparent motion had all but disappeared, distances to reference objects had become so great.

The crew, or more correctly passengers, fell into quiet patterns of personal preference. As days grew to weeks, they played more cards, read more. Rick rarely left the bowed array of windows stretching across one side of the craft.

Almost two weeks into the launch, Dorian awoke from sleep to an unpleasant smell. He didn't know who was awake and who was not. Individual circadian rhythms had diverged on-board the ship—no responsibilities, no duties, nothing to mark time save for wrist watches that meant very little so far from home. But that smell would surely wake someone else too.

The scent wafted as if from a room left closed, or a closet full of long-forgotten damp wool. Or toadstools sprouted from the nostrils of mutilated livestock. It was a shifting and slippery smell, recalling and even magnifying every horrible memory and feeling from his life. He remembered his dog, fallen in a well and pulled out days later covered with translucent, gluey sheets of bacteria. Unknowingly they had been drinking from the well all that time. He remembered his grandmother . . . found behind . . .

He yelled.

Brice rolled to his feet, sleep gone from his eyes, his hand thrust beneath the heavy flannel jacket while he scanned the cabin. "What is it?"

Rick and Joyce came from the forward control cabin. Agnes, who had also been sleeping, sat bolt upright.

"Jesus! A bad dream. Is that all?" Brice said, rubbing hard at his eyes. "This thing is too damn small."

Agnes went to him and crouched by where he sat in his sleeping bag: "Were you having a bad dream?"

"No, it was that odor," he said. "It got into my head, reminded me of horrible things. Don't you smell it?"

Everyone sniffed several times, heads turning like radar dishes.

"I don't smell a damn thing," Brice said, sitting on the floor again, his back against the bulkhead, wrists draped over widely spread knees.

"I do," said Joyce, taking slow sniffs. "Not strongly, but I smell it."

Rick said, "With the lot of us closed up in this small space, is it any wonder things are getting ripe?"

"It isn't that," Dorian said.

"Why don't you stay awake for a little while?" Agnes spoke before Dorian had a chance to reply. "We'll play cards or something and . . . Hey! Now I smell something too."

Agnes, with sharp bird-like motions, began looking around the room.

"Now what?" Brice stood again, stretching.

"It's gone now."

"Not for me," Dorian said. "There is something definitely wrong with the ventilators, or something."

"You're losing it," Brice said, shaking his head.

"No, goddamn it!" said Dorian. "Something's happening on this ship!" It was a long time before he managed to get back to sleep.

<Memories, real or implanted, act-present declarative/logical constructive—on behavior in a peculiarly emergent pattern of control> they said.

<Particularly when triggered—temporal unity/logical associative—with the most primitive of their data accumulation systems.>

<Small groups have—present declarative/logical constructive—unpredictable collective reactions> they said.

<Single units demonstrate—present declarative/logical constructive—a powerful ability to dictate small group collective behavior.>

<Further investigate—logical internal imperative/logical continuance—value and influence of unit> they said, initiating metaplasms exchange.

The twin planet Pluto-Charon hung icy and silent in the feeble glow, the sun itself reduced to little more than a brilliant diamond. Shimmering opalescence from the Milky Way fell across the landscape, lighting the craft's approach. Finally, the globe of Pluto had become the splendid desolation of a tangible world, here at the solar system's frontier.

Lights from a web-work of structures integrated in Pluto's surface, once "ahead" and now "down," threw shadows laterally across vast plains of black ice, shadows sharply delimited. Domes and a lattice of connecting lines spread out in repetitive shapes, like a sprawling carbon molecule stretching to a horizon that never got quite far enough away.

A triple-jawed dome screwed open, exposing a dilating portal beneath. Now with Charon directly overhead, itself a ghostly disk amid a splash of stars, the craft descended vertically into the opening mouth. Utter darkness enveloped the ship upon entering the shadowed interior. Stolen vestiges of star glow dimmed as the dome leaves closed again above their heads, until finally they were left with an implacable absence of light.

"Hey!" Rick said. "Do you feel it?" He stood there, flexing his knees. "The ship's artificial gravity system must have shut down. I feel lighter." He jumped and settled with a noticeable slowness. "Wahoo wee! Pluto!"

But once the ship rested, no delegation came to meet them, no messages of welcome arrived. A waiting began where hours felt like the days taken in transit, testing even Rick's enthusiasm.

Outside, the temperature itself seemed alive, a crackling few Kelvins mounting siege against one small bubble of heat. Engines silent, ventilation system too—although no one had noticed exactly when it had shut down. Their apprehensions grew sharper. Dorian had a very hard time just managing to breathe. Monsters seemed to shuffle beyond the veil of darkness, oozed toward the ship on gelatinous bellies, affixed to its walls with tentacles underslung from mind-consuming jaws of filth.

With the cold seeping through the bulkheads, they all huddled together in the forward control area staring out one of the direct-view access portals. Black—formless, infinite black—surrounded the ship like a digesting amoeba. Half-light from the incomprehensible control panel threw their reflections just beyond the pane so that their own concerned faces stared back at them.

"We can't hope to understand them," Rick said, responding to unspoken questions from the others as much as trying to dampen his own growing malaise.

"What the hell is going on then? Why is it still dark? Do they know we're here?" A torrent of rhetorical questions poured from Joyce. What might have been hysteria made her voice shrill in the enclosed area of the control room. And hysteria was an infectious disease.

"It'll be all right, Joyce," Dorian said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders, pulling her close. "It's been a wondrous trip, and it's not over. You'll see." Patting her shoulders, he fixed his gaze beyond the darkness.

"No! There's something out there, coming for us," she said, her voice muffled in Dorian's shirt.

"Cut it out! It's just your goddamn imagination," Brice said, although unconvincingly. He too stared intently through the array of windows, set in one section of the craft like spider eyes.

Agnes spun on Brice. "Leave her alone! At least she's honest with her . . . Oh Christ!"

Two Greys stood just outside the control room by the airlock, long, anemic arms waving slowly, fingers curling and extending like placid strands of kelp. Their almond-shaped, insectoid eyes reflected dark and distorted images; the lipless slashes of their mouths worked soundlessly. They were naked, but the withered state of their sex made it impossible to guess at gender.

Dorian disentangled his shirt from Joyce's clutching fingers and approached the pair of Greys. He took small, slow steps to reach them.

"I didn't hear the airlock open," Brice said. "Where have they been the last weeks?"

Joyce turned to Agnes but kept her gaze on Dorian: "What are you doing? Be careful."

"It's all right, Joyce," Rick said. "They aren't interested in harming us. They could have done that in New Mexico." The sudden thought of the New Mexican desert being so distant sent a chill through Dorian, reviving his wonder at just where they were at the moment. Four hours of light-speed, of space-time, separated them from that place. Simultaneity did not even remotely exist between them.

Dorian stopped before the placid-seeming Greys, his warped reflection large in their obsidian eyes. The Greys showed no reaction, continuing in their inexplicable motion.

"Do you hear me?" Dorian spoke barely above a whisper while peering intently into the face of one alien. He reached out with a single, hesitating finger, then abruptly stopped when mechanical sounds began within the bulkhead.

Behind the Greys, the inner airlock door swung outward with a hiss, suggesting an imperfect pressurization match. Still silent, they turned and entered the antechamber, stopping when just sufficiently far enough for the door to swing closed behind them.

Cycling lights on the bulkhead above the door brightened as Rick rushed to the small view port. Agnes came up beside Dorian and watched with him as the outer door opened.

"There's air out there," Rick said. "They wanted to show us we could leave the ship."

Light flared out from the ship through the open airlock. As far as they could see, the floor was a dull gray, as smooth and gray as the aliens' domed heads. The Greys stood stock still before the open door.

"What are they doing?" In her struggle to get a better view, Agnes spoke almost directly into Dorian's right ear.

Before either Rick or Dorian could offer a guess, one of the aliens began to move in an odd, stiff motion that clearly became a forward fall. As the Grey struck the ground, it shattered into glittering grains and fragments that skittered beyond the reach of the light. The second alien too fell forward, its remains mingling with those of the first.

Dorian felt nauseous, sickened and horrified more by the senselessness of what he saw than anything. "My God! They walked right out into that freezing fucking vacuum," he said as he turned and slumped against a bulkhead.

Mechanical whirring from the airlock drew Rick's attention; he looked back through the small view portal.

"The outer door is closing," he said.

Lights above the airlock door blinked in succession, but didn't stop, as the outer door snugged shut. The sequence continued and the airlock mechanism began cycling again.

The inner door hissed open; air around the inside of the seal fumed with condensation from the cold that had leaked from outside the craft's exterior lock. A whiff of fungal decay filled the cabin; Dorian could tell by the others' flaring, twitching nostrils that they registered it too. The lights continued to cycle, even though the inner door remained open.

"This must be some kind of malfunction," Rick said, his face a mask of disbelief and confusion.

Brice rushed forward and pulled uselessly at the heavy airlock door. "Somebody help me here for Christ's sake!"

Dorian pulled at the edge of the door, but there was no handle on the inside and so no real way to completely close it, even if it had moved. Joyce began to wail and even Agnes started to cry; Rick only repeated a muttered, "Why? Why?"

A sudden gale of frigidity hammered through the airlock as it opened to the dome, immediately replaced with unexpected warmth. Panels of lights outside the vessel flared bright and washed away the legion of unseen monsters with which Dorian had populated the darkness.

Except for the sound of deep breaths, the cabin was silent. Rick recovered first and stepped forward, wanting to be the first outside, the first man to set foot on Pluto.

The craft sat centered in a wide circle, one of several in a vast, hanger-like area. They were alone; only the one circle was occupied. Rick stepped from the open airlock. Save for the freeze-dried remains of the Greys crumbling to a powdery blow beneath his feet, the floor spread clear and featureless.

"I knew it!" he said. "They don't want to hurt us. We can't begin to understand their methods." Turning back to the ship, he said, "Come on, Dorian. You guys can't stay in there. Whatever they have in mind, it isn't to leave us alone, or they wouldn't have opened the door." He turned and moved away from the vessel. The dome's vastness swallowed the sound of his footfalls. It wasn't until Rick was a good distance from the open door that Dorian and the others followed. Things were horribly wrong; Rick was insane. But going forward seemed no worse than staying behind.

When they had all left the confines of the ship, a door in the distant wall slid open and a brightly lit corridor stretched beyond.

Once they left the hanger dome, they entered a long corridor. Given what they had seen from the sky, this hallway would have multiple crosswise connections and would eventually lead to a similar dome. Along the right side were locked doors with pictogram- or script-embossed plaques; the other side of the hallway was dotted with tiny windows overlooking Pluto's surface. Brice eyed the doors; Rick, the windows.

Lighting fell oddly, emanating in an omnidirectional way that precluded shadows. Their faces seemed washed out, lines of character gone. Perhaps it was this softness that helped ease the tension after the odd suicides of the Greys.

"So," Brice said, "can any of you read Martian?"

"Martian?" Agnes looked askance at Brice.

"This stuff on the doors," he said, running his finger over the recessed markings.

"That's derogatory!" Agnes snapped.

Brice laughed. "Since when?"

Dorian felt a sudden panic as he remembered something. "Hey, hey," he said. "No one thought to bring the packs."

"What if we get thirsty?" Joyce asked, suddenly stopping.

"It's not the word, Brice; it's the way you say it."

"What would you like me to say, Agnes?" Brice stopped too.

"How about 'Visitors,' and without the smart-ass inflection." Agnes had kept walking.

"Well," Rick said, "actually, I think we're the 'Visitors' here."

"Then let me rephrase my question: Can anyone read 'Host'?" Brice laughed and continued walking, rapping one extended knuckle on each door he passed.

"I think we should stay close to the ship and our stuff," Joyce said.

"I doubt anyone is going to steal anything," Brice said. "They've been such good 'hosts' so far."

Dorian looked over his shoulder to where the door to the hanger dome cut a dark rectangle at the end of the hallway. "We can keep track of things, Joyce. If we pay attention, we can't get lost here." He was silent for a moment, then continued: "But we should go back there from time to time, use it as a base or something. At least until we know what's what."

Moving down the hallway, Dorian noted that the distance between every two doors along the right included three windows along the left. The pattern was unflinching, the light as even and ubiquitous as the tomb-like silence.

"Where's Joyce?" Agnes had stopped and was looking back the way they had come. The hallway seemed to bend downward; the doorway to the dome had disappeared, lost below the curvature of the planet. Even given Pluto's small diameter, they had gone quite a distance. "Joyce!"

"All right, don't panic," Brice said, pushing his way past Agnes and heading back. "She can't be far, and she can't be lost. We haven't taken a single side corridor, so it's a straight shot to the ship."

"She said she was thirsty," Dorian said. "She went to get the packs."

"Okay," Rick said, "I'll keep going, won't take a turn, and meet up with you later."

"Out of the question," Brice said, turning to Rick. "We stick together all the time."

"He's right, Rick," Agnes said. "We've got to stay together."

Rick turned to Dorian, but gave in without argument when he offered no support. Dorian resolved to keep an eye on Rick. He glanced back, saw Rick looking farther along the corridor, then turn and follow.

They called Joyce's name, but felt the sound didn't carry far along the length of the corridor. Knocking on and calling through doors produced nothing.

"If she's in the ship, we're wasting time," Rick said. It was obvious he wanted to continue exploring and that he thought Joyce was not in any danger. "Why don't we just go directly to the ship, and if she isn't there, then work our way back?"

"And if she isn't at the ship and comes looking for us?"

"We have to do something, Agnes," Rick said.

"And," Brice said, "we'll cover a lot of ground a lot quicker." He didn't wait for a consensus, and started to trot.

Dorian experienced an odd feeling in his head that resolved into sounds: the buzz of an approaching gnat, someone's crying.

Agnes said, "Stop." She tucked the hair behind her ears and cocked her head. "She's close." Dorian's heart was pumping hard, but the light, the whole situation, rendered the experience dreamlike, detached.

"Why is she crying?" Rick asked.

Brice gave him a sidelong glance and said, "She's farther up ahead. Come on."

When a door hissed open to his left, Brice drew back in surprise. They could clearly hear Joyce now, and he motioned for the others to stay behind him as, to Dorian's relief, he put his hand under his jacket by his armpit and drew a gun.

Rick stared at the weapon for a moment, eyes widening, neck veins distending, "You fucker! What are you doing bringing that along? Do you realize the position you've put us in? We're diplomats, you son of a—" He looked around incredulously from side to side, met Dorian's gaze. Once again, he wasn't getting any support.

"I'm here!" Joyce called.

Agnes called over Brice's shoulder: "We're here, Joyce. Are you all right?"

"Scared," was all she said.

Brice followed his gun hand around the corner and into the room. Joyce lay folded in the corner, staring up at two Greys that stood almost touching her with their spindly legs. The Greys made languid waves with their arms and fingers, slow repetitions of motion. Other than that, the room was empty.

"Get away from her," Brice said, moving cautiously inside. When they didn't respond, Brice raised his gun.

As Rick approached Brice, Dorian followed, ready to stop him if he interfered, but Rick merely touched Brice's elbow. "Don't," he pleaded. "They haven't touched her."

Rick placed himself between the gun barrel and the Greys and spoke quietly to Joyce: "I'll come get you. Stand up slowly; be calm." He outstretched his right hand. "They won't hurt you."

The Greys seemed oblivious to what was happening around them. They did not change their behavior; they continued the slow movements of arms and fingers. Joyce contorted herself to crawl away while keeping at least one eye directed at them. Dorian nodded at her as she glanced at him. The Greys didn't follow. When Brice backed from the room, the last one out, the aliens were still acting as they were when found. The door hissed firmly closed.

Joyce hugged Dorian as Agnes stroked her hair.

"It's over, Joyce," she said. "You're safe now."

"What happened?" Brice had not reholstered his pistol. He kept his gaze on the door.

"I don't know," she said, looking at Brice. "One second I was behind you all and then I wasn't. Those things came at me, and I ran through an open door."

"That's all?" His eyes narrowed, surrounded by lines so deep that even the odd lighting couldn't wash them away. "They never touched you?"

"Then you came in," she said, and turned back to Dorian.

"They didn't hurt her, Brice," Rick said. "She's fine. Aren't you, Joyce?"

"I guess so. I was just scared." She started to sob. "Didn't know what was happening."

Dorian held her and patted her back. He had the odd feeling he was calming not only Joyce but the whole group. It was now up to him to supply direction. "Why don't we go back to the ship, eat, rest. I'm sure that we could all use a rest."

The doorway leading to the dome still lay below the horizon, but they knew where it should be. As the door seemed to rise above the downward curve of the floor, Dorian felt tensions ease. They found the ship as they had left it. Those that could eat, ate. Everyone rested.

They said, <They have mistaken—present declarative/logical derivative—the conclusion.>

<Perhaps intuiting—data subjective/logical derivative—no point to further discourse.>

<Immediacy instigates—circumstantial probabilistic/logical compli-

ance—the desire and need of reaching conclusions> they said.

<Biological hazards will present—future declarative/logical constructive—impetus to consider.>

Metaplasms mingled among them.

To their left, as they wandered slowly down the corridor again, the small windows gave teasing glimpses of Pluto's surface beyond. Painting a picture with words, Rick told them of what they might expect on a stroll across the landscape, a planetary ice forest condensed directly out of the Oort Cloud. At the ambient fifteen Kelvins, water could be worked like iron. Somewhere out there, volcanoes spewed molten nitrogen, their cones growing wide from an ash comprised entirely of frozen elemental gases. Here, rivers of liquid hydrogen could flow uphill.

"Do you realize that with quantum effects, there might even be some kind of indigenous life out there?"

Rick stopped every few windows to press his face against the cool glass, trying to see that much farther. But the window area was too small, the glass recessed too deeply, to afford more than a frustratingly narrow view.

"I've got to see more," Rick said, slowly punching the wall.

"Maybe there's a bigger window ahead," Brice said. "Let's go, Rick. You're slowing us down."

"Take some time, man," Rick said. "Slowing us down from what?" Rick stopped at another window, his curiosity stronger than Brice's pointless need to hurry. "Just look out there! We might never see anything like this again." His face pressed against a glass. "And of course, who knows what we'll see next."

"Come on, Brice," Dorian said, "we don't have anywhere to run."

"Really. And we need to stay close together," Agnes said. "I don't think we want to lose anybody again."

"Look! Oh shit! Look! There's a spout," Rick said, and took off running down the hallway.

"Didn't you hear what Agnes said?" Joyce yelled. "Where are you going?"

"Finding a bigger window," Rick called over his shoulder.

Brice sighed. "Can we rush a little bit now, folks?"

Dorian had an odd feeling of *déjà vu*; some terrible inevitability approached. His limbs seemed heavy, weighing against his will, frustrating him. He ground his teeth. "Come on!" he said.

Far up the hallway, Rick hooted and seemed to leap through the outer wall: "Eureka!" He disappeared from view.

For a brief second, Rick poked his head back into the hallway. "A window," he said, seeming to dart back into the wall before finishing his sentence, "and a big one, looking right over the volcano."

The rest of them, Dorian leading, hurried to the opening in the wall. Rick stood by a larger window at the back of an alcove like the spaceship's airlock. He turned as Dorian and the others came to the narrow doorway.

"There's a volcano out there," he said again, "Just like I imagined it. It's beautiful." Tears pooled in his eyes.

Dorian started to enter the alcove when transparent doors hissed shut, closing it off from the hallway. Rick had only a moment for surprise and confusion to register on his face before the far window swung outward. Explosive decompression threw Rick away from the structure. His body, arcing through the open, had already frozen solid. It struck a drift of nitrogen snow. Displaced powder fell back like cannonballs in the vacuum, dusting his body in a plutonian blanket. Rick would always be a part of Pluto.

"Rick!" Joyce screamed as Dorian pounded on the glass.

"Look out!" Brice had drawn his pistol and was pushing Joyce aside.

"Are you crazy?" Dorian grabbed at his wrist.

His eyes glistened, wide and white. Stopping, he looked at him: "I don't know, maybe I am." But he had been defused.

The outer door thumped closed and after a moment the inner panels slid aside again. A hint of sub-arctic temperature snatched heat away. Dorian saw Joyce start to move toward the open door, and he blocked her way: "No, he's gone. We can't help him."

Glancing up and down the length of the quiet hallway, Brice seemed to look for enemies, or predators. "Let's get the fuck away from here," he said, bobbing his pistol nervously.

Joyce bit at her knuckles and sobbed.

Just then, Dorian noticed the absence. It wasn't that he looked around and took stock of his compatriots; rather, it occurred to him, as if he'd been told to expect this moment at some distant time and just now remembered a name. He said the name aloud: "Agnes." The others looked around, momentarily confused. Agnes. In the raw-wound aftermath of Rick's death, she had disappeared. Just like Joyce, she had simply gone. Not a sound, not a trace. Without Rick's calming voice, monsters seemed to skulk behind every closed door.

Dorian had no more premonitions. He felt empty. He tried to take Rick's place as a voice of reason: "We'll find her. She's probably in one of the rooms with a pair of aliens."

"Doing what to her?"

"Nothing. Just like Joyce. If we panic, it'll just take longer to find her." He could scarcely believe he was saying such fatuous things. He felt detached from the scene. Perhaps it was a symptom of shock. Yes, that had to be it; he concentrated on the situation at hand.

They had never left the first long corridor. The chances of getting lost

were as small as ever. Brice took the lead and Dorian put Joyce between them as they made their way toward the dome once again.

"Agnes wouldn't have just gone back to the ship," Joyce said, "not after what happened to Rick."

Dorian had to admit that she had a valid point. But what else could they do? They rapped on doors and called her name, but there was no answer. For some reason, perhaps instinctual, they did not return directly to the ship, but methodically searched instead. They often stopped to call and listen; they tried every door.

With a touch, a door panel hissed aside. Brice rushed through with complete disregard for caution. The room was not empty.

A mass of objects glistened over a wide tabletop. Vermillion mounds set out in bilateral symmetry amid fluid-filled bottles and metal pans brimming with wet and unsettling substances. The air was charged with an overpowering smell of meat. Standing at the end of the table's long axis, a single Grey stood as if stationed by a light-crimson human skull. A flaccid sheet of skin dangled from its spidery fingers. When the Grey draped the skin over the skull, it became a warped and tortured face. Vivisection. Agnes.

Dorian felt his throat seize up; he started to choke. Joyce collapsed to the floor while Dorian went on retching bile.

The alien spread its fingers over Agnes's skull and turned its head toward them: "What are you waiting for?" The words came calmly out of the alien's lipless mouth in a blasphemous mockery of Agnes's. "I thought you would never get here in time."

"Agnes?" Joyce spoke, her eyes flooding with tears, but unblinking, bright with a spark of madness.

Brice, who had until then seemed turned to stone, said, "It's like the cattle. But worse. Worse than I could've imagined. Dear God!" He pulled the pistol out of his jacket. "Don't talk to it, Joyce. That's not Agnes."

"What are you talking about, Brice? Put that away!" Fear played cruelly through the inflections of the voice coming from the alien's placid face.

"Agnes! No!" Joyce sobbed, dropping to the floor on her knees.

Dorian had finally gained control of himself. He looked at the alien, seemed to read cool mockery in its impassive face. His horror and frustration turned to hot rage, even as a cool undercurrent of doubt trickled toward his guts. "Kill it, Brice," he hissed. "Kill that goddamned thing."

Brice thrust the barrel of the weapon ahead of him as he crossed the room to the table with its macabre display.

"Brice! Are you crazy? Don't!" The pleading voice leaped from the expressionless face of the alien; Brice hesitated.

"It's me, Brice. What's wrong with you?"

"Kill it, Brice!" Dorian shrieked. "Don't listen!"

"Dorian! Have you all lost your . . ."

The shot exploded into the alien's face; its head splashed against the wall as the decapitated body fell away from the table.

On the table, the skull moved, jaws working under the draped skin and flesh. A wall rose in the room as the disarticulated pieces of Agnes writhed like gastropods torn living from their shells. "What have you done to me!" Fuzzy green tendrils spread over the flesh like rapidly consuming brush fires, spores puffed from bursting sores and blisters.

Brice, eyes wide, fired several rounds into the remains spread across the table, splashing them over the floor beyond. The cry grew louder.

"Dorian, get her up and let's get out of here." He backed a few feet away from the table before turning to run. The door had closed and Brice kicked at it while Dorian tried to keep Joyce, draped limply in his arms, from falling to the floor again.

Brice turned to a shuffling noise and found the alien coming toward them, Agnes's skull jammed down on the protruding stump of its spinal column. The bloodless flesh of its neck pulled into a cowl around the grinding jawbone and over to the top of the orbits.

Joyce turned, scratching at Dorian and the wall. "Open the door; open the door!"

Dorian protected his face and began kicking the door with Brice. As spidery fingers, slick with body fluids, groped against the back of his neck, the door slid into the wall, opening the way to the hall beyond.

Joyce scrambled toward the exit as Dorian pushed her roughly ahead. The last out, Brice turned to face the chimerical monster coming toward them. As he prepared to fire another precious bullet, the door closed, trapping the reaching wrists.

"Traitors!" Agnes's voice accused and cursed them from inside the room until the door closed firmly, crushing the forearms away from the rest of the body. A muffled shrieking came through the walls.

On the ground, the hands writhed, fingers trying to pull forward slid against the smooth surface of the floor. Brice kicked them both, to send them spinning away down the corridor.

"You bastards," said Agnes's voice, resonating with the quiet madness of someone being bricked into a basement wall.

"No, Agnes, no!" Joyce cried and Dorian and Brice carried her down the hallway.

Trundling along the corridor of antiseptic white, Dorian had that same detached feeling again, only this time it grew steadily worse. Joyce seemed to grow heavier and heavier; the corridor slowly bleached from white to an almost featureless curtain, through which he could barely make out the lines of the windows, the doors, Brice's looming face. He felt himself sinking.



<Conflicting evidence of death/non-death for conspecific led—present declarative/logical derivative—to behavioral nonsequitur.>

<Not a clear trail. They may have been displaying—data inquiry/logical presumptive—individual value exchanges concerning self-preservation.>

They paused, unused to intellectual discord.

<The survival of the one was excluded—present declarative/logical derivative—as best solution for them, as reality would harm collective behavior> they said.

<The ability to act on what is not true may be—unity declarative/logical presumptive—the embryonic ability at paraphysical manipulation.>

They reached parity upon metaplasma exchange.

Dorian's head spun with vertigo as he suddenly realized he was alone. He was in the corridor. Somehow he had managed to gain his feet. A Grey scuttled toward him. He backed away only to find another approaching from behind.

With horribly placid faces, they herded him along the hallway. He tried to call out, but only a strangled croaking escaped his lips. With his back pressed against the wall, he tried to avoid them as best he could. He heard a sluicing sound behind him, and only realized a door had slid open as he tumbled backward.

More slowly now, the Greys followed him into the room. Just inside the door they stopped; it closed. He scrambled back until he abutted against an object.

Looking up from the floor, he saw two tables, tables like the one that had been covered with poor Agnes. He couldn't help imagining them supporting his own body, vivisected, categorized, and laid out in some bloody alien geometry. Then, not of his own volition, he got up from the floor and laid himself out on a table, helpless. The Greys came to stand over him, looking down in his face, their fingers fluttering over his skin.

Black crescents at the edge of his vision expanded to tunnels of darkness, widening, swallowing, packaging his mind away somewhere deep. At least he would not be awake to feel the dismemberment.

"You wish to save him? Then save him." Those words, spoken in a voice of dust and ambulant toadstools, were the last thing Dorian heard before he lost consciousness.

When he awoke, he lay on the floor between the tables. Before getting to his feet, he tried to look around the room as best he could. Standing at the end of each table, he saw a pair of spindly Grey legs. Along one wall, he saw an open doorway.

Inching himself as far away from the Greys as he could before trying to get to his feet and run, he slid across the floor. Brice and Joyce were gone. But he would find them if he could.

When he had reached the far end of the tables—any farther and the Greys would surely notice him—he leapt to his feet.

Both tables were covered as before; a part of him had known that they would be. The same symmetry, the same scene of death so rapid that Brice and Joyce had not had time to realize yet that they were gone. As he stood paralyzed, he watched detached muscle strands contract and relax, forcing blood from within to pool around open-ended vessels. Each alien held the peeled-away flesh above a skull. Dorian watched them drape the wet skin, dripping. The jaws worked as the long alien fingers enfolded the heads.

"We barely arrived in time, Dorian," Joyce's voice said, more calm and reassured than it had ever been.

"Now we need a plan, Dorian." Brice's voice drifted from the gash of the alien mouth.

"What do we do now, Dorian?"

Backing away, breath fast and shallow, Dorian said nothing. The door leading to the hallway had remained open, and he backed his way for that chance of escape. Languidly mechanical, the Greys lifted the heads from the table and followed.

Once in the long hallway, keeping the windows to his left, he ran in the direction he thought they had come. Before turning down a crossing corridor, he looked back toward the room. The aliens scuttled like things escaping from a suddenly overturned stone. Only they weren't trying to get away; they were coming for him. He turned and ran.

It was impossible to be sure anymore where he had been in the labyrinthine web-work of the domes and corridors. Repeating patterns of doors and windows flashed past in his flight away from the Greys, still in pursuit. Luck, or at least chance, would have to save him.

Ahead, a slow drumming beat sounded, echoes dampened in the closed corridor. Stopping to listen, and hearing the approach of the Greys and voices of his dead friends, Dorian let the panic drive him again. When he came to a wide window, the drumming was loud. He stopped again and turned to look through the heavy pane holding back a hungry lack of Kelvins.

Rick pounded at the glass, staring with frozen white eyes. On impact, his fists, then wrists, then elbows shattered away in the intense cold of Pluto's open surface; frozen pieces fell into a drift of nitrogen snow.

"Hurry, Dorian, hurry! We can make it!" Joyce's voice urged him to his feet again, while the sight of the closing Greys, terrible heads cradled in their arms, made him run.

At the end of the corridor a door stood open, darkness beyond. This

was his goal; this became his one chance. They were still back there; maybe even the Rick-thing had managed to enter the warmth of the hallway and had joined them in their pursuit. The door ahead . . .

As he passed through, darkness enveloped him and the sound of his footfalls was swallowed by distance. He was in a lightless dome. He groped for the wall and ran along the edge as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. While he had hoped to go unnoticed by the Greys, he saw them orient directly toward him as they passed from the corridor's spilling light.

Panicking, he left the touch of the wall and sprinted toward the center of the dome. A subdued and will-o'-the-wisp opalescence grew at the edge of perception. He followed the light, although it seemed to dance away. Voices calling his name kept him from giving up.

He ran up hard against something. Patting along in the darkness, he tumbled through an open door and found himself lying amid the day-packs and supplies they had put together so long ago in the distant desert.

Dorian leapt to his feet and began slapping at the controls beside the airlock. With the scuttle of alien feet close in the darkness, the mechanism started its sequence and the outer door swung firmly closed.

Bouncing from the bulkheads in his rush, Dorian went to the control cabin to peer from the forward portals. Above, he could just make out the dilating dome-top stir. In the half-light, the Greys approached the windows of the ship, stopping a few feet beyond the glass. Flesh that had been torn from the faces of friends flew at the glass and adhered. Dorian recoiled. Then the outer dome opened, evacuating the hangar in a rage of escaping air that sucked the Greys up and out into vacuum and swept away the grisly remains.

After the vessel had completed a vertical climb out of the dome, Dorian staggered backwards to collapse. In the hours of silence that followed, he drifted off to sleep.

"All my life I've been waiting for them. Everything that comes after will be a reflection of this moment." Dorian knew that voice! "Look around, don't forget what you see, it will be a pivotal point for everything that comes after."

Dorian opened his eyes. The desert sky he had left behind stretched broad over his head, dark with a new moon. Rick stood there, smiling, staring at the craft where the airlock had opened. Dorian stuttered, incoherent questions formed on his lips; instead of speaking he looked to the darkness within the open portal of the vessel. Strangely, he felt like an observer in his own body, a rider, a parasite dependent on its host. Trying for a moment to be heard, tenuous lines between himself and another disconnected self experiencing the "now" stretched tautly. Then, more frightening in its implication, lines stretched inward, to other, older selves, help-

lessly watching each in turn. Buried deeper with each loop, always alone. Somewhere down there he knew they would begin gibbering. And when enough layers had been laid over his consciousness, he would join them in madness.

<In finality it displays—present declarative/data presentative—a clear example of human versatility in paralogical derivation> Mi-Go said.

<Each first layer correctly determined—present declarative/data presentative—linear perceptions of future looping.> Mi-Go extended tendrils, exuded spores from metaplasms for exchange between Mi-Go.

<Continued loops between must augment—future declarative/logical constructive—perception of the time stream's nonexistence.>

<New levels of consciousness and paralogical derivation may manifest—future conditional declarative/logical derivative—in examples of human paralogical limitations as well as innate abilities of eospacial control.> Mi-Go stated to Mi-Go in no-uncertain terms.

<Only continued data collection will permit—future addendum/logical assumptive—the conclusion of this phase of the study.> Mi-go revolved and prepared the loop.

<Bury—imperative/continuance—it and observe—imperative/continuance—the cascade.>

With a whiff of metaplasms curling through his synaptic gaps, Dorian realized—eotemporal unity—his new state and screamed down layers of isolated self-awareness. The vessel still lifted away with a full complement of eager participants, ready to explore a solar system that only Dorian could imagine re-existed. ▲

Since contributing "Potential Recruit" to the first Delta Green fiction anthology, Mr. Stolze has co-authored the critically acclaimed role-playing game Unknown Armies with Delta Green co-creator John Tynes and the game Wraith: The Great War with Geoff Grabowski and Rich Dansky for White Wolf. He was also sole author for the Usagi Yojimbo game for Gold Rush.

This story sees the return of Agent Rebecca Marks—first seen in "Potential Recruit"—and develops an important sub-theme of this book: that the visceral horrors of the Mythos pale beside its shocks to our naïve view of the universe, especially as regarding space and time.

AS I SEE IT

GREG STOLZE

ITHACA 1969: ANTICIPATING

Special Agents Carl Scranton and Morgan Dolliver waited in the car, a Ford, parked in the darkest corner of the lot. Dolliver's hair was starting to recede, but it was still pitch black. He wore it buzzed short, a look that marked him as a "square" on the campus of Cornell college. Of course, Dolliver's squinty eyes, tight mouth, and dark suit would have made him look conservative anywhere.

Scranton was squinting through binoculars at other cars as they pulled up, jotting license numbers on a pad.

"Here's one," he said. "AXL . . ."

"Is it that yellow thing? You know, cheap German car, shaped like a cat turd?"

"Volkswagen, yeah."

"That's AXL 422. Gene Clooney's car. He's one of Carciofolo's grad

students, been with the group since the beginning.”

The two of them were monitoring a campus group called the Brotherhood of the Lamp. Some of its members—Clooney included—were suspected of having ties to the Weathermen. Scranton had been the first to hear about the Brotherhood while he’d been investigating Clooney. Dolliver had been called in because of his experience in domestic counterintelligence.

Scranton glanced at him again.

“So,” he said at last. “You were down in Mississippi, huh?”

“Yep.”

“MiBurn, right?”

“Mississippi Burning.”

“Think it worked?”

Dolliver let out a short bark of laughter.

“Yeah, I think it worked. Those crackers never knew what hit ’em. Soon as they knew their white sheets weren’t going to hide them, half of ’em just up and quit.”

“Really?”

“Most times all it takes is a postcard. ‘We know who you are and we know what you’ve been doing.’ Suddenly the shoe’s on the other foot, you know? They run like roaches when you switch on the light.”

“Huh.”

Dolliver shifted, scratched his ribs idly.

“Another thing is to cross their wires. We started up a front organization—a fake splinter group from the Klan, right? Started sending out mailings accusing the—you know—grand wizards, exalted dragons. Said they were skimming money. Sent postcards to their wives saying they had girlfriends—half the time it was even true. Pretty soon we had a bunch of defectors from the real KKK.”

“Wow.”

“Wow nothing. It wasn’t that hard.” Dolliver shook his head. “They were a bunch of slack-jawed, bourbon-swilling, cousin-fucking idiots. From what I saw of their membership, the Ku Klux Klan is about the *worst* argument you could make for ‘white superiority.’”

Scranton laughed a little.

“You think these college kids are going to give us any trouble?”

“Nah. They’ll crack up as soon as we threaten to call mommy.”

“I’m not so sure . . . They seem pretty convinced that they’re working for a just cause.”

“The Klan thought the same thing.”

Scranton nodded. But he spoke again, as if he couldn’t stop himself from disagreeing.

"Yeah, but they're not as dumb as the Klansmen, right? After all, they're in college and everything."

"You can be plenty smart and still be a fucking idiot."

Scranton wrinkled his forehead at that and bent his mouth into a wry little smile.

Then they were outside the car, guns in hand, before they even realized they'd heard a woman scream.

ST. LOUIS, 1988: REMEMBERING

Dr. Rebecca Marks rolled her glass back and forth between her fingers and thumb. The glass was empty except for a pink plastic sword. There had been olives on the sword, but they were gone now. So was the martini. They hadn't even served it in a martini glass. She straightened her spectacles (which weren't crooked) and looked up at the clock. Another twenty minutes. She should have taken a taxi. She could go and return the car—no one would know. She'd rented the car at this very airport. She could return it.

She didn't go return the car. She signaled the waiter.

"The same," she muttered. He nodded, turned. "Wait," she said irritably, holding the glass. He rolled his eyes and carried it off. Rebecca glared at his back.

Goddamn bastard's too fuckin' busy to carry away my empties, is that it? How's it gonna look if Special Agent Morgan Fucking Dolliver shows up and his ride's got a stack of empty glasses in front of her? I should return that goddamn car.

Vaguely, she became aware that the song "What About Love" had come on the bar's speakers. She clenched her teeth.

Sitting in an airport bar is always depressing, but listening to a white girl whine about shit while you're waiting—that's some kind of new low. Where's that fuckin' drink?

There was a mirror over the bar, and as she tried to find the clock again (her vision was a little wobbly—the word "nystagmus" drifted up through her memory), she saw herself in it. She was wearing a blue pinstripe suit (padded shoulders), a white blouse, and the floppy maroon bow around her neck was askew. Big glasses with dark red frames. Face shiny with sweat—even her collar showing it. Her cornrows were starting to get a little frizzy around the sides, and she was slouching. She started to sit up, then slouched again as her gun dug into the small of her back.

Fifteen minutes.

She hadn't planned on drinking, on getting drunk. That was why she'd driven. But the plane had gotten delayed by an hour and a half, and she

could have driven back to the hotel but it would have been fifteen minutes waiting there and then turning around to come right back, so she'd had coffee, and that had made her jittery, so she'd had a decaf, and when that was done, she'd just sat. And sat. And sat, looking at the empty coffee cup, thinking about Axel, and now she was thinking about him again, and it still made her want a drink like it had then, the first drink, and now here came her fourth.

"Thanks a lot," she muttered. "Here, I'll settle up." The waiter nodded, maybe rolled his eyes again, and she felt a flash of anger. He didn't give a shit about her, some overdressed nigger woman getting drunk in a crappy airport bar, and he didn't even know Axel, didn't even know Axel was dead.

She paid, took an automatic sip and realized she had to pee. The waiter was turning to go, and she almost said "wait," but some part of her didn't want to have to deal with asking him where the ladies' room was.

You're the FBI agent, figure it out.

She stood, looked back at her drink, tightened the side of her mouth and decided no one was going to steal it. She was a little wobbly, but was sure that she'd be the only one to notice. She was good at acting sober, and she walked to the bathroom in a very straight line.

Pissing, she wondered what kind of gun Dolliver carried.

Probably some big-ass Dirty Harry piece, blows away GRU agents with one shot.

Morgan Dolliver was a legend at Quantico. No one was supposed to know about it, but when an FBI man gets surrounded by three GRU thugs—not just the KGB guys but GRU, Soviet military intelligence, the real sons of bitches—and shoots his way out, killing all three—well, people talk.

Now it turned out he was in Delta Green, too. Figured. If you can chew through the Soviet elite, you aren't going to get scared by a few sea monsters and mad scientists, right? Rebecca wiped herself, stood up, imagining Morgan Dolliver blowing away Joan Grazgul. In her mind, he looked a lot like Charles Bronson.

Grazgul was still alive, of course. Living in jail in Joliet, Illinois. Right where Rebecca and Axel had put her.

When she left the ladies' room, there were two new men in the bar. One of them was talking to the bartender, and the other looked right at her and said, "There she is."

One was tall, lanky, with a kind of subtle awkwardness that reminded Rebecca of the kids who looked bad in her high school marching band. He was in a turtleneck sweater and a brown leather coat, and he carried a

large satchel—its straps were taut and he leaned slightly to the side. He turned from the bartender, blinked, looked back, smiled a little, thanked him, turned back towards her. He extended his hand, took a step, then put his hand down and kept walking towards her, raising it again when he was close.

“Hi, Dr. Marks, right? I’m Ross Wickman.”

The other man was small, and old. His hair was gone, and the skin on his head was pale except for large dark liver spots. His wrinkled face fell into vertical folds except for the swags under his eyes. He seemed to hold his lips back from his teeth a little, the way some people with dentures do. He hadn’t moved a muscle. He stared, and his eyes were clear, hard, sharp, and oddly dead. They reminded Rebecca of empty glasses.

“Dr. Wickman, isn’t it? They sent us your article about cult traditions. Axel liked it a lot.”

He smiled—bad teeth—then bit his lip. “I was sorry to hear about your partner, Dr. Marks.”

Suddenly it came crashing down on her. For a moment she’d forgotten he was dead, forgotten she’d seen him die. It was easy to forget.

“Dr. Marks? Are you okay?”

“I want a drink,” the other man said loudly.

“You know you’re not allowed,” Wickman said over his shoulder.

“She has one. Why can’t I?”

Wickman closed his eyes briefly, then smiled a brittle, bad-teeth smile.

“Dr. Rebecca Marks, meet Morgan Dolliver.”

She blinked, looked down at the pale old man.

“Agent Dolliver, I’ve heard so much about you.”

“They called me Doll, you know. Back in the seventies. We all had nicknames. I hated it. Dolls can’t do nothin’, you know—just move like they’re made to. You know any folks like that?”

“I’m sure I don’t,” she said, blinking, hesitating.

“I’m sure you do. Get me a drink.”

“You know it’s not good for you,” Wickman said, in a voice suitable for whining children and cranky old men.

“Shall we, uh, get going?” Rebecca asked.

“I don’t leave until I drink,” Dolliver said. He was staring off into space. “You paid for your drink, so I finish it.” He turned towards the table and picked up her drink. Wickman started after him, looking around nervously.

“It’s all right, let him have it,” Rebecca said.

“He’s been like this the whole flight,” Wickman muttered to her under his breath.

"Drinking to your dead partner? I'll do the same," Dolliver said. Rebecca blinked, turned to Wickman.

"You told him . . . ?"

Wickman looked from her to him to her again. "I, uh, guess I must have. I don't think . . . Well, it was a long flight."

"Good drink. You got good taste. Now give Stretch here the car keys."

"Stretch?" Rebecca asked.

"He calls me Stretch," Wickman said.

SYRACUSE, 1971: HEADACHE

Morgan Dolliver crouched in the snow and blew on the handle of his revolver. It was snowing, had snowed all night and was supposed to keep snowing for hours. His feet were just numb stumps, and his fingers were icy knobs inside his mittens. In a few minutes, when it got good and dark, he, Carl Scranton, and a whole lot of New York State Troopers were going to kick in the door of a lovely farmhouse out in the Finger Lakes region. Then hopefully they would arrest Gary Paquette and two friends of his for knocking over a series of upstate banks stretching from Albany over to Buffalo. Paquette's gang was armed and dangerous, not to mention warm.

Dolliver knew the gun was going to be ice cold in his hand, and worried that his fingers would be too numb to shoot. He sure wasn't going to fire it through mittens, though.

"Doll."

Morgan glanced over at his partner. Carl had a mitten in his teeth and his right hand down his pants.

"What are you doing?"

"Warmest part of the body, Doll."

Morgan shook his head. "You ready to go?"

"Wish I knew how many people were in there. Guys with the scopes say three, but there might have been more waiting."

Morgan peered at the house, at the green shutters and dimly seen lace curtains. Through the snowy gloom, he tried to make out figures, watchers, but there was no way. He squinted . . .

. . . and a shaft of pain lanced through his skull—a searing, tearing agony that shook down his spinal column into his gut; the foreign pain; he knew it from his nightmares . . .

. . . and all the space and matter between him and house crumpled aside before his eyes; he could see the walls but around them too: three men, two women, one woman holding a child, and he could see her nipple through the child's head as it nursed at her breast and he could see inside the men's guns, count their bullets, and he could see the bags of

money hidden behind a panel in the closet, could see in the sacks and even in the dark he could read the serial numbers off twenties signed by the Secretary of the Treasury, could see the flecks of blue and red thread on the surface of the bills, could see it all . . .

"Awww damn!"

"Morgan, what?"

"A . . . another migraine," he managed to say. "I can, uh, feel it coming on."

"Great timing. You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah." He scooped snow in his left mitten, rubbed it on his receding hairline. "You know what, Carl? I bet their women are in there."

"Huh?"

"Think about it. Paquette knows we're after him—he's seen his face on posters. Guzman's just out of jail, and his wife's got a newborn. They know they've got to be mobile—they're going to want their women with them."

"We don't even know Guzman's in the gang . . ."

"Okay, so what? They're still going to want women around, right? Especially with that much dough, they're gonna want to live it up a little, even with us on their trail."

"You think?"

"I'm just saying it could be. So let's take it easy, all right?"

Carl winced, leaned in.

"Doll, you know these cops are sore 'cause of that guy they shot in Skaneateles. They're gonna want to charge in like D-Day."

"So I guess we ought to go in first, huh?"

"You ready? Is it time?"

"Sure. Might as well before the migraine really gets here."

Carl shook his head.

"Doll, you got balls like desktop globes."

"Hell, it's just that I'm more afraid of the migraine than the bank robbers."

"You ought to see a doctor after this," Carl said, cocking his pistol.

"I will, one way or the other," Morgan said, then wrapped his fingers around his chill revolver. Carl held up five fingers where the cops could see, then four, three, two . . .

ST. LOUIS, 1988: UNEASY NOTIONS

Rebecca slipped between dreaming and thinking easily. She'd been dreaming about Joan Grazgul and Axel. Axel was dead, but Grazgul raised him back up; she'd put him back together and he was explaining it all to her, how she'd gotten Joan out of jail to bring him back to life, and in dream logic it all made sense. Joan could raise the dead. Axel was dead. Joan

could raise him, but Joan was in jail. Rebecca had put Joan in jail; Rebecca could get her out. Then Axel wouldn't be dead.

She opened her eyes with a start, as a more conscious part of her brain realized what she was thinking. Immediately she squeezed her eyes shut again. Her head hurt—"dehydration from binge drinking often causes cranial pain," a line that had gotten a laugh in med school. She knew dozens of hangover cures and preventions, but it still happened when she was tired or careless.

She rose, went to the bathroom, got a glass of water and her vitamin tablets. It was hot and sticky in the room, the close clingy heat of St. Louis in July. An armpit kind of heat. She turned on the shower.

When she got out of the shower, she felt better. She didn't even glance at her hotel room's mini-bar. (One of her rules was not to drink from mini-bars. Hotels robbed you blind with them. If she was going to drink, she'd plan it so that it wouldn't bankrupt her. It was how she kept in control of her life. She also didn't drink on duty or when she was going to drive. Good thing Wickman had driven home the night before.)

When she got down to the hotel's restaurant, Wickman was already there, head bent over a piece of streaky bacon in his hand that he was gnawing with crooked molars. Seeing her, he self-consciously put it down on the plate.

"Don't get the Sunrise Surprise," he said with a weak smile. She smiled back, sat down across from him.

"So, 'Stretch,' where's 'Doll'?" Her joke kept the grin on his face, but it got a little sour.

"He's still in the room. The long flight and the drink excited him. Uh . . ." —he leaned in a little—"it was hard to hypnotize him."

"You hypnotized him?"

"Yeah, I, uh, did. I couldn't really do it at his retirement home—no time before the flight, so I . . ."

"Back up. Why did you have to hypnotize him? In fact, why's he here?"

"You weren't told?"

She sighed. "No. I wasn't told anything except that he'd be coming—that someone would bring him from Syracuse."

He looked at her for a moment, then pushed his chair back and reached into his satchel on the floor beside him with both hands. He made a soft grunt as he picked up a metal object and put it on the table, where it landed with a thunk. It looked like a small iron brick—a featureless piece of forged metal the size of a Rubik's Cube.

"Do you know what this is?"

Rebecca shook her head.

"It's the five-part ward that Morgan Dolliver retrieved from the Broth-

erhood of the Lamp in 1969.”

“What’s a five-part ward?”

ITHACA, 1969: A BROKEN CEREMONY

Morgan had been expecting rape. You watch a bunch of creeps, you hear a woman scream, you think: rape. Some snooty beatnik Cornell girl over her head, or maybe a pretty local Ithaca girl. His gun was cocked and he was ready to kill those pinko sick bastards. He kicked the door in, Carl right behind him.

He saw candles. Robed figures. Billowing sheets in wooden frames, meeting above their heads like a tent. On the floor, a pattern of sharp angles that didn’t seem to add up. Floating above the pattern, something that didn’t belong in a sane universe.

A man’s voice droned foreign syllables as Morgan and Carl stared, jaws slack.

It had been a woman, but it was now a grotesque parody of human form—limbs curved, but not as if they themselves had been twisted, but as if space around them was warping. She was disproportionate; for a moment it was as if her ear was only inches from his eyes, while her arm was yards away. Fluid, protean, she howled and changed and warped like dripping candle wax, and in her voice was ecstasy and terror.

“I see, Robert! I see the way *IT* does!”

Morgan said the only thing that came to his mind.

“Freeze! FBI!”

The chanting man looked up from an innocuous sheaf of lined yellow paper. It was Dr. Robert Carciofolo, founder of the Brotherhood of the Lamp. He turned pale and stammered.

“Robert! Keep reading!” shouted one of his acolytes—Gene Clooney, of AXL 422—but it was too late.

There was a thud as the woman dropped to the floor, smudging the chalky pattern. Above her was . . . a presence.

“Carl . . . what the fuck is that thing?”

“The chant! Robert, the chant! *IT’S GOING TO SEE US!*”

Morgan could never figure out how he’d known about the thing. He couldn’t really see it—it had neither color nor shape, but appeared instead as a distortion of space itself—a corruption of distance and perspective. He didn’t look at it as much as *through* it—the way you look through a kaleidoscope. Only this was warping reality itself, instead of one man’s view.

Even knowing that he saw it, he could never figure out how he’d known it was alive.

The distortion floated, flowed—then struck. A short figure in a robe

screamed and then started to change, warping and bending and folding. Blood erupted as the body turned inside out, but it didn't drip or spurt, just hung in the air like rubies on gossamer threads. The hood fell back, then faded off as if it had receded a hundred miles, and Morgan saw the screaming face of a college student for a moment before it unfolded like a flower popping out of a magician's sleeve, only it was all perspective, the student's nostril and gaping mouth widening as if they were inches away while his eyes shrank back like they were going away or turning a corner behind his skull. His brains erupted.

Carl and Morgan opened fire, to no discernible effect.

"The ward! Everybody touch the ward!"

Some of the robed figures were screaming, frozen in place by horror and shock. Others tried to run, but the malign entity they had called twisted space around them, snapping it like a whip to keep them within its reach—or perhaps warping its reach around the space they occupied. It twisted reality and pushed their bodies through it.

Clooney grabbed the professor's right hand. Dr. Carciofolo, wild-eyed, began to struggle with him.

"Finish the chant, damn you! Before it's too late!"

Mad-eyed, Dr. Carciofolo sank his teeth into the other man's hand, dropping the yellow pad to the floor.

"Carl, what is it?"

"I don't know!"

Clooney howled and lashed out, punching the older man in the side of the head. The doctor stumbled, and the object in his hand fell to the floor with a crash. Then the nameless force was on him, and in moments he was no longer human—just mush.

"The ritual!" Clooney was clutching the object—a small metal block—and crawling towards the legal pad. Desperately he began reading.

Carl shot him.

Morgan stumbled forward through a world gone delirious and grabbed the pad and the block. Somewhere in his mind he'd made a connection. The words—Clooney thought the words would stop it. That and the block, they were important.

The words were unfamiliar, but in the English alphabet.

He started chanting.

ST. LOUIS, 1988: BREAKFAST WITH WARD

"In 1969, Morgan and his partner were investigating the Brotherhood of the Lamp—a suspected subversive organization, it had a few members associated with the SDS, maybe the Weather Underground. It turned out the Brotherhood wasn't political at all—or at least, not primarily. I guess it doesn't mat-

ter: they all died. Anyhow, their leader probably had a copy of a book called *Haram Ihtifal* written by Tasyir Fahish. Ever hear of him?"

Rebecca shook her head.

"How about Abdul Alhazred? *Al Azif*? Ibn Schacabao? *The Necronomicon*? None of it?"

"No."

"Well . . . you're lucky, I guess. It's kind of my field of study—ancient Arab mysticism. Fahish was a student of Alhazred or Schacabao, or possibly both. *Haram Ihtifal* means 'Forbidden Celebration,' and I'm pretty sure that's where the leader of the Brotherhood learned how to make a five-part ward."

"What's so special about this thing?"

"Pick it up."

Rebecca tried, and her eyes widened as she realized how heavy it was. It was almost like it was glued to the table.

"What's it made of? Lead?"

"It's heavier than lead. Heavier than gold, heavier than any compound or element that occurs in nature. It should weigh a pound, if that. Instead it weighs twenty-three pounds, two ounces."

"But . . ."

"They told me it's been X-rayed, tested for density, scoped out with every tool from a centrifuge and scale to MRI and a gas spectrometer. It's iron."

"Iron? Nothing else?"

"Ordinary, simple, uncomplicated iron. We're careful to keep it dry so it doesn't rust. As far as the utmost reach of our science is concerned, there's nothing special about this block of metal . . ."—his voice lowered and he smiled nervously as a waitress walked by—" . . . except it weighs over twenty times what it should."

Rebecca shook her head.

"What does it have to do with Dr. Hertzog's little club?"

"Dr. Hertzog examined it once. He was freaked out, as you might expect. He wanted to know where we'd gotten it and what it was for. Of course we didn't tell him."

"Yeah, that fits the profile . . . Transgressive experimenters are driven by knowledge more than anything else. Though I have to say I'm curious myself. I mean . . . Jesus. What *is* it for?"

"Apparently it protects people from what Fahish called *Khamisi Janib Idris*—a five-part or five-sided demon."

"Five, huh? In Hertzog's lab, he'd set up five walls around his equipment."

Wickman nodded, his eyes bright with enthusiasm.

"Fahish describes these demons in *Haram Ihtifal*. They can become invisible, pass through walls, change their shape and size—standard tricks from stories and folklore. More importantly, the book describes the ritual of *Idris Ain Iftah'li*. The ritual was supposed to provide eternal life, perpetual youth, second sight—the name means either demonic eye opening, or the opening of the demon eye."

"Opening an eye? I think I'm starting to see a connection . . . There was some anthropologist who believed that the pineal gland was the equivalent of the 'third eye' of the Tibetan mystics. Hertzog was trying to stimulate the pineal gland. Like Dr. Crawford Tillinghast—did you read Axel's file on him?—Hertzog believed the pineal gland was key to perceiving other dimensions. Do you think this is the same phenomenon as 'opening the demon eye'?"

"Maybe. Hertzog offered an explanation for the weight of the five-part ward; it's a lot bigger than it appears, but all its extra matter is in other dimensions."

"So it could affect, uh, extradimensional beings?"

"Bingo. That would explain the powers of the Idris. Is it invisibly watching us—or just watching our three dimensions from the fourth and fifth we can't see? Is it really changing shape—or just extruding a different aspect of itself into our dimensions?"

"Does it pass through walls—or just take a fourth-dimensional short-cut around them?"

"Exactly." Dr. Wickman smiled. He had a chunk of bacon between his front teeth.

"So you think Hertzog is trying to do with science what these Arabs were doing with . . . magic?"

"You sound skeptical. How about calling it 'alternative knowledge'?"

"You can call it Tom, Dick, or Harry for all I care; it adds up to magic, right?"

"That may be what Hertzog thought—or maybe not. Someone fitting his description purchased a copy of *Haram Ihtifal*—or a book that was *claimed* to be a copy anyhow—three months ago."

"Have you seen this book?"

"Only excerpts. Delta Green doesn't have a complete copy. However, someone remembered Morgan Dolliver's old report about the Brotherhood of the Lamp and they figured that if they sent a qualified hypnotist who knows ancient Arabic . . ."

"Meaning you."

". . . meaning me, that I might be able to get the dismissal part of the ritual out of his mind. After all, that's all we want to be able to do, right? Dismiss the Idris?"

"Sure . . . so did you do it?"

Wickman sighed.

"Yes and no. I got the ritual all right—luckily the leader of the group at Cornell had written it phonetically, so Morgan was able to read it even if he didn't know what he was reading. Otherwise, there still might be an Idris running around Ithaca. Anyhow, under hypnosis, he remembered it all right, and I wrote it down. Only it turns out to not be a dismissal."

"Then how did it get rid of the . . . Idris?"

"It killed it."

"Well, that's even better then, right?"

"Not necessarily. The translation was an invocation to something called *Khauf Bauwab*—a name that means 'fear's gatekeeper.' 'In return for this sacrifice, and my pledge of fealty in blood and soul, give unto me the powers of this, the being I slay in your name.' It's not a dismissal. It's a pact."

SYRACUSE, 1986: IT'S HER OR ME

Morgan Dolliver lay in his room reflecting on the indignity of being the youngest man in an old-folks' home. Old Scranton's widow had pulled strings to get him put in here—better than a nuthatch, but he could see she was glad to get rid of him.

"Early senile dementia, my ass," he muttered. He wondered what she was doing.

. . . she was dancing in a chintzy dance hall with orange shag carpet and a mirrorball. The man with her was older—older than Morgan. He'd been born in 1923. Morgan saw four fifties in the man's wallet, a pillbox in his jacket pocket; Kleenex and lipstick and a compact in her purse . . .

Morgan blinked. The pain wasn't nearly as bad these days, but he still didn't like using the Vision. Every time he did, it made things seem . . . false somehow. Like everything he saw normally was just an image on a TV. But it got easier and easier to look . . .

. . . Cindy wouldn't bring his medicine today; it was going to be Rowen, big fat grouchy Rowen, who liked the fact that she could pin old men in their beds and force pills down their throats. Rowen was coming down the hall and she had mixed his little cup up with Widow Hensley's, and he was going to take those pills and die and that would be it . . .

His heart started pounding as the door opened.

"Here's your meds," Rowen said, clanging the tray down on his table.

"No, those aren't . . ."

"Mr. Dolliver, you're not going to be difficult again, are you?" Her

words said she hoped not, but there was a hint of relish in her eyes.

"They'll kill me . . ."

"Nonsense, Mr. Dolliver, they're good for you," she said, and her meaty hand slammed onto his shoulder with practiced force, holding him down. It was humiliating; he was a grown man, an officer of the law, but they never let him do anything; that was why he'd wasted away into just a shell, a doll for a fat, cruel girl to manipulate and unwittingly poison.

He felt panic rise in his throat, and he knew what he had to do.

It's her or me, he thought.

Moments later, her tray clattered to the floor with her lifeless body. There was no mark of violence on her.

ST. LOUIS, 1988: DRINKS AND CONVERSATION

Rebecca was exhausted and her feet were thumping. She'd spent the day going door to door with pictures of Dr. Hertzog and his crew, getting the same blank looks and shaken heads, and then she'd gotten into a sharp argument with Detective Stan Klatski, the homicide cop on the case. She couldn't even remember how it had started—she remembered being sore that he'd kept calling her "Ms. Marks" instead of "Dr. Marks" or "Special Agent Marks."

She was so tired she almost went straight to bed instead of stopping at the hotel bar for a nightcap. Almost.

Somehow, it didn't surprise her to see that Morgan Dolliver was in the bar with one empty glass already in front of him.

"Mr. Dolliver? What are you doing down here?"

"If that ain't obvious, they're letting the wrong people in the FBI."

Rebecca let her profound irritation tighten her mouth, and Dolliver held up a hand, ducked his head.

"All right, all right. You caught me. I snuck out when Stretch fell asleep. He's not an agent, is he?"

"You have to go up to your room now."

"No."

"Why are you making so much trouble?"

"I don't go to my room. I'm not a doll. You can't just push me around." Something about his defensive tone saddened her. She pulled up a chair.

"Bring the lady a double martini," Morgan called at the waiter. Rebecca winced.

"No, don't . . . Well, make it a single," she told him. She turned to Morgan. "Did they even tell you why you're here?"

"Not a damn thing. It's a psychotic opera, ain't it?"

"If you mean a Delta Green operation, yes it is."

"Well what the hell is it? Another one of those things like in Ithaca?"

"We think so . . . Look, have you ever heard of a man called Crawford Tillinghast?"

"Nope. And I've got a good memory for names."

"Well, Tillinghast thought . . . Oh hell, he had a bunch of weird ideas, back in the twenties, about other dimensions that are normally imperceptible."

"I think I see where this is going. It's like that thing I saw in Ithaca, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"Tillinghast came to a bad end, but not before he was responsible for a lot of deaths. My partner Axel stumbled across reports about him while doing research for a monograph on what he called the transgressive experimenter personality."

"You lost me there."

"Axel was a psychologist, and he believed there was a personality drawn to . . . dangerous experiments. Extreme examples of the type usually started out pursuing legitimate science, but eventually pursued science only as a vehicle for . . . well, unacceptable urges. He got started when he read the statement of a doctor named Vargas, who'd been imprisoned for murdering his partner, Herbert West. West and Vargas were prototypes—'mad scientists.' Then we stumbled from their work onto Dr. Joan Grazgul . . . but I'm getting off the subject."

"You remind me of Jenny Bloch."

"Who's Jenny Bloch?"

"I met her working on the Black Nationalist COINTELPRO."

Rebecca's drink soured in her mouth and she narrowed her eyes at him.

"You worked on that?"

"Yeah, I worked on all the COINTELPROs. Counter-conspiracy—that was my specialty." He looked over at her. "I ain't real proud about what I did with the SCLC. Hoover was convinced King was going to get America's blacks working for the Reds. It sounds insane now . . . Maybe it was nuts then, too. Maybe the whole country was nuts, and maybe it still is."

"Jenny Bloch . . . what did you do to her?"

"Postcards . . . the usual stuff." He took a deep drink. "We kind of made her husband think she was cheating on him."

Part of Rebecca wanted to push her drink away, but she found herself finishing it in one gulp instead.

"Here's the thing, though; she didn't cave. The kids, the New Left, they didn't realize how much they had to lose. Didn't really understand the

stakes. The Klan, they knew what we meant all right, and most of 'em folded right up. Bloch, though, she knew what we were doing. Maybe she knew better than we did. And she *didn't* fold."

"How did you meet her?"

"She met me. Spotted me on a passive tail, snuck out of her house and came up on my car." He smiled. It made Rebecca cold to see it. "She asked me what the hell I was doing. Oh, she was a pistol. She wanted to spit right in my face . . . You know what she told me? She said that 'once you've seen the truth, you can never look away again.' That was how come she kept going, despite all the shit we put in her way. Because she knew how things really were and couldn't pretend otherwise."

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know. I lost track of her. Anyhow, you remind me of her. You've seen things you can't look away from, haven't you?"

Rebecca thought of Axel's death playing itself out behind her eyelids every night, and she nodded.

"Maybe you're right, Mr. Dolliver. I think a lot of people in Delta Green have seen too much. Maybe we can't go back to just trusting that the world is all right."

"We can't forget. You keep trying, though."

She glared at him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You drink too much. You know it; you can't even lie to yourself about it. You keep trying to, though."

"That's none of your goddamn business!" She shot to her feet.

He shrugged. "Nothing personal. You drink too much. It's going to fuck you up, and soon."

"You're full of shit. I can quit . . . I don't need to . . . If I decided to stop drinking tomorrow, I could do it, damn you."

He shook his head. "No. Tomorrow is just like yesterday. Nothing changes. Not for us. That's what *I've* seen. That's the truth I can't look away from."

"Maybe I am like Jenny Bloch, 'cause I'd sure like to spit in your face." She turned on her heel and made a beeline to the elevator.

The line "Tomorrow is just like yesterday" kept running through Rebecca's head the next day as she went door to door, showing pictures, asking questions. Their search was concentrated in a neighborhood miles from Dr. Hertzog's office and home but where he'd used his MasterCard five times in the previous two months—two restaurants, two gas stations, a drug store. It had bothered her. Clearly Hertzog was spending time in the area, but why? Was there something here he needed? Had he planned

this as his backup bolthole, in keeping with Axel's psych model—like Grazgul's hideout in Springfield? It was an area of closed businesses, convenience stores, strip malls and run-down, prefab houses from the era of the G.I. Bill. Day had turned to evening and the twilight was fading when she called the station to check in and was told that Dr. Wickman wanted to speak with her.

"Rebecca, listen; I've been re-reading some background material on *Haram Ihtifal* along with some fragments that always kind of confused me. It's kind of technical, but it looks like the ceremony can only be performed at certain times, in very specific circumstances, with the stars in proper alignment. I've been trying to figure out when Hertzog would have to try his ceremony, but without a complete text. But then I realized that I could find one date that worked, from Morgan Dolliver. The 1969 ceremony at Cornell—he knew what the date was and so I could find out where Fomalhaut and the other . . ."

"Uh, Ross . . . where are you going with this?"

"Right, sorry. I'm trying to say, tonight's the night! If he doesn't perform the ceremony tonight, he's going to have to wait at least eight months, possibly two *years*, depending on which star they mean by . . ."

Rebecca stopped paying attention, because something had just become clear in her mind. She was remembering Dr. Hertzog's lab at Washington University, the five partitions around the neon and copper tracteries of his 'resonator.' She had seen something else, something around here, something with five sides . . .

"Ross, ask Mr. Dolliver if the room in Cornell had five sides."

"What?"

"The room where they had the ceremony. Did it have five sides?"

She chewed her lip and listened to Ross muttering on the other end of the line.

"He said there were five cloth walls, like a tent . . . Oh Jesus! The pavilion of *Khauf Bauwab!*"

"What?"

"The text mentions preparing the pavilion of, of Fear's Gatekeeper, but I never knew what it meant . . . Of *course* the ritual would require a five-sided enclosure."

"Ross, get yourself and Dolliver to Lake Run Road; I think it was around the two-thousandth block. I'll meet you there and I'll call the cops if I think it's the right place. Be careful—I don't want to spook them if they're where I think they are."

Rebecca slammed the phone booth door behind her and half ran to the sedan where her cop partner waited.

As she got in, she said quickly, "You remember that funny-looking

building on Lake Run? Looked like a set from an old fifties sci-fi movie? I think that's our place."

Astro-Burger had gone bankrupt in the seventies and had briefly housed a lawnmower repair business before finding its true niche as a building with a "For Rent" sign perpetually out front. Only, the "For Rent" sign had quietly vanished a few months ago, without any other outward indication that a new tenant had arrived.

Rebecca cocked her ear towards the five-sided building and could already, faintly, hear a droning chant.

"Shit!" She briefly deliberated; there was no way of knowing how long the chant was, or when it would bring the Idris. Cops were on their way, and so were Morgan and Ross, but would they arrive in time?

"Pop the trunk, I'm getting the megaphone," she told her partner.

"What? If we alert them, they could scatter before anyone gets here!"

Good thinking, if you don't believe that chant is going to do anything, Rebecca thought, but what she said was, "Standard procedure."

"But . . ."

She shook her head and got out of the car, drawing her gun.

"FBI! THE BUILDING IS SURROUNDED! COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP!"

The reply was a gunshot. She flinched back behind the car.

"Dammit, we should have waited!" the cop hissed at her.

"Innocent lives are in danger if we wait! I'm going in; you coming?"

"Jesus!" He grabbed a shotgun from the trunk.

The building had no windows. Rebecca fired at the doorway, then waited, holding up her hand. When she saw a flicker of movement at the door, she fired again, and heard a sharp cry.

"Now!" She raced across the street, firing a third round at the door. Dimly, she was aware of cars pulling up, of screeching tires, and then she kicked the door in. It struck a young woman who was lying on the floor, clutching her bleeding left breast and looking up at Rebecca with a helpless, puzzled expression. She still had a gun in her right hand. Rebecca shot her, shouldered the door open. She winced, and a second later realized she'd winced because a splinter from the doorframe had hit her face, a bullet had hit the door frame, and then she was in; she saw a man with a gun, fired at him; he fell. She heard the boom of the shotgun behind her, saw blood and neon tubes and Hertzog and his followers, chanting, arms raised. Hertzog's hands were empty, but it was like she was seeing Axel again and she shot him in the chest.

The chanting stopped and the screaming started, and then she saw the thing.

At first she wondered if her vision was damaged—a migraine could be coming on, pressing her optic nerve, distorting her vision, but then she realized that she was seeing the Idris. Hertzog's students saw it too; some simply stared, slack-jawed, seeing their efforts come at last to fruition. Then the thing they had called saw *them*, and their bodies began to twist and split, smeared like jelly across five dimensions.

"What is that thing?"

"RUN!"

She turned to the door, but space spun around her; every way she tried to turn just left her facing the center of the room and the Idris; she could feel its embrace shredding her sane reality . . .

. . . and then it pulled back, and she could hear Morgan Dolliver's voice. Cold, flat, chanting in a foreign tongue, and the thing was trying to get away from him, but his voice was everywhere—not just in her ears but vibrating the bones in her legs, throbbing against the inside of her lungs, pulsating up through the soles of her feet. She turned towards him—she could turn again—and saw the Idris coalesce around him, drain *into* him. And vanish.

For a brief moment, the world was okay.

Then Morgan Dolliver started getting younger.

NEVADA, 1972: IT ALL COMES TOGETHER

Dolliver's leg muscles strained to push the gas pedal down, as if pushing it through the floor would squeeze more speed out of his Chevy sedan. It was a bright day, almost blinding through his sunglasses, and the landscape stretched out ahead as flat and ugly as a headache, but not half as ugly as the truth he'd left behind—the truth Carl Scranton had paid for with his life.

Got to find a phone, call HQ, tell them Bedford—fucking Bedford's a mole. Jesus. Who knows what he's sold them already. And now, god-damn it, now, with this WOTAN thing . . .

He glanced into his rearview mirror in fear. The black Chrysler was still behind him, of course. There was one road from the base and it went for thirty miles without a turn. If he could outrun them, he was safe. He bit his lip.

Then he saw a second car on the road ahead, coming straight towards him.

It could be someone else, someone uninvolved, he thought, but in his heart, he knew it had to be more of Them.

He jerked the wheel to the right and his car bucked and throbbed as he went off-road and into the desert. Frantically he tried to remember the area map he'd seen—was there another highway this way? He had a

canvas water bag in the backseat—Scranton had insisted, said the desert was nothing to fuck around with. Maybe he could ditch them in the wilderness, get back to town, make his report, make Scranton's death *mean* something.

Then his front tire hit something—a dip in the ground maybe, or just a sharp rock—and blew out. The car swung hard to the left, the wheels spun up a whirlwind of dust, and then he was twisting and tumbling as the car rolled like a log across the desert floor.

Maybe he blacked out, briefly. He found himself dangling from his seatbelt, bruised and sore.

They'll kill me, bury me in the desert, and the next FBI agents will think it's Feinstein, just like they're supposed to; Bedford will snow them just like he snowed me, and the GRU will get WOTAN . . .

The crack of a pistol shot broke through the ringing in his ears. He started struggling with his seat belt, trying to get his gun, wishing only that he could see what was going on . . .

. . . and then he could. Even though his head was pointing the wrong way, he could curve his vision, look around the floor of his car and see the black Chrysler, parked parallel to his car and twenty feet away, the driver crouched behind the engine block pointing a gun at him; the second car had stopped, and two more men were getting out, and there was an Uzi submachine gun in the trunk, three magazines with forty rounds each; they were going to get the Uzi and circle around him to make sure he was pinned and then erase him; he could see it as clear as a memory, see the shells tearing through his chest and this was it, this was the end, his end, what every event in his life inexorably led to, he could see the future and the past as a seamless line, uncurved, leading to this point . . .

. . . but he could change it. It wasn't just sight anymore. He'd denied it, refused it, but it had still grown in him, and he couldn't look away. Morgan Dolliver, who hadn't taken physics since high school, understood dimensions no human scientist did. He could feel that the fourth dimension was time, and that human beings belonged to that dimension only in part. They could only go forward, blindly, each trapped in an inexorable fate.

But he wasn't human anymore. He existed fully within time, and around it. Unlike all the others, he could change his fate. He looked inside the GRU men. So many nerves, synapses, arteries. So simple to reach out at them, to change their futures, to turn them from living to dead . . . so easy to rewrite the universe.

MARYLAND HEIGHTS, 1988: FREEDOM

"Morgan . . . what's happening to you?"

"I'm becoming." The air about him rippled.

"Rebecca, stand back!"

Rebecca looked behind Morgan and saw Ross Wickman holding a huge gun in both hands. She lunged to the side as he fired. Dolliver flopped forward, blood spurting out his back.

"Ross!"

Ross shook as he held the gun. "He was making a move. I—"

They converged on Morgan Dolliver's body, which now looked like that of a thirty-year-old man.

"Poor old bastard," Wickman muttered. Rebecca looked up at him. His face was pale and his hands were shaking—he was going into shock.

"Ross, sit down . . ."

"And don't pity me," Morgan Dolliver said, sitting up.

Ross screamed, and Rebecca leaped back, stumbling over the mangled corpse of a cultist.

Ross raised his gun again, then screamed again as the gun, his hand, and the arm attached to it seemed to shrink and stream off into a great distance, although it was still in front of a wall only inches away. Then his heart blossomed out of his chest, his ribs like pale petals, and he simply hung in space, suspended.

"M . . . Morgan?"

Now in the body of a barrel-chested twenty-year-old, the thing that was once Morgan Dolliver turned to Rebecca.

"Don't make me kill you. You still remind me of Jenny Bloch."

"What . . . ? How have you . . . ?"

"The first time showed me that human beings have nothing, Rebecca. Slaves, dolls, unable to take a single step off the path. I tried to deny that, but now I see the other side. Now I can choose my path, because I can see time. *I can see time*, Rebecca. You're going to join A.A. in 1990 and get shot by a fat man in a restaurant in 1999. That's what happens to you; that's your story. Now I'm writing my own story."

"No . . ."

His voice rang out harsh, like the sound of some inexorable, inhuman machine.

"Once you see the truth, you can never look away. Here's the truth, Rebecca. The only difference between your future and your past is which one you remember."

"*You're lying!*"

He shook his head. "Wait and see."

Space bubbled, twisted, tore—and he was gone. ▲

Arinn Dembo's first published story appeared in the June 1996 issue of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. She writes that she was conceived in the Summer of Love, attended Woodstock in utero, and emerged several months later under the sign of Aquarius. A writer of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, she lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, with her husband, Martin Cirulis, and their two children.

Turning in a long novella/short novel without warning will dismay any short-story anthology publisher with a small-press budget. As a general rule, we advise you not to do it—unless you write like Arinn Dembo. If you are looking for a warm little story to relieve your horror reading, look elsewhere. The author has done her work in describing the terrible and callous servitors of the Mythos. However, she also explores how creativity, self-sacrifice, and love may survive even the most appalling horror—and perhaps even death itself.

SUICIDE WATCH

ARINN DEMBO

March 29th, 1994. A small green town called Humansville, Missouri. Early evening. Rain. There was a cop out front, keeping an eye on the street. He was young and miserable, standing on the porch with one hand wrapped around a styrofoam cup, and the other in his pocket. He was still dressed in rain gear; his hat was covered with plastic, and bright strips of reflective tape had been crossed over the chest of his slicker. He had started this day directing traffic. The coffee in his hand had long since ceased to serve its true function—keeping at least two or three square inches of his skin warm—and now he was reduced to actually drinking it, one wincing sip at a time. Probably be six or seven months yet before he really needed the stuff. Maybe a year or two before he liked it.

The man in the leather jacket, who already needed coffee, among other things, climbed the steps and flipped open his badge. "Agent Chandler," he said. "FBI." Seeing the look on the rookie's face, he added, "I assume

I've come to the right place."

The young man looked down into his cup, walked over to the porch railing, and threw the last of his drink out on the grass. "Yes sir. They're expecting you." He looked out into the rain over Chandler's shoulder. "They said there would be three of you."

"We came in separate cars. The others should be here soon."

The house was cold. Two men were standing in silence, taking up most of the narrow hallway—the local sheriff and the fire chief, judging by appearances. As he closed the door softly behind him, shutting out the sound of rain, the sheriff looked up. "Agent Chandler," he lied again, "FBI. You must be Sheriff Dale?"

The old man nodded and pointed up the stairs with his chin. "Been waitin' on you boys." He laid his weathered hand on his companion's shoulder and squeezed lightly. "You ready to go back up, Bill?"

The fireman turned. His face was a dark, smeared mask of soot; only his wide blue eyes were still clearly visible, haunted and red. "As I'll ever be," he said hoarsely.

Chandler followed the two men up the stairs and into a narrow hall, dark and dripping. Glass was scattered over the carpet at the top of the stairs; the firemen had used the window up here as an entrance. The waterlogged carpet sucked at his feet like peat moss in a swamp. The smells were strong: smoke, rain, and something else, a dark odor that made him rub his mouth on the shoulder of his coat—bacon, burned into black charcoal.

The young fireman stopped ahead of him and turned into the bathroom. Chandler glanced at him curiously, seeing him take the white rim of the porcelain sink in both hands and bend over it, almost prayerfully, looking for strength in the drain. The man's palms and wrists were wrapped in gauze; he had obviously taken hold of something red hot and burned himself badly. "I can't do it, Pete," the young man said loudly, almost shouting. "I'm 'onna wait here."

The sheriff's voice came from a room ahead, at the end of the hall. "That's okay, son," he said. "We're almost done."

Chandler stepped over the splintered remains of the door. This room was completely black, gutted by flames. Looking around, it was hard to say what kind of kid had lived here: maybe a rich kid, if nothing else. Amidst the debris of a toppled bookcase and dresser, he could see a half-melted television set and the warped wreck of a three-component stereo.

In the corner of the room, someone had laid down a sheet from the family's linen closet. "Who called this in?" he asked quietly, picking his way through the charred books and plastic on the floor.

"Neighbor," the sheriff said. "Saw the smoke coming out this window."

"Where are the parents?"

"The boy's only got the one," the sheriff said. He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Or did have, anyway. His mother." The old man rubbed the back of his head, holding his hat in his hand. He'd taken it off when he came into the room, automatically, out of respect for the dead. Force of habit. "She's down at the station. State troopers picked her up at work."

Chandler lifted the sheet. It was a recognizably human form, but all the individuality had been burned away—what was left was just a crumbling, greasy black bundle, arms and legs drawn up into a boxer's stance. The heat would do that to you, once you passed the thousand-degree mark; bones and ligaments shortened as they burned, pulled the limbs up into a rheumatic crouch.

"Jay-sus," he murmured, trying to sound surprised. "That's some kind of fire." He looked up at the sheriff. "How'd he do it? Gasoline? Some kind of home-made napalm?"

The sheriff's eyes shifted away. "I guess we were kind of hopin' you'd tell us, Mr. Chandler. We don't see this sort of thing too often."

"Suicide note?"

"Just that there."

Chandler turned. The mirror was dark with soot, and the lines of the symbol were difficult to make out; and it still seemed to writhe against the amber glass, its arms twisting out from the shapeless blot in the center and then whipping around, like a triple-bladed scythe, to carve out a circle with his own horrified face trapped inside it. His mouth filled with the flat, electrical taste of ozone, and darkness tightened around his vision, forming a narrow tunnel. It took several moments to realize that the roaring in his ears was only blood—his own blood.

Slowly, deliberately, he breathed in. The sheriff had hold of his arm; he found that he was standing with one heel buried in the cinders of a half-burned double bed. He had backed away from the mirror, involuntarily, until he almost fell backwards into the scorched ruin.

"You all right, Agent . . . uh . . . Chandler?" the sheriff asked. As Chandler numbly stared at him, Dale let go of his arm. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

"Yeah," Chandler said.

In the center of the village, there was a tree, a great black matriarch with a diameter of almost fifteen feet. It looked as if it might be a thousand years old; at least one strangler fig had grown down around the trunk, girding the surface with thick gray roots, but had been unable to squeeze the life out of it. The hooches had been arranged around it in a loose semi-circle, like children sitting around the knees of their great-great-grandmother. At least a day had passed, but some of the tumbled grass huts were still smoldering.

Light filtered through the glowing green canopy overhead, and monkeys screamed in the dimness. He reached out and touched the rudely cut symbol, gouged so deep into the dark hide of the tree that the tool had found the pale, creamy wood beneath. Pungent sap had dripped down from the carving, like blood from a fresh tattoo. Something about it made the back of his neck tingle. The sweat all over him seemed a few degrees colder.

The squad commander came up behind him and made a soft sound with his mouth. Without turning, he said, "What do you think of this, Sergeant? Does it mean anything?"

The man leaned forward on one knee and looked politely. After letting a few heartbeats pass, he shook his head. "Never seen it before, sir."

"Hrm." He shook his head. "What was it you wanted?"

"We found something."

As always, the blue of her eyes surprised him; it was a rare color, dark and oceanic, and the pupil was surrounded by occasional bright flecks of autumn gold. "Are you all right, Ray?" she asked. She was still searching his face, wearing a worried expression, and despite himself one corner of his mouth kinked up into a smirk.

"Well, I dunno, Polly." He could smell her hair; in self-defense, he reached for a cigarette. "If you're gonna make such a fuss over me, I might have to muster up a heart attack. See if I can get some mouth-to-mouth."

She looked away sharply, embarrassed. "You're obviously fine." Finding a reason to step away from him, she smoothed the hair over one ear unconsciously, as if to make sure that none of it had escaped the severe knot at the back of her head. "I wish I could say the same for that fireman."

"Yeah. He seemed a little shaky."

She made a face. "He's holding out on us. Giles and I have both tried, but he's iron-clad now, and that lawyer is riding him. They seem to think there's going to be some kind of inquiry. They don't want to leave a chink in his armor—or the department's."

"Yeah. Okay," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Try him." She turned away. "Get something."

"Yes ma'am," he said. He pointed to her briefcase. "You got that case file in there?"

"Yes. You want it?"

"Just for a few minutes." He looked over his shoulder. "Why don't you see if you can get a statement from the mother?"

He walked into the conference room, looking down into the open file in his hands, and sat down next to Sheriff Dale at the long table. "You about finished, Giles?"

"Agent Farmer" looked over his shoulder. His mouth was drawn down

into a grimace of frustration. "Yes. I think we're done."

"About damn time," Sheriff Dale said, putting down his coffee cup. "I told Charlene I'd be home for dinner an hour ago."

Chandler smiled disarmingly. "Why don't we get that deposition ready? I'm betting Mister . . ." He looked over at the lawyer.

"Planck," the man filled in obligingly.

"Mr. Planck here is going to want to go over the details before his client signs anything."

"Definitely," the lawyer said. "Are these interviews over?"

"Yes, sir," Chandler said. "We have everything we need. We'll just wait here until you've got the paperwork, if you don't mind." He turned to Giles and said in a lower voice, "Make sure it doesn't take too long, will you? I think everyone would like to go home."

Giles stiffened almost theatrically. "I'm sure we can wrap this up quickly."

Chandler waited until the door had closed on Giles and the departing lawyer before he shook his head. "I'm sorry you had to go through this," he said to the young fire chief. "Some people just don't know when to quit."

"That's for damn sure," the sheriff grumbled. "I don't know how many times you got to ask the same question and hear the same damn answer before you'd believe it."

Chandler nodded sympathetically. "Well, my partner thought there was more to this than meets the eye, but I think he's just getting punchy. This kid was probably just stoned out of his gourd, free-basing or something, and set himself on fire. Happens all the time."

"That so," the sheriff said, lowering his eyes.

"Well, I suspect that's what the final report will say. Guess it depends on what comes back from toxicology." He reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "The truth will out one way or the other . . . just so long as I don't have to be the one to tell his mother, y'know." He sighed heavily. "Anyway, Giles is going to have to get her statement ironed out as well. To decide whether this was suicide or death by misadventure."

The sheriff looked uncomfortable. "We already got a statement."

"Polly says we didn't get anything we could use," Chandler said helpfully. "She's trying to get in and talk to her now."

Dale stood abruptly and clapped Bill MacPhearson on the shoulder. "You want some coffee, Bill? I'm about dry."

"Sure, Pete," the young man said. "That'd be good."

The fireman raised his bloodshot eyes and looked at Chandler for the first time as Dale left the room, as if suspecting some trick. Chandler gave the younger man a sympathetic smile and fished a lighter out of his pocket. Seeing the unspoken protest in MacPhearson's face, he held the pack out

across the table. "Don't suppose you'd like one?"

MacPhearson's lips parted awkwardly, pressed so tight that they had become glued together. "No."

"It's a filthy habit," Chandler agreed. He lit up.

"Dangerous, too," MacPhearson said, almost accusingly. "A lot of fires are started by cigarettes."

"This one wasn't," Chandler said. He caught the fireman's eyes and held them with his own. "Was it." It was not quite a question.

MacPhearson sat back, letting his gaze drop back to the tabletop. "Don't know."

Chandler tapped an ash casually into an empty coffee cup. "Deaf and dumb. Yeah . . . I've seen this movie before. No one wants to say 'spontaneous human combustion,' but it's got to the point where I don't need to hear it from anyone else. This is the seventh case we've had."

He had MacPhearson's attention now. The man's blue eyes were riveted on him, wide but still disbelieving.

Chandler snorted contemptuously. "I guess you didn't even wonder why they'd sent us here, did you. Well, it's not like Giles and Polly would ever tell you—they're 'non-disclosure' types. Me, I don't give a good goddamn who knows what, or signs what, so long as I hear the truth."

He flipped through the file casually, putting the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. There was a stack of black-and-white photographs inside, blown up to eight by ten; Polly's meticulous notes had been made on the reverse side of each picture. He flipped one over at random and tossed it out onto the table: head shot of a smiling, dark-skinned young man in a vest and tie—obviously taken for a high school yearbook. His black hair was cropped short, and a silver eagle's feather dangled from one ear lobe.

"Jimmy Agee," he said. "He died about a month ago. Worked at a Taste Freeze in Farmington, New Mexico; there wasn't much left of him once they managed to douse the flames." Chandler met MacPhearson's eyes with an ironic smile. "They called it a grease fire. Too bad that 'grease fire' started in the men's room while he was mopping up . . . By the time he ran into the kitchen, he was already the Human Torch. But hey, that would have been tough to explain, and the kid was going to go into the Marines when he got out of high school. Can't have had much of a future anyway."

He looked down again, slid another picture out across the table. "Here's a sad one. Lisa Preston and Garth Fisher." The shot was dark and grainy, but in the end the black smears could be made out—two charred bodies, their bent limbs entwined. "Little girl from the pep squad and her Rebel-without-a-Clue boyfriend. Her parents didn't like him, and some of her peppy little friends told the police that she was going to break up with him, so this would be what a 'murder-suicide' looks like in Austin, Texas."

He kept his eyes on the photograph, taking a hard drag on the cigarette. "Sometimes I have bad nights, wondering which one of them started to burn first. What did the other one do? Try to put out the fire? Try to push away? They never let go of each other, see—but was it because they couldn't, or because they wouldn't?" He let out the smoke. "I can't ever sleep after I start thinking about that."

"Jesus." MacPhearson covered his face with his bandaged hands. His voice was hoarse with pleading. "Stop it."

"Well, I'd sure like to do that, Bill," Chandler said reasonably. "I'd sure like to stop. But you see, I have five more dead kids in this folder, all burned beyond recognition." He leaned forward. "Every one of them went through the same hell as Tommy Wilson, but one thing was different: they were all alone." He took up several photos and flung them across the table angrily; MacPhearson flinched, warding off the rain of sharp-edged paper instinctively. The pictures landed all around him; numbly he bent to pick them up off the table and the floor, helplessly staring at the images.

"Who's that?" he asked. "Is that the kid who was hitchhiking on I-19? We don't even have an ID on that one. He burned up under some overpass by the side of the road. Nobody saw, nobody cared." He tapped another ash into the coffee cup. "You think his parents are wondering what happened to him?"

"You think this is my fault," MacPhearson choked out. "That I let him die."

"No, Bill," Chandler said, almost kindly. "I don't think you did anything wrong until you came into this room." He tried not to notice, one way or another, whether MacPhearson was crying; it was hard. Idly, in some back corner of his mind, he recognized that the man might never recover from this day. He reached out and took the pictures away, gently.

"You've got to realize that I have a job to do, son." He held the younger man with steady, sad brown eyes—eyes that had seen it all already. "I'm fighting this fire the best I can, but no one wants to talk to me. Everybody is too goddamned busy covering his own ass."

"I couldn't help him," MacPhearson said shakily. "I tried and tried to put him out . . . b-but the fire was *inside him*." The man's voice slowly rose into near-hysteria. "*It was inside him, eating him.*"

The door opened, and Chandler looked up to see the horrified faces of Sheriff Dale and MacPhearson's lawyer, Planck. "What the hell is going on here?" Dale said, striding into the room, holding out both hands to the fire chief without realizing that he still had two cups of steaming coffee. MacPhearson was up out of his chair instantly, knocking it over in his hurry to back away from Dale and Planck.

"No!" he said. He was shouting now, tears streaming down his face.

More people were running down the hall; soon the room would be flooded. "I'm gonna tell 'im!"

Chandler closed his folder and looked up in time to meet the sheriff's angry eyes. "Somebody get June!" Dale yelled over his shoulder, into the hall behind him. "Tell her we're taking her boy down to County!"

"The fire was comin' out of his mouth!" MacPhearson screamed. He slapped the boiling hot coffee out of Dale's hands, spraying several people with scalding liquid, and then leaped up against the press of human bodies. "It came out of his ears, goddamn it!" He sobbed, clawing at them to get to Chandler. "I just couldn't put it out!"

Two or three of the state troopers had taken MacPhearson by the arms and were dragging him out of the room; the man's whole body was flexed into an arc as he brayed and shrieked like a maniac.

Dale turned to Giles Farmer, standing in the doorway with a sheaf of papers in his hand, and jerked a thumb at Chandler. "Get this son of a bitch out of my squad room," he said disgustedly.

Chandler put out his cigarette calmly, not bothering to deny the unspoken charges. "That's all right, Sheriff. I'm on my way."

He walked down the deserted hall and let himself into an observation room. In a window of light, Agent Polly sat with Francine Wilson, asking all the routine questions about her son. As he watched, Polly offered the Wilson woman a box of tissues.

He flipped on the intercom in time to hear Tommy Wilson's mother say, "No . . . that's all right. I have my own . . . somewhere . . ."

Struggling for control, Francine opened her purse. Her face crumpled as she took out a new compact disk, still wrapped in plastic. "I just bought this for him today," she said. She paused to bite her lips, holding back tears. "He said the old copy was scratched."

Chandler was on his feet, hands against the glass. It took several moments to hit the button of the com; his body didn't want to obey him. "Polly," he said.

She looked up, turning her face by instinct toward the speaker above her head. "Ray? That you?"

He kept his eyes riveted on the jewel case in Francine Wilson's hand, marked with the sickening three-armed symbol that spun against a field of black. "Take that thing into physical evidence," he said, voice shaking. "I believe we've finally got the break we've been looking for."

"What is it?" he asked.

One of the men had found a stick with a fork at the end of it. There was a dead fire pit in this clearing; Hansen was using the stick to roll around something he had found in the ashes. Now he looked up, cheerful

blue eyes staring out of a face blackened by shoe polish, and his dark countenance split into a white grin.

Marlowe looked down and saw pale fingers, curled and stiff against a fire-browned palm.

"That would be an arm, sir," the sergeant said. "I'm thinking it was a kid, judging by the rest of the bones."

He sat on the bed, eating chow mein out of the take-out box while Polly bent over her laptop. Here in the hotel room, she had stripped off her jacket and heels. Chandler tried not to stare at her, although this state of undress was perversely distracting—the dark leather straps of a shoulder holster against snow-white blouse, narrow feet tucked behind one leg of the chair, and nothing but a thin sheath of brown nylon over her long, sharply angled toes. As he had come to love her, there was no part of her almost sexlessly slim little body that wasn't exciting. She showed so little of it willingly that even a few inches of extra skin were a treat.

"Well?" he asked her. Idly he picked up the remote control and flipped through the cable channels, looking for the rock videos.

"Just a sec," she said. "Giles, you wanna help me out here? That old password isn't working."

Chandler was reminded of Giles' presence in the adjoining room by a renewed clacking of keys. Polly was decent with a computer, but Farmer was a wizard. Seeing the bright, blissful smile that flashed across Polly's face as Giles cracked security programs for her, Chandler could have cheerfully snapped the fat man's neck.

In thirty seconds, Giles sang out. "That should do it."

"What have we got?" Chandler asked.

Polly shook her head. "Not much," she sighed. "The lead singer has a few arrests. Vandalism." She chuckled. "He did thirty days for writing 'Fag-got City' on a viaduct leading into his home town."

"I've got lyrics and fan sites," Giles called from the next room. The staccato of his fingers on the keyboard reached a fever pitch, and he laughed. "What do we want to know about these guys? I can get you just about anything but penis size."

"Birth dates, where they came from, where they went to school, living relatives. Find people we can interview," Polly called.

"They're all from the same town in Washington," Giles said. "The drummer is the oldest: that's Eli Bateson. He'll be thirty in October. The lead guitarist and singer is Christopher Lanois—he's twenty-six. Bass player is Jim Banecek, twenty-seven. Born in Santa Ana, California, and started high school in Washington state when he was fifteen."

Polly turned to him. "Are you sure this is a lead, Raymond?" she

asked. "It seems an awful lot like a wild goose chase."

"I'll do the chasing," he said. "For my own piece of mind, if nothing else. I imagine you'll follow up these killings domestically."

She frowned. "You're actually going to go after a rock-and-roll band? And bring the Company into it?" It was proof of her anxiety that she had let a lock of hair slip out of the knot; it hung beside her ear, a winding curl of champagne-colored silk.

"I've already thought up a good excuse," he said, looking away. "The whole band supposedly takes heroin; I'll tell the brass I'm following up on their supplier. Company doesn't like competition in the smuggling business."

"Plausible," she admitted reluctantly. "But I think that this connection is still a very long shot, Ray."

Chandler raised the CD case. "I've seen it before," he said shortly. "That was twenty years ago, but it wasn't the sort of thing you forget." He sighed and put down his food; the idea of putting another bite in his mouth was now inconceivable. "I thought I was losing my mind when I saw it in the Wilson kid's bedroom. And maybe I'm putting two and two together and getting five—but it's one of those things."

"It's also the absolutely only lead we have," Giles called helpfully from the other bedroom. "Our other option is to go home and wait for another immolation."

Polly shook her head and turned back to the computer. "It's certainly an unconventional line of investigation," she said. "The band's touring in Europe; I'm going to try InterPol."

"I want to know where three punk kids from a shitty little logging town got that symbol, and the bright idea of putting it on an album cover." He lit up a cigarette and closed his eyes. "If it has something to do with the rest of this, that's gravy, so far as I'm concerned."

"If you feel that strongly about it," Polly said, "we'll follow it up. At least until we get something else to go on . . ."

He could see right away when she had something; her whole body tensed, like a bird-dog on point. Quietly he levered himself up out of the bed and peered over her shoulder. "What's that?"

"Christopher Lanois is in the hospital in Rome," she said quietly. "In a coma. He has been for three days."

"Yeah?" he asked. "What happened?"

"Details are fuzzy." Her fingers flew over the keys, and screens came and went faster than he could follow them. "Ah," she said. "Drugs, it looks like." She frowned. "Not heroin, though."

"It doesn't matter." Excited, he let his hand rest on her shoulder for a split second; she cringed at his touch, making a soft involuntary yelp, and he snatched his hand away as if he'd touched a hot stove. "Uh. Sorry." He ges-

tured vaguely. "Can you hang up the modem for a minute? I need the phone."

"Surely," she murmured. She typed with one hand, the fingers of the other still holding her shoulder where his hand had been.

He picked up the phone and dialed through to a desk in Wichita, Kansas. "Hello, Janis," he said. "This is Phil."

The voice on the other end responded in a bright, friendly Midwestern twang. "Hello, Mr. Marlowe. What can I do you for?"

"I need an insertion. Rome. The client is a Mr. Christopher Lanois; he'd be staying at one of the local Hiltons. I'd like a window seat, if I can get one."

"I'll see what I can do, Mr. Marlowe."

"Thanks, Janis."

He turned away, hiding his revulsion from the grinning soldier with his forked stick. These men were barely human now, if they had ever been; the jury was still out, so far as he was concerned, as to whether a genuine human being could ever learn to kill with so little conscience.

He had been warned how it would be out here, long before his helicopter touched down in Laos. For that matter, the agents he met in Saigon would have been warning enough—three out of four were depraved lunatics, mumbling about VC hoodoo and wearing a half-dozen fetishes to protect them from bullets and curses. There was nothing in the manual to tell him how to command, out in these dark jungles; it was like putting on a wolf skin and going out hunting with the wolves. He didn't want to let the mask slip while they were watching. Wouldn't be safe to show them he was a human being.

He turned in a slow circle, surveying the scene. Three logs set up around a pit full of ashes and dead coals. In his mind's eye, he could see the hunting party—between six and ten men, sitting around a fire in the darkness. Cleaning their rifles, leaving tiny wads of oil-soaked rag scattered around in the dirt. And eating, tossing the bones sidearm into a pile of gnawed debris.

Marlowe swallowed hard, forcing the bile back down his throat, unbuttoned his breast pocket and took out a rolled pair of surgical gloves.

His eyes burned while he shrugged his hands into them and squatted next to the heap of bones. It was the chore of a half-hour to sort through the stripped remains, laying them out in rude, general patterns against the dark earth; in the end he had the fire-darkened skeletons of at least two young children, and the femur of a third. The camera he used to photograph them was no bigger than a fountain pen.

He visited the killing fields outside the village, where almost fifteen men and women had been lined up against a low clay bank and shot with M-16's. No effort had been made to bury them; they were rotting as

they had fallen, sprawled gracelessly in the sand. He took photographs of their withered bodies, blank old eyes crawling with flies. When he turned, he found the sergeant standing behind him again.

"Is this what you saw before?" he asked.

"No," the sergeant said. "The others were VC. We found their guns cached up in the tree, along with some—uh—body parts." He had a piece of grass in the corner of his mouth; he worried it now with his teeth, the only outward sign of his agitation. "We could tell they'd been eatin' on 'em, though. That's why we said something when we got back." His pale eyes flickered as he looked over the Laotians, their bodies bloated in the afternoon sun. "Why you figure them JoJos done this? I thought they was supposed to go after Charlie."

"Looks like they're free agents," Marlowe said. "I think they've got their own agenda." He spat, disgusted. "When it comes down to it, the Viet Cong aren't such easy prey. They fire back."

The sergeant nodded. "How come they killed these here, then?" he asked. "Looks like they took all the rest with 'em."

The Company man turned again to look over the scattered dead. "These're all old or crippled," he said. "They took every man, woman, and child who could walk out of the jungle on their own two feet, and shot the ones who couldn't make the trip."

"Trip to where?" The sergeant worried at his piece of grass nervously. "They got no base around here. We'd know it if they did."

"I don't know, Sergeant," he replied. "They've got to live somewhere. There's supposed to be a whole city of them in Burma; maybe they're taking these prisoners all the way back home." He put his camera away and tossed his gloves over his shoulder. "It doesn't matter."

"Why is that?"

"Because they're not getting there, Sergeant," he said grimly. "We're taking them out before they cross over, out of Laos."

The sergeant nodded and took the blade of grass out of his mouth with a lupine smile. "Mr. Marlowe," he said, "that sure sounds like a hoot to me."

The Ospedale was over four hundred years old, built in a century when Rome enjoyed loftier ambitions. Ten mounted knights could ride abreast through the gigantic arch of the entrance, in full parade plate and carrying halberds at the ready; one man in soft silent shoes, wearing nothing more impressive than a black leather jacket and new jeans, seemed an impossibly lonely sight.

Chandler stopped at a desk beneath the north windows to ask directions from a nun. "Ciao, babi," he said. "Dové é la stanza numero tre-dué-sette?"

She looked up from under an elaborate linen wimple, her face alight with the generous, pitying smile of the truly virtuous. "E laggiu," she said, indicating the direction with one hand. "Va alla finé del corridoio é gira a sinistra dué volté."

Silent rain began coursing down the windows, and the light in the great hall softly pulsed and flickered in answer, simmering with the shadows of running water. Chandler turned away from the desk and hesitated for a moment, looking down into the dark, narrow ell that the Sister had indicated with her hand. Then he followed the shadowy path, deeper into the bowels of the *Ospedale*. This was a modern addition; the walls here were cinderblocks and sheetrock, painted with latex that glowed dull, flat cream-yellow under the incandescent bulbs. At the end of the hall, someone in a dark suit sat bent over in a folding chair, his hands dangling between his knees. He looked up anxiously, saw the visitor approaching, and hurried halfway up the hall to meet him.

"Are you from Delgado?" he said.

"Yes sir. You must be Mr. Bukowski."

The man in the suit laughed, putting the heel of his hand to his forehead in disbelief. Chandler, who had originally put his age in the mid-thirties, lowered that estimate by a decade. "Man—don't call me that. Mr. Bukowski is my dad. I'm Paul." He wiped his hand on a pair of Armani pants and held it out for a shake.

"So. He's in room 327." Chandler gestured with his chin, ignoring Bukowski's outstretched hand.

"Paul" looked over his shoulder, his brief smile fading. If he noticed the older man's refusal to shake hands, he gave no indication of it. "Yeah. I've really got to hand it to your agency. You made it here quick."

"I was already on the continent." Chandler took out a fresh pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and gave it one sharp, expert shake. He took one of the two cigarettes sticking out of the pack between his dry lips and offered the other politely.

"No, I don't, thanks." There was sweat standing on Paul Bukowski's forehead; Chandler made note of it idly, putting the pack away. As he fished for a box of kitchen matches in his coat pocket, he said, "When do I get to work?"

"Well . . ." Call-Me-Paul Bukowski put his hand to the back of his neck, looking at the ground. "That's the problem. Officially, you're a bodyguard. That's what it's going to say on the books, and that's what we're going to tell *him*, whenever he wakes up; the doctor says it could be anytime." He jerked his thumb at the door behind him. "But in reality, the job is going to be a little tougher."

"Of course."

"We need someone to babysit him. Like, twenty-four hours a day. He can't be alone at all."

"Why not?"

"Um, basically because we're afraid he'll try and kill himself." Bukowski sighed. "Again."

"Mmmm." Chandler closed his eyes for a moment, silently fortifying himself with a long drag. "I heard he was mixing drugs. He did that on purpose?" He turned away, politely blowing a plume of smoke down the hall, away from Bukowski's face. "And you're sure of this?"

"Paul" gave him a narrow-eyed look. "No. The only thing I know for sure is that if his wife hadn't missed her flight back to L.A., no one would have found him until it was too late. He was already turning blue on the bathroom floor." The young executive wiped his forehead with his sleeve suddenly. "There were supposed to be three shows in Rome—all of them were sold out. We had to cancel; did you see it on the news?"

Chandler shook his head.

"They were going to give full refunds, man—but people are just nuts. Even in Europe, they're fucking nuts. They smashed into the booth, broke down the doors into the theater; some yutz had his video camera and taped the whole thing. It's been on every channel today." He rubbed his eyes, as if trying to wipe away the memory. "I'm just waiting for CNN to pick it up. It's a goddamned disaster."

"I'll bet." Chandler looked up at the low ceiling casually. The two girls from the ticket booth were at another hospital across town, in intensive care; silently he wondered whether Bukowski knew or cared. "I guess the fans are pretty intense about this guy."

Bukowski shook his head. "They're out of their minds for him. I'm serious—I've never seen anything like it." He put his hands in his pockets and turned away abruptly, as if ashamed. "I mean, don't get me wrong; I like Chris. These guys are all like family to me. We came up from the ranks together—we all kind of made each other out of nothing."

"So you have a personal stake in this," Chandler said. "As well as a professional interest." He kept his voice low and even. "That would be why you called us."

"Egg-zactly."

"You want to let me see him now?"

Bukowski looked up and gave him the soulful-puppy-dog eyes, full of hope and pleading. "You think you can do it?" He put on a half-regretful smile, trying to be charming. "No offense, but you're a little older than I pictured."

Chandler smiled with distaste. "I'm not quite ready to be put out to pasture yet . . . Paul." He resisted the urge to tap his cigarette ash off onto

the white linoleum floor. "I think I can handle a few teenagers—no matter how nuts they are."

"But I mean, can you keep him together? We really need him to get through this tour."

"I'll do the best job possible. I can't promise anything more."

"Okay," Bukowski said. He smiled winningly. "No offense, right?"

"No offense," Chandler lied blandly.

"They still have at least two days on us." The man spoke softly, in a voice gone rusty with disuse. He was one of two in the squad who seemed to have nearly lost the power of human speech; these men were so tight that they communicated almost completely by body language and wordless sounds, when the sun was up. A naturally shy man could go without speaking for days.

The soldier rose from his easy crouch, rubbing a pinch of charcoal between his fingers, and then opened his hand to show Marlowe the jet-black paste. "This camp got rained on last night. After they left."

Marlowe nodded. "I think you're right." He turned on his heel slowly, looking over the campsite for any details the others might have missed. "What's your name, soldier?" he asked idly.

The man lowered his eyes. "Chapman, sir." He cleared his throat a little. "I answer to Chap."

"Good to know." Marlowe sighed and turned toward the entrance of the cave. The captives from Gi'y Lang had spent a miserable night in this natural cattle pen, bottlenecked and under armed guard. Most of them would probably have collapsed immediately, after a grueling forced march; twelve hours on the move through the thick jungles of Khoa Ban had left his own body numb and heavy with fatigue, and after a full twenty-four hours of terrified stumbling, driven by blows and bullets, the Laotians must have been completely exhausted.

The Tcho-Tcho guerillas, on the other hand, seemed to have inexhaustible energy. After driving their prisoners nearly fifty miles, they still had the strength left to build another cooking pit and slow-roast the body of a young woman. Marlowe was beginning to be vaguely disturbed that there never seemed to be a skull among the remains he found.

Someone had scratched a shallow depression in the furthest corner of the cave to serve as a makeshift latrine. Above it, flies were humming around a collection of faint, shadowy blots on the wall; he ignited his Zippo lighter and held it up to the rocks to read the legend, written in human feces: We will march west tomorrow. And under that, in much larger letters, HELP US.

"They're moving faster than we thought," Sergeant Roop said qui-

etly. He had come up from behind while Marlowe was reading the writing on the wall; he never spoke if he was more than a few feet away. "I don't think there's a hope in hell of catching them before they're in Burma." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Sir."

Marlowe didn't answer for several moments. When he finally turned, he found Roop standing at the entrance, looking at him expectantly.

"What do you want to do, Cap'n?"

Marlowe frowned, looking down at the toe of his boot. To the trained eye, every sign of human habitation in the cave was a desperate cry. The ground still held the impression of many sleeping bodies. There was a tag of red cloth peeking out of the dirt here; he went down on one knee and brushed a carefully laid heap of twigs and leaves away from a little straw doll without a face, dressed in a scrap of red cotton. It was no bigger than his hand. He looked down at it for a long time, forming a clear image of the child who buried it there—a would-be mother trying to save her "baby" from the roasting pit, very likely.

"We go on," he said. "And hope that the Viet Cong can slow them down better than these hills have done."

The room was quiet, so quiet that it was almost certain that the entire wing was empty. Chandler closed the door softly behind him and took up a post on the radiator. He sat for a while, listening to the sound of Christopher Lanois' breathing, and then opened the casement, letting in the soft sound of rain from the piazza. It took about three hours to smoke half a pack, looking out the window into the rain and wondering how many people had been turned out of their beds to allow *l'enfant terrible* such a wealth of privacy.

The kid's breathing changed slightly, and Chandler heard the soft rustle of clean cotton. He looked back and saw Chris Lanois still lying in the same sleeping pose, dirty blonde hair pushed away from his forehead, his thick-boned face relaxed and peaceful. Even with the dark stubble coating his cheeks and chin, he looked far younger as he lay there—with his eyes closed, his face in repose, he could have been eighteen.

Given the voice he had heard on the band's first album, Chandler would have expected him to look more substantial, somehow. Lanois was surprisingly small, his arms and legs almost spindly. The only tell-tale sign that he was awake was the tension of his lips—he probably didn't realize that he slept with his mouth open.

Chandler turned away, blowing another stream of smoke out the window, and said in a low, amused voice, "Welcome back, sleeping beauty."

"Well, shit," was the answer. Chandler turned back in time to see him trying to wrestle himself upright, the IVs taped to the back of his hand

flopping back and forth as he poked at the pillows behind him. "What, you're just sitting around waiting for me to wake up?"

"You got it." Chandler turned, ready to toss his cigarette out into the rain, but looking out through the glass he froze; in the piazza below, empty a moment before, a dark figure now stood. It was a tall man in a black cloak and a wide-brimmed black hat; for a moment he thought it was a priest, until the cape slipped to one side and he saw that the man was wearing a white dress shirt and a dark vest. He held a violin in one hand, and a long, wicked-looking bow in the other.

"Who the fuck are you?" Lanois said. "What are you doing in my room, anyway? You a doctor?"

As Chandler looked down, the man raised his face toward the window and cocked his head to one side. He was wearing a mask—a white mask with a long, crazy, hooked nose and a big gat-toothed smile. It looked like something out of an opera house. The violinist put the fingertips of his bow hand to his chest and extended the other hand, holding his violin by the neck, to make a low, slow, mocking bow.

"More like a nursemaid," Chandler said, turning toward the singer absently. He stepped down off the radiator and walked up to the bed, sticking the smoldering cigarette into the corner of his mouth. Firmly he took the pillows and tucked them behind Lanois' back, then stuck his hands under the kid's armpits and hauled him unceremoniously up into a sitting position. When he was finished, he went to the corner of the room and put his shoulder against the wall, his back turned, keeping an eye on the man outside, who had now tucked his fiddle under his chin and begun to play, a high-pitched shivering melody that blended oddly with the hiss of rain.

"Hey." Lanois had raised his voice. "Who are you, motherfucker?"

The door opened, and Chandler turned to see Bukowski come into the room, wearing a fearful smile. "Hey, Chris, buddy," he said softly. "You're awake."

"No shit. What the hell is going on, Paul?"

"You're in the hospital," Bukowski said sadly. "You got sick . . . The stomach medicine they gave you was dangerous with alcohol, and you collapsed. We've been worried as hell."

"Yeah?" Chandler could feel Lanois pointing at his back and he turned, smiling. "If you're so goddamn worried, why am I waking up with strangers in my room, Paul? Shouldn't I be in the bosoms of my family or some fucking thing?"

Bukowski looked up and met the agent's eyes with an apologetic smile; Chandler could easily picture Christopher Lanois' mother wearing the same smile, every day, from about the time her son turned four. She was still alive, according to the paperwork. She hadn't rushed to her darling boy's

side. "You want to give us a minute?" Bukowski said. "We haven't really had a chance to get him up to date . . ."

"Fraid not," Chandler said coldly. "The sooner he gets used to me, the better." He turned his shoulder and went back to smoking, looking out the window. The man in the mask was dancing along with his own music now, slowly spinning in the rain.

"What the fuck is this about, Paul? Am I on trial here? Is he some kind of fucking narc?" Lanois' voice was rising. "I'm in the fucking hospital and there's a fucking narc in my room?"

"Relax, Chris," Bukowski clucked, talking as fast as he could under Lanois' escalating tirade and making little pushing gestures with his open hands. "He's not a narc; he's a bodyguard . . . We hired you a bodyguard, we were worried about you, I mean you just collapsed . . ."

"I don't need a bodyguard, *Paul*," Lanois said, loading the man's name with a freight of contempt and loathing that Chandler would not have thought possible, if he hadn't heard it with his own ears. The kid was a master; he kept punching words and syllables with that same hatred as he spoke, while Bukowski cringed as if each one were a fist thudding into him. "I'm not fucking Axl Rose. What I *need* is some *medicine* for my fucking *stomach*, because I feel like I drank a *six-pack* of fucking *batteries*. So take *care* of me, *Paul*, and get me a real fucking *nurse*, not a fucking *bodyguard*, because I don't fucking *need* a fucking *bodyguard*, you *ass-hole*."

"Don't be so sure," Chandler said coolly, gesturing toward the window with the cigarette. "Your loving public knows where you are. Or do you think this guy is doing his little serenade for someone else?"

Lanois froze, his shoulders drawn up around his ears. When Chandler turned back toward him, he saw that the kid's eyes had gone bright and black, some of the ruddy color draining out of his skin. Mr. Rockstar was about to wet himself. "What guy?" he croaked.

Bukowski, nearly brought to tears by Lanois' abuse, couldn't think of anything better to do than round on Chandler like someone's crabby old auntie. "You shouldn't be smoking in here, you know," he said sharply.

"What guy?" Lanois said. "Is there a guy out there?"

"Yep."

Bukowski had come to the window and was looking out. In an undertone, as if to himself, he mumbled, "I don't see anyone . . . Where did he go?"

Chandler laughed. "What are you, blind?" He pointed. "The crazy bastard in the square. The one that's dancing around."

It was funny how the man in the mask almost seemed to hear him. He stopped his endless turning, his cloak swirling to a halt around him. For a moment he stopped playing; the garish smile tilted up toward the window, leering merrily.

"I don't see what you're looking at," Bukowski said, perplexed. Then, as if a light had dawned, he was all agreement; he looked up at Chandler with a chummy wink, a bitter little smile on his face. "Oh, *that* guy," he said, looking off into a corner of the square—nowhere near the man in the opera mask. "Yeah, he is dancing, isn't he? He must have headphones or something. Shit. I wonder how he found out which hospital you were in?"

"Fuck you, Paul," Chris Lanois said, huddled in his bed; he had drawn his knees up under the sheets, and had his arms wrapped around them now, rocking back and forth slightly. "He isn't dancing anymore."

"Nope," Chandler said over his shoulder. He looked back at the singer, realizing that there was no way that Lanois could see the masked violinist outside; his bed wasn't high enough, and the window was completely blocked by Bukowski's body, not to mention his own. "He's stopped now. He's just looking up at the window."

Chris Lanois' face had gone gray, wizened and ugly. The goblin smile of cruel half-pleasure he had worn just moments ago was gone; he looked like a sick old man. "You see him," he said bleakly, meeting Chandler's eyes for the first time. "No shit."

"I don't lie, son," Chandler said. "If I say he's out there—he's out there."

"I'm going to go get the nurse," Bukowski said suddenly, turning on his expensive heel and stalking toward the door—left out of another joke.

"Yeah . . . get me some morphine, Paul," Lanois pleaded. Bukowski stopped and turned at the door, in response to the sad need in Lanois' voice. "I'm sorry I was such a prick, honest. It just hurts so bad, man . . . it's scaring me."

Bukowski melted visibly, smiling at Lanois. "I'll get a doctor, Chris. Don't worry." His eyes flicked up toward Chandler, narrowing slightly as he calculated the odds of winning Lanois over. "If you don't want a bodyguard . . . just say the word. I mean it."

"I'm okay." Lanois flattened himself in the bed, obviously exhausted, one arm crossed over his stomach protectively. "He's your guy, right? Must be all right."

Chandler looked Paul Bukowski in the eye, reading the petty vengeance there with a calm smile.

"Okay, Chris. I'll be right back."

Chandler watched the door swing shut and let the sound of Gucci loafers recede down the hall before he permitted himself a laugh. "Why don't you just bend him over?"

Lanois had thrown one forearm over his eyes, but his mouth curled into a ghost of the goblin smile for just a second. "Hey," he said, "don't think he hasn't begged me, dude."

The kid took his arm away and looked up, his eyes filmed over with a

dull cataract of despair. Chandler had seen that look before, but never outside a VA hospital.

"Who are you, man?" Lanois said. "Why are you here?"

"I'm here to watch out for you," Chandler said. Even to his own ears, it didn't sound convincing.

Roop shook his head. "I can't see how the hell they did this, sir," he said.

Marlowe closed his eyes and took a deep breath, sickened. What he had, scattered up and down the slope, was a swath of shattered trees and shattered men. There was no point in trying to put an exact number to the dead; they were torn up and tossed around like confetti. It looked vaguely as if someone had shelled the place, minus the craters and the obvious centers of impact—all the trees were broken off in the same direction, as if hit by some killing wind that rose from the floor of the valley below.

He found enough French and Russian rifles to call it a platoon of Viet Cong, give or take a few. He found enough human feeling left in him to hope that some of them had gotten away, despite the danger they represented to his own LRP. It looked like a hell of a way to go.

He looked over the wreckage and then at the tree line behind him. Roop was half-crouched beside a man with no legs, worrying at the light pack that was still strapped to the torso. His men were drifting back to the cover of the jungle like smoke, having stripped the bodies on the hill of anything they could use.

"Looks like this ol' boy hit a MASH a while back," Roop said. "He got all kinds of goodies." He held up a packet. "Penicillin. Pain killers, too."

"Might as well take 'em, Sergeant," he said. He indicated the blasted trees around them with a looping gesture. "How long ago?"

"Less than a day," Roop said. He shrugged. "More or less. These bodies ain't softened back up yet."

"How long until we catch them?" he asked.

"Tomorrow or the next morning, maybe. If we don't run into Charlie. Sooner, maybe, if they do."

"Good enough. Let's push on until dark."

It took almost an hour for Lanois' wife to arrive, although the hotel was a fifteen-minute taxi ride. She didn't come alone.

Chandler, already braced for her arrival, was still taken aback by the sight of Tracy Tone. A mere photograph could not do the woman justice. He was prepared for the unabashed homeliness of her face; Polly had downloaded as many pictures as he could stand. It was a coarse visage, with all the grace of a chainsaw sculpture, the broad features made even less lovely by a habitual expression of blind, naked loathing of everyone and every-

thing. He was ready for the angry sneer and the heavy-lidded blue eyes, blazing with swollen veins, which looked as if they should be glaring through a tiny square of shatterproof glass in a hospital for the criminally insane. The wild ragged trails of blonde hair, standing up all around her head like witchfire, were nothing new. But somehow, in person, it was worse.

The woman was chaos incarnate. Her always-heavy makeup had melted into a smeary, running nightmare: thick semi-circles of liquid eyeliner under each eye, lipstick half-rubbed off her mouth, and some strange gray streaks running all the way down her cheeks and neck, staining her white tank top—a thin layer of cotton behind which there was nothing but skin.

Standing there at the door, she wiped her nose with the back of her hand, taking in the room with a cold, unblinking blue stare. The morphine had put an end to Lanois' brief interlude with consciousness; now his eyes were rolled back up into his head, a crescent of pus-yellow sclera showing between his lashes. "They gave him something, huh, Paul?" she said. There was accusation in her voice. "Like he needs more drugs." Her eyes settled on Chandler, and he stiffened automatically. "Who's this asshole?"

Bukowski, who had been sitting with his arms folded beside the bed, nodding off onto his chest, looked up wearily. "Bone Mountain hired Chris a bodyguard," he said quietly. "This is Mr. Chandler."

She smiled, exposing a mouthful of dangerous-looking teeth, and turned her attention to Bukowski. "Hired him a bodyguard? Shit. Where's mine?"

"We thought you were going back to L.A.," Bukowski said diplomatically. "If you want to stay in Europe, maybe we should get one for you and Catherine too."

"Nah," she said, looking away. "I don't need some shithead following me around."

Chandler suppressed a snort of derision. His eyes had automatically bounced away from the woman—her face and the dark nipple shadows under her shirt were equally disturbing—but her entourage wasn't much more pleasant to look at. They were a couple of heroin addicts; nothing could be more obvious. One of them, a sandy-haired man with the rubbery, emaciated body of a long-term user, was holding the tiny hand of a baby girl who could only be Lanois' daughter. Despite himself, Chandler felt his gut tighten to see a child in the grip of such an obvious junkie; as he looked up from the baby's serious frown, he found the man watching him with a sickly, knowing grin. *I can guess what YOU'RE thinking*, the smile said. As if to confirm his suspicion, the addict brushed a few strands of filthy hair out of his face and scooped the little girl up into his bony arms, holding her on his hip with a defiant grin.

The last member of the party was a nervous young girl. She hadn't been riding the horse for long, but she already had the look: drained, graying

skin; sunken, hunted-looking eyes; and the tell-tale nails—bitten to the quick while waiting for the next hit. As she stood there, hugging herself, her eyes shifted nervously between the thin man and his mistress, waiting for a cue.

"This would be Tracy," Bukowski said conversationally, addressing himself to Chandler. "She and Chris were married recently."

"Congratulations," Chandler said drily.

"Yeah," Tracy Tone said tiredly. "Fuck you too."

Chandler raised an eyebrow, but made no further comment as the woman bent over her husband. The way she took hold of Lanois' jaw, her blunt, shovel-shaped nails almost biting into his skin, made Chandler flinch.

"Wake up, Chris!" she barked. Some kind of current seemed to jolt through Lanois at the sound of her voice; he shuddered all over, arms rising spasmodically, fingers jittering crazily.

Incredibly, his eyes opened. Tracy Tone sat down on the side of the bed, bending over her husband; from Chandler's angle, she looked twice his size. She cocked her head, gazing down into his eyes; Chandler couldn't see her expression, but he could imagine what Lanois was seeing, waking up in an opiated haze with that baboon's mask in his face—and he shuddered sympathetically. For a moment, the kid looked scared; then the old goblin smile was back, wider than ever.

"Hey, baby," he said dreamily, grinning an uneven narcotic grin. He raised a limp hand and pawed feebly at her hair, pushing it away from her damp cheek. "You look great."

She wiped at her face angrily, suddenly self-conscious—as if no one had told her what she looked like. "Fuck you, you sick little bastard!" Her shoulders hitched, and she made a strangled sound—half sobbing, half fury. Her fist thumped into his chest, so hard that it drove the wind out of him. "You made me cry!"

"Ow," he said in a high, light voice, rubbing his chest with his hand. If anything, his smile widened for a moment—and then softened into a kind of sad tenderness. "No, I mean it," he said. His hands rose again, together, as he reached for her. "I mean it." She tried to push him away for a few seconds, batting at his hands savagely, but those hands kept drifting back. When he wouldn't stop, she covered her face and began crying, resting her forehead against his chest as his arms enfolded her.

Her tears were atrocious. The sobs ripped into her over and over, and she sounded more like a tormented animal than a human being—but the worst of it was that she kept trying to talk the whole time. "You s-s-scared me," she kept saying, interspersed with meaningless cursing—"you fucking junkie shitweed!" She drove her fist into his ribs over and over as he held her, thumping him in the sides like a boxer trying to fight his way out of a clinch.

For a moment, Chandler considered breaking it up, worried that she would pull out the IVs—but upon seeing the look on Lanois' face, he thought better of it. Resting his sharp chin on her bare shoulder, holding her close to him, the kid looked like he was being crucified. Every sob, every half-coherent word, made him wince—wince the way a gut-shot soldier winces at every little touch, every attempt to move him. "I mean it," he said again, stroking her hair clumsily. Finally he raised her face in both his hands and kissed her, stopping up her mouth with his.

With that kiss, her body suddenly relaxed—as if a circuit had been completed, or a radio turned from thunderous white noise to a station which played only silence. Her body flowed into Lanois' so naturally, so easily, that Chandler turned his face away and closed his eyes, deeply embarrassed . . . and for the first time, he genuinely wished himself elsewhere. He didn't want to see something so intimate—it was too much to see of anyone, much less of someone he hated on sight. Maybe a woman shouldn't even love a man like that, the way a screaming baby loves a bottle. The only thing he was sure of, seeing her stripped so completely bare, is that when a kiss like that happens to someone, no one else should witness it—no one else should exist at all.

Bukowski cleared his throat and stood, impatient with the scene. "Yeah," he said awkwardly. "Well, I've got to get back to the hotel and tell everyone that you're not dying," he said.

Lanois broke the kiss, grinning his goblin grin at Bukowski. "I'm not dead yet!" he squeaked a la Monty Python—and then, in the same high-pitched British accent, added, "Tell the vultures to piss off!"

Bukowski laughed, his head hanging in exhaustion. "Will do."

Tracy Tone wiped her mouth, sitting up. "So you still make me horny," she mumbled. "So fucking what." She looked over her shoulder imperiously, not even bothering to speak; the blonde junkie stepped forward and handed over her little girl. The baby settled into her lap, and the woman bent her head over the child's shoulder, taking one chubby little hand in hers. "See, honey?" she said, waving the little hand at Lanois. "Daddy's okay."

The baby had been sucking the fingers of her free hand thoughtfully; now she took them out of her mouth for the first time and said, in a startlingly clear and solemn voice, "Daddy is an *ass-hole*."

Tracy laughed—a loud, vicious laugh. "That's right, sweetie! Daddy is a big asshole!"

Lanois looked stricken. His face contracted into a tragic knot of guilt; just the sight of his daughter seemed to fill him with pain. "Sorry," he said. His eyes flicked back and forth between mother and child, trapped. "Really."

Despite himself, despite the fact that he automatically loathed the woman, Chandler almost laughed with her. He leaned back against the

wall with his arms crossed over his chest, eyes closed, and thought: *Serves you right, you little prick. A man with a family can't just drink poison.*

"Okay," Bukowski said. "I'm gone."

Sometime that morning, Hansen saw something. He was on point; suddenly he straightened up and fired twice, deliberately, at a human head which had been mounted on a pole beside the trail. By the time anyone else could get to him, he was eerily calm. "Damn thing was lookin' at me," he explained.

Accordingly, the sergeant put someone else at the front, a steady black man named Cole. In the late afternoon, he too stopped; the shriek and rattle of the jungle was muted, but even so, his low rumble could barely be heard.

"Sergeant."

Marlowe and Roop went up to the front of the column in a squat. Cole was crouched in the brush; the two officers went down on either side of him and peered through the leaves at the trail ahead.

There was something hanging in the trees. "It's a cage," Cole said. "Looks like a white man in there."

Marlowe peered ahead, trying to see. Cole and Roop made no effort to hold him back as he crept forward, one squatting step at a time. The area had a dangerously innocent look that made the back of his neck prickle; he kept his eyes on the ground, looking for mines, tripwires, deadfalls.

Most of the mercenaries in the clearing had been killed the old-fashioned way, gunned with assault rifles. The casings were scattered over the ground liberally, and the bodies lay as they'd fallen, untouched. Some of them still had their hands on the back of their heads, in the attitude of surrender. Cautiously, Marlowe poked one with his rifle, rolling him onto his back—a blue-eyed kid with no tags.

He straightened slowly, wary of a sniper, and approached the middle of the circle with caution. Inside the hanging cage, a naked man sat with his legs splayed out before him, his toes slowly, rhythmically flexing around the bamboo bars. Swarms of flies and midges surrounded him, constantly billowing down out of the high forest canopy in buzzing clouds. He sat there with the insects crawling all over his terribly white, unhealthy flesh, with wounds too wet and exposed to scab over in his shoulder and both legs. The skin was turning yellow and green all over him—so fast that Chandler could actually see the corruption advance.

The rattle of an M-16's barrel against the bars made him turn his head. Seeing Marlowe standing there, he croaked out:

"Who are you, man? Why are you here?"

The stink of him was unbelievable.



It was the smell that woke him. Chandler's eyes opened blind, and his body stiffened immediately. He had the urgent sense that something had come into the room, and was moving silently in the darkness. He took a breath; there was a smell in the room so overpowering that it took his complete mastery of will not to gag out loud.

It was the smell of death, of poisonous infection and decay—with an undertone of human filth that brought up a thin coat of oily bile to crawl at the back of his throat. The odor was overwhelming, a rippling wave which had many parts—fish rotting on the docks, mercury-laden sloughs pouring out into a dead river, the ripe sweet horror that rises from an open grave—and beneath it all there was a sense of other, a bitter chemical odor that made him wish for a gas mask. As he strained his senses into the dark, unmoving, he heard a small sound just opposite him, on the other side of Lanois' bed. *Kish*.

Kish. Kish. It was regular, a sort of small hissing noise. Almost like something . . . dripping.

Kish. Kish. And then, closer—it must be on the bed itself. The dripping no longer ended with a hiss. Chandler was quite sure the sound was a sizzle. The smell of burning cotton joined the rest of the stink . . . and in a minute, he was quite sure, it would be burning flesh.

The gun in his hand, a strangled yell rattling in his mouth, he groped desperately for the button on the bedrail. As the lights above Lanois' bed flared on, he staggered backward out of his chair, firing once-twice-again, three bullets that hit a dark figure in the chest, disappearing into the body as if he'd fired into a tub of ballistic jelly. The white mask flashed in the air, black stinking tatters of cape whirled—and he fired again . . .

At nothing . . .

The mirror above the sink exploded. Lanois was yelling hoarsely about fire, pounding his call button. Chandler pressed himself into the corner for several moments, clawing at the collar of his shirt, trying to get air—and then went to the window and broke it with his elbow, knocking out the glass with three blows of his leather-clad forearm. He thrust his head outside, breathing in the cool spring stink of Rome . . . sucking his lungs full of it like a drowning man.

Turning, he covered his mouth and nose with his own cold, sweating hand. "Holy shit," he said through his fingers.

"Wh-who the fuck was it?" Lanois said. "What were you shooting at?"

"I don't know." His voice had gone dead, cold and emotionless, as he struggled to master himself. In his head, the alarms were screaming: four shots, one hits the wall. "I thought there was someone standing over you."

Chandler went to the opposite side of the bed, cautiously, desperately hoping that what he would see there was a human being, stretched out on the floor with three neat holes in the front of him and one hell of a mess in the back. Inconvenient, stupid, a damn shame—but that's what belonged there.

Nothing. Carefully he squatted, and tilted his head to see under the bed—*just to be sure*, he told himself, while he craved beyond words the sight of someone holding his guts, having crawled across the linoleum in shock. There was some kind of little mark on the floor; he took a pencil out of his pocket and gingerly poked the spot with the eraser, trying to think above the still-urgent pounding of his heart. The tile was actually pitted here, as if something had cut away a chip of it; when he lifted the pencil, a long curl of smoke was rising from the end. The eraser crumpled and collapsed into black goo before his eyes.

He stood, scanning the bed, still holding the gun in his hand. Lanois cringed away from him. There was a scattering of little brown marks, here, against the pure white linen. On the pillow, beside the divot that Lanois' head had made, were three spots in the pillowcase, each edged with brown discoloration. He picked up the pillow and yanked the case off; the holes went through several layers of cloth, had burned all the way through to the feathers.

He stuck his finger through one of the brown holes. "Been smoking in bed, kid?"

Lanois shook his head, eyes wide. His skin was pale as cheese. "What did it look like?" he asked.

Chandler looked him in the eye. "You're trying to tell me you didn't see it?"

Lanois avoided his eyes. "It—it was dark," he said. "Then the light blinded me . . ."

The door rattled, and then someone was urgently knocking. "Hello!" cried a woman. "Let me in please! Is everything all right?"

Chandler went to the door, tried the handle, and froze, feeling the blood drain away from his head. He reeled for a moment, fighting down a flood of rising bile, and then quietly reached into his jacket and put the Beretta back into the holster under his arm. The door was still just as he had left it before he turned out the lights—locked from the inside.

He unlocked the door with trembling fingers, then pushed his way through the anxious nuns in the hall. And even while he canvassed the corridor, trying every door, searching every corner, he knew there was nothing to find.

The last bullet didn't miss. The target, whatever it was, just *went away* before it hit.

The cage spun slowly under the tree, twirling on its long rope. Hansen

couldn't look at the man inside; he kept turning slowly, holding his rifle, flaring his nostrils in the cool rain like a nervous horse on the verge of panic. "It's a trap," he kept muttering. "This is a trap. We should get out of here."

The others checked the rigging of the rope carefully and poked the ground underneath with sticks, trying to figure out what the gooks had done. If the Marine was the bait, there had to be a hook.

Somewhere.

Impatient, Marlowe gave the order. "Cut him down."

Cole and Chapman cut the rope with a machete and pulled the man out of his prison. He came out like a scarecrow, a big sack stuffed full of wet rice, and lay sprawled unhealthily out on the ground, his belly bulging up between a wasted chest and a shriveled penis.

"We need to rig a travois, if we're gonna move him," Roop pointed out.

"Nuh . . . nuh . . . no," the prisoner protested. He began coughing all of a sudden, a wracking, slow, groaning cough. He rolled onto his side on the ground, his body speckled with wet earth, and then onto his hands. "Uuuuuuhhhhh—"

His belly heaved, flesh jumping all over him. Chapman bent close, holding out a steadying hand, and then backed away suddenly as the naked man lifted his head. There was a splashing sound, and suddenly the whole clearing filled with the smell of chlorine.

"Jesus Christ," Chap said, trying to back away, "his face . . ."

He didn't realize he was heading for the phone until he was there. At the booth he unfolded a piece of paper in his pocket and, after making his wishes known to the overseas operator, managed to reach a small hotel room in rural Washington. The voice that answered was alert—too sharply alert for a woman wakened from sleep. It was a nine-hour difference in time; she would have had dinner. She would be in her room, preparing for the night's long, insomniac vigil.

"Hello?"

"Polly." He closed his eyes and he could see her, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Give me one reason that I shouldn't wax the kid right now," he said. There was no way to keep his voice from shaking.

There was a hesitation on the other end of the line, and he knew that she was turning on a scrambler. Her voice, when it came again, was almost tender. "You having some trouble, Ray?" she asked. "Tell me about it."

"Something came for him," he said. He dropped into his robotic monotone to describe the incident: the man with the violin, the smell, the dripping sound, the bullets—three absorbed, one into the wall directly behind. When he was done, she answered with one word.

"Acid?" she asked. "You're sure?"

"I'm not sure about anything." Then, almost pleading: "Polly—what's going on?"

"I don't know yet," she said. Just the sound of her voice, the brisk competence of it, gave him something to hold onto. "But rest assured, we will find out. Giles and I are working hard."

"Give me something," he said hungrily. He liked to hear her think aloud. Her mind worked like a Swiss watch; her thoughts were like architecture. Like classical music. "Something to go on."

"Well . . . there's one thing that didn't turn up in our report; Lanois lost a girlfriend in 1992," she said. "Her name was Jennifer Lambert. It was an ugly death, possibly cult-related; some of the local authorities were a little hysterical about it. They thought that she might actually be a victim of the Bellingham Strangler, but the Bureau rejected that theory—the mutilation of the body was outside of his usual MO." He heard the sound of papers shuffling. "Giles got us quite a lot of photographs of the crime scene, and an autopsy report. The acid you mentioned—that catches my attention. You see, some sort of acid torture was used on the Lambert girl; a large quantity of an unknown solvent was administered—" There was a quaver there, for a moment. She cleared her throat. "Uh, through the vagina."

"Jesus Christ," he said. "Screw this; I'm going back to the hospital and blow his brains out. Case closed."

"He didn't do it," she said quickly. "We tried every angle, but the time of death for Jennifer Lambert is fairly precise. Christopher Lanois was onstage in Minneapolis at the time. It was a four-hour show. People had their eyes on him . . . for the duration." She stopped. "Raymond? Are you there?"

He reached for a cigarette. "Yeah," he said, lighting up. The nicotine poured into his blood, a soothing dark tide. "I'm here."

"Okay," she said, relieved. She cleared her throat again, a little awkwardly. "Well, Lanois went into a deep depression. One of our contacts thought he would have married Jennifer Lambert if she had lived; she wore a ring that he had given her, but they never announced anything. It was a bad case of survivor's syndrome. He was in a car accident around that time which may have been attempted suicide—his mother's Pontiac went off a bridge into the Wishkah river."

Chandler whistled. "Bad things, man."

"He may have been responsible, directly or indirectly, for what happened to her. The—manifestation—you just described . . . it seemed to be focused on him?"

"Jesus . . . I don't know. It seemed like it . . ."

"That's interesting. As it so happens, I've done a little research into this area's mythology on my own—the agency asked me to put together a

report. There's a surprisingly high concentration of serial murderers who either begin or end their careers in the Pacific Northwest . . ."

Something skittered along the ground in the street behind him, and he whirled, heart pounding. The wind had caught a crumpled sheet of newspaper. It skipped and fluttered past, jumping with each little gust.

"—several coastal tribes up here," Polly was saying. "Do you, um, have any interest in anthropology?"

"I might." He smiled a little, taking a drag of his cigarette—once he could get it into his mouth. His hand was shaking violently. "If I knew anything about it."

She laughed—a bright silvery sound, which she let die into a long, slow sigh. "Yes, well . . . perhaps it is a little esoteric. Considering what time it is, in Rome."

He looked around him again, feeling exposed and vulnerable. The city slept all around him, deserted, only a distant sound of traffic to remind him that somewhere, people might be awake—but nowhere near enough to hear him, if he were to start screaming. The single cone of lamplight on him was an island, surrounded by a dark sea of twisting, empty old streets. "I guess I'd better clock back in."

"I'm sure we're onto something here," she said reassuringly. "It has something to do with the music itself."

Chandler dropped his cigarette and ground out the spark under his toe, with one precise twist. "Whatever. The kid gets out of the hospital soon. From the way his agent is acting, I bet they'll try and put him out on stage right away."

"Keep your eyes open," she said. "Good night, Ray."

The line went dead abruptly. He had noticed that about her; Agent Polly never gave anyone a chance to say good-bye.

From behind, you could see the things wrestling inside him, flowing under his skin like madly kicking babies. He rolled back over, and the freight pouring out of his mouth was clearly visible—they had already melted away most of the soft tissue from his nose down to his Adam's apple. Blue bruises were swiftly spreading over his abdomen; his skin opened and then melted away into clear red ooze, and they came out of him the same color, clear red ooze, then brown-green-black, turning the color of the ground, of whatever they touched, as they rushed out of him like water.

Someone opened fire, and high-velocity lead ripped the nightmare apart. Bullets thundered in the clearing like Niagara, until the dying man was reduced to a broken heap of flesh and bones, only barely recognizable as a human being. The things inside him sizzled and exploded when they were hit, spattering apart into burning, stinking gobbets of jelly: within

seconds even those vanished in curling tendrils of smoke, leaving whatever they touched—leaf, vine, skin—discolored and dying . . .

It was amazing how the kid could stare at the wall. Several times, Chandler found himself idly glancing at the blank expanse of white paint, half-expecting to see some silent drama being played out; Lanois had the glazed-but-fascinated expression of a kid watching cartoons with the sound turned off.

Finally Chandler broke down and said, "So. Bet you're happy to be leaving tonight."

Lanois turned his head, the vacant look on his face vanishing in a heartbeat. "Are you kidding? I love hospitals." He took a deep breath through his nose. "Just smell the *clean* in here, man. You can tell they scrub everything with Lysol."

Chandler wrinkled up his face. "Lysol smells like shit."

Lanois barked laughter. "No—shit smells like shit. Shit is full of living stuff; Lysol smells like death. That's what the name means, you know—'essence of death.'"

Chandler gave him a dubious look. "Where'd you get that? Cereal box?"

"I used to be a janitor."

"No shit." Chandler took another cigarette and politely offered the pack.

"No shit. I was good at it, too." Lanois took the cigarette; Chandler lit them both up with the same match. "Lysol is good stuff," he said, pulling hard to get the cherry lit, "but what I used to love was bleach. Bleach kills anything it touches."

"Liked that, did you?"

"It's a good thing." Lanois grinned. "Bleach is a purifier."

"That's interesting." Chandler blew his smoke up at the ceiling. "In a sick kinda way."

Lanois shifted his weight, taking hold of the bed rail. "Did I mention that you're looking like shit this morning?" he said absently. "Guess you didn't sleep real well after that guy tried to get at me."

Chandler hid a sardonic smirk. "You probably didn't get such a good look at me beforehand," he said. "I'm sure it's not that much worse."

Lanois lowered his eyes and smiled to himself, one of the rare, shy smiles that were not really meant to be seen. "Maybe. You look tired, though."

"I don't sleep a lot when I'm working," the detective said. Silently he added, *Too many dreams*. "And no, I didn't bother going back to sleep after—whatever that was. He got too close." For appearances' sake, he added, "These hospital security guards are for shit."

With considerable effort, Lanois swung both his legs off the mattress, bare hairy feet dangling several inches above the floor. "I have to take a leak."

Chandler offered his hand, helping him up. He took the kid's arm,

and together they hobbled over to the bathroom door, Lanois' gait uneven and loose in the knees; a few days of intravenous feeding had sapped his strength.

"I can handle the rest," Lanois said, pulling his arm free. He took a few steps on his own.

When he staggered on his way through the door, Chandler leaned over and caught him by the back of his hospital gown. "Whoopsie daisy," he said casually, and held Lanois upright until he could grab the shower door to steady himself, going hand over hand the rest of the way.

Leaning over the toilet to urinate, bracing himself with a forearm against the wall above his head, he looked back over his shoulder at Chandler and nodded at the back of his BVDs. "By the way," he said, "there's my ass, if you want to kiss it."

"Careful, Christine," Chandler said, lighting up a cigarette. "Or I won't walk you home."

Lanois wheezed out a chuckle, turning away again. "You're pretty cool," he said, with the air of a guilty admission. "Like the world's only punk bodyguard."

"That's right," Chandler said, smiling thinly to himself. "A reverse bodyguard."

"What . . . you're gonna protect the world from me?" Lanois laughed uncertainly.

Chandler gave no answer. Lanois flushed the toilet twice when he was finished, and took the time to wash his hands, rubbing the soap up the forearm like a surgeon.

As he was about to help the kid back to his bed, the door suddenly rattled in its frame. Someone in the hall was pounding it.

"Yo, Chris! You in there?"

"Hell, no!" Lanois shouted back. "I'm Sid Vicious!"

The door slammed open with a boom. Chandler's hand had gone into his leather jacket; it stayed there when he saw Lanois' visitor. Regardless of whether this man was really dangerous, he looked it. He was almost seven feet tall, with long, hard-looking limbs, greasy black hair, and a beard-and-moustache combo that went out with Rasputin. In his hand, he held up a rolled-up magazine, and on his face he wore the look of a man about to beat his dog for shitting on the carpet.

"Where are you, you little puke?" he said loudly. He looked Chandler up and down contemptuously. "And who the hell is this fag?"

Lanois appeared at the bathroom door, gripping both sides of the frame to stay upright. As the man's attention shifted, Chandler moved lightly to one side, never taking his eyes off the target. "Is he a friend of yours, Mr. Lanois?" he asked coldly.

"Friend is a pretty strong word," said Lanois, grinning at his visitor. The air between the two of them was heavily charged. Slowly, Lanois walked to his bed and climbed into it, every move calmly controlled. Chandler, who knew how weak he was, narrowed his eyes at this; there were reserves of will in the little man that he would not have suspected. Lanois pulled the sheets back over his knees, and looked up at the tall man again; his face was quietly composed now, except for the hard lines around his mouth. "What do you think, Jim?" he asked. "Are you my *friend*?"

"You're lucky you're an invalid, motherfucker," the man growled. Now that Chandler had a few moments to look at him, he recognized the man; it was James Banecek, the bass player of Bliss. Banecek whipped the magazine he was holding at Lanois side-arm, hitting him with enough force to knock him back in his bed. "'Cause otherwise, I'd be kicking your candy ass."

Lanois' eyes narrowed, glittering with yellow light. "Yeah . . . and hey, 'get well soon' to you too, you asshole." He picked up the magazine in his lap and unrolled it. "What's this? A present?"

"Gee—I don't know what it is, Chris," Banecek said. "I pick up the latest issue of *Noiz*, and it says there that we're going to break up the band after this tour. Funny—Eli and me never heard a thing about it, so who do you think would tell them something like that?"

"I have no fucking idea," Lanois said coldly. "You're saying it was me?"

"Who else?" Jim Banecek demanded. "You or your fucking psycho wife—I don't care which anymore."

Lanois' face twisted scornfully. "Yeah, me or my wife—or maybe they fucking *made it up*, Jim, so they could put our names on the cover." He tossed the magazine aside. "You want to kick my ass, you're going to have to come up with a better excuse than that."

Banecek thrust out an accusing finger. "You let us down, man," he said. "We had three shows in this city—now we'll be lucky if you can play one. That's bullshit. That's ripping us off."

"Yeah, okay, and I'm sorry about that," Lanois said reasonably, "but it's not exactly like I planned the whole thing."

"I wouldn't put it past you," the bassist said. He turned abruptly and walked to the window, looking down into the square. His teeth were still gritted, although there was a faint smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. "Probably did it just to *piss* me off."

"Yeah," Chris Lanois said, laughing once. "Well, you know that's the only reason I do anything." He grimaced. "Actually, Tracy and I were fighting, and I was so cheesed at her I forgot I'd already taken my medication. Complete fucking accident."

Banecek looked dubious. "What, trouble in Paradise?" he said sarcastically. "Say it isn't so."

"Okay—but I'd have to lie."

Banechek heaved a sigh. "Yeah, well, it's not like I haven't told you about a million fucking times to get rid of her." He looked as if he would've said more, but he glanced at Chandler and changed his mind. "A good lay is worth only so much bullshit. I'm not even gonna say it anymore, dude."

"Good." Lanois paused. "Are we done now, or do I have to send my bodyguard out in the hall so you can beat the shit out of me?"

Banechek dismissed this idea with a wave of his hand. "Beating your ass doesn't do any good. It's been tried." He stared out the window, eyes burning with intensity. "I'm just pissed about the Rome shows. That theater really rocks, man—it's old, and the acoustics are *excellent*." His fist thumped into the window. "Man, I *know* we can get a seat on the Senate after this tour. We fucking *deserve* it."

"Yeah," Lanois said distractedly. "The theater. It's . . . cool."

"Anyway, I've got to get back. I have things to do." The bass player walked up to the bed, and Chandler's back stiffened again. Regardless of how Lanois had deflated his anger, there was still a taut thread of mistrust between the two of them, a palpable sense of threat. Banechek leaned over and offered his hand, elbow bent, and Lanois slapped his palm up into it.

"Cool. Tell Eli to get me some cigarettes, will you? I'm dying in here." He nodded at the bodyguard. "This guy smokes the queer European things."

Banechek's voice dropped a register. "Tell me this shit isn't going to happen again, Chris."

"It isn't going to happen again, Chris," Lanois parroted solemnly.

"Good. 'Cause we're close to the sound—real close."

Lanois' smile was thin. "Yeah—I could tell. I think I might have something new, too."

"Good. Glad to hear it." Banechek turned and walked out.

Chandler waited until the man was long gone before he turned to Lanois and said skeptically, "*That guy* wants to go into politics?"

The singer laughed. "Jim wants a lot of things. He's ambitious." He rolled over on his side, showing Chandler his back. Within moments, he was asleep.

"Aw right, aw right, cease fire goddamn it!" the sergeant roared. Hansen's gun had jammed with a dull snap several seconds ago, but he was still squeezing the trigger, his teeth clenched, both arms shaking. Roop slapped him upside the head with his open hand, and the man finally relaxed, stumbling to one side almost bonelessly.

"I'm hit!" Chapman screamed. He was on his back, both hands clapped to his face, kicking himself away from the mess with his heels. "Cole—!"

The black man went down on his knees and tried to take Chapman by

the arms and hold him down; when he touched the younger man, he jerked his hands away with a bark of anger and pain. "Damn! Hold still, Chappo!"

Chapman writhed like a snake in a loop, digging in his heels. "It's burnin' me! . . . oh, shit . . ."

Marlowe looked around him. "L-let's not panic, people," he said loudly, trying to keep his voice steady. He stepped forward to help Cole, shrugging out of his pack.

Just as he knelt alongside Chapman, Cole managed to pull the boy's hands away from his eyes. Marlowe looked down into Chapman's panic-stricken face and saw that his exposed skin had gone pale ivory-green, wherever the strange jelly had touched him; the stripes of shoe polish had saved some of his color, but the black grease was thinning, running, leaving bare patches of healthy flesh glaring out against the white stripes. If he survived this ordeal, he'd be wearing his jungle camouflage for life. One of his eyes was burned out and dead-looking, bright blue turned the color of sour milk; the other was singed and weeping, staring wildly out of his head.

"I'm blind!" Chapman said, his voice pitched high and frightened. "Aw fuck, I think I'm blind!"

Cole hesitated. "S'gonna be all right, kid," he finally said. "We got you covered."

Marlowe opened his kit, looking for bandages. For just a second, he looked up; Sergeant Roop was squatting in front of Hansen, trying to talk to him. His back was turned. Hansen was staring into the woods over Marlowe's shoulder, smiling oddly; as Marlowe watched, the man's chest heaved with a strange little giggle.

"Well, isn't this some shit?" Hansen said.

Marlowe turned, trying to get to his feet. It all happened quickly, within the space of a few heartbeats; the butt of a rifle swung around in a sharp, swift arc, catching Cole in the back of the head with a hollow thud. Marlowe had already drawn his pistol; he fired point-blank into the assailant's chest, staggering him back a step; he had just enough time to look up before the rifle stock descended again, and see that his shot hadn't done much harm—this soldier was already missing most of his head. Then the rifle butt rushed at his eyes, and he was driven down into the dark.

Chris Lanois raised his chin to the mike. The thunder of distorted chords broke, and his pleasant baritone drifted through the eye of the storm; as always, he sounded drugged, numb, his words slurred and indistinct. Chandler listened, feeling sick. He had read a few lines of these lyrics before, in the liner notes of the album called *Lysol*. There was something queasily familiar about the words, even then—now the effect was magnified tenfold.

*Golden glow . . . fading sun
Broken road . . . day is done
Walking home . . . all alone
Doesn't hurt . . . jagged stone*

*I can't tell you . . . what I've seen . . .
They can smell you . . . where I've been . . .
I'm so tired . . . day is done
Hurts my eyes . . . kill the sun . . .*

The music rose up under Lanois' voice, grim and ominous, on the chorus.

*Duty calls . . . time for bed,
Iron walls . . . in my head,
Time to dream . . . time to fly,
I can't scream . . . I can't die.
Duty calls . . .*

The kid's voice wound up on the last line into an unearthly shriek, more like a big cat than anything human. Halfway through it, the chords fractured again, the drums kicked in, and things got ugly; Lanois bent his head and disappeared under a curtain of hanging, dirty-blond hair. He bent backward as he played, shaking the feedback out of his guitar. And then, abruptly, the music subsided again and Lanois offered the second verse to the microphone, with the same deceptive gentleness.

*Golden glow . . . double sun
Now I know . . . too late to run
Shadows crawl . . . by the lake
Too far gone . . . my mistake . . .*

His voice was already thickening, long before he was finished; the last lines were roared aloud in a voice that made Chandler put his fingers in his ears, wincing.

*Rise and walk . . . the silver sand
This must be . . . the promised land
Dry and die . . . stars that sing
Empty temple . . . yellow king . . .*

*Duty calls . . . time to go
Curtain falls . . . feel the flow*

*Time to dream . . . time to fly
Time to touch the killing sky . . .*

Abruptly, the music stopped. "Aw, shit," he heard Lanois say. "This isn't working." The kid stomped the distortion pedal with his grubby sneaker, holding a chord; there was no response—the notes held pure. "Could someone actually get this shit functional, please?"

"It's not the equipment," someone said from the audience. "I think it's the theater, Chris."

"Check it anyway," Lanois said irritably.

Chandler shook his head slightly, feeling as if he had been half-asleep. There was something hypnotic about the music, especially Lanois' voice, something that numbed the senses—until the kid's low, drugged murmur and his demonic roar were equally welcome to the ear, and seemed equally musical . . . both part of the same thing.

It was strange how he felt as if he had heard the song before. It was the words . . . When he closed his eyes, he could still see them, dripping dark on a powder-blue wall. *Kill the sun.*

He turned his head and started, a cold chill rippling over his skin. While he was standing in the wings, listening to the sound check, Tracy Tone had come up silently beside him. She was now only inches away, standing with her arms crossed over her breasts, watching her husband with an expression that could only be described as murderous.

Chandler faded back, moving slowly and cautiously, until he had the wall against his spine. There was only a half a foot or so of clearance. The woman didn't notice him. As Lanois stood there, his lifeless guitar hanging around his neck like an albatross, he seemed to feel his wife's eyes on him; he turned and grinned hideously at her. The roadie kneeling at his feet gave him the thumbs-up, and Lanois stepped up to the microphone again. "Hey baby," he said. His eyes gleamed with feverish mischief. "I'll play ya our song."

There was movement at the back of the stage. Eli Bateson, the drummer, sat bolt upright at his kit, his shoulders stiffening abruptly. With one tipped hand, Bateson started a hissing, slow beat on the high hat. At the end of the measure, he gave the bass drum an uneven double kick—*thump-THUMP!*—like a sick heart, and on the third measure, Lanois joined in.

*Bunny slippers, got my shot
Let my mom wipe up my snot
I can't move—just watch t.v.
Wonder who
I used to be . . .*

*Eat my dinner, take it slow
 Like waiting for a tree to grow
 Try to think—but that's a pain
 Fuzzy fingers
 In my brain . . .*

Lanois played the guitar as he sang, a deceptively chipper dead-string melody that could have been about almost anything; in this case, a few months that he spent in a mental hospital, on heavy medication. Chandler dimly recalled some mention of the song from Giles; it was called “Thorazine.”

The music thickened on the chorus, Lanois’ depraved roar rising in a chant of protest:

*But I need you . . . like a loaded gun
 This vampire . . . loves the rising sun
 You thrill me . . . like a shark attack
 Just kill me . . . don't keep coming back.*

Chandler watched Tracy Tone’s face; her eyes glowed like a cat’s, shimmering green. She was practically hyperventilating. When he was able to look away from her face, he saw that she was gripping her own arm with nails like claws, blood flowing darkly away from the crescent wounds.

“Uh, hey,” he said weakly, surprised by the sound of his own voice. Despite himself, one of his hands went out toward her.

She turned abruptly, as if noticing him for the first time. The full weight of her attention was almost unbearable; it hit him like a crushing slab of stone. He was pinned to the wall like a bug.

Seeing his expression, Tracy Tone looked down at herself, at what her hands were doing. His stomach churned with some emotion too intense to identify as she looked at her bloody fingernails casually, and then reached out and wiped them on the breast of his leather jacket. He couldn’t take his eyes off her, inwardly cringing and helpless as she took him by the lapels and jerked his face down within an inch or two of her own. Her breath was sweet . . . sickeningly, powerfully sweet, like strawberry soda on the hot, deep-summer sidewalk. The irises of her cold blue eyes had almost completely vanished; there was nothing left but thin rims of ice, surrounding two bottomless black pits.

Her voice was low and hoarse. “What the fuck are you looking at?”

The blood was roaring in his ears, hammering his temples; he found that he wasn’t breathing at all. This was what a male praying mantis must feel like on his wedding night. With numb horror, he felt the blood pumping into his erection . . . and Lanois was singing the words that somehow

made horrid sense of it all, the chorus that melted with every repetition into a new set of lyrics . . .

*I love you . . . like a loaded gun,
I need you . . . like the rising sun,
You thrill me . . . like a shark attack
I killed you . . . please stop coming back . . .*

She turned her head, listening, and the crushing weight was gone; Chandler stumbled out of her grasp, doubled over and staggering. "Jeeee-sus," he choked. The idea that she had been about to kiss him—or rip a chunk off him with her teeth—was too much to even imagine. Like an animal he bolted for the backstage door, and hit it so hard that it flew open and slammed into the wall outside with a shower of powdered brick. Her laughter chased him out into the alley.

The weak light of dusk was almost appallingly bright. He stood there for almost a full minute, bent over with his hands resting on his thighs, staring down at his own shoes, and breathing hard in the alley reek of piss and sour wine.

A hissing noise caught his attention; he looked up to see a ragged kid spray-painting the wall. The yellow circle was already drawn; as he watched, the third of the three twisting lines coiled inside it was completed, surrounding a crude yellow splotch.

"Hey," he said hoarsely, starting down the iron steps.

The kid turned to face him, and Chandler saw a dark line running from the left nostril down to the chin, dripping onto the collar of a torn jean jacket. Blood. The eyes were huge, and staring, black with fear. Shaking his head slightly, trying to think, Chandler tried Italian.

"What are you doing? Why are you painting that on the wall?"

The boy turned and bolted, scrambling like a rat through the garbage and broken crates behind the theater. Chandler looked up at the dripping yellow sign, feeling a second wave of nausea pass through him.

"What the hell does it mean!" he shouted down the alley.

He bent over and picked up the duffel bag the boy had left on the ground. It was as beat-up and filthy as the rest of him—German army surplus. In it there were a few more cans of yellow spray paint, a pair of torn jeans, and a notebook full of scrawled, ungrammatical Italian. On the cover, he had drawn some sort of title—a legend so surrounded by heavily inked doodles that it was barely legible. He squinted at the mass of curving lines, trying to make out what the greater sense of the picture could be, and blinked with astonishment as the writhing mess briefly resolved itself, like an optical illusion, into a hundred little bodies, engaged in frantic, painful copulation . . .

He shook his head and the picture was just a page of random squiggles again. Uneasily, he laughed at himself. *Must be getting pretty fucking hard up*, he thought. *Either that, or I'm cracking up again.*

He wiped his mouth, and the longing for oblivion came and shook him like Tracy Tone's greedy hands. His tongue ached for the melting sweet burn of alcohol, and he found himself calculating the distance to the nearest drink almost feverishly—a habit he thought he'd beaten long ago. Quietly he lit himself up a cigarette and smoked it down to the filter in ninety seconds. Nicotine was allowed. Nicotine was a friend. If he ever had a daughter, he was going to name her Nicotine.

Light and the darkness flickered. His head throbbed in time with the strobe, blood crashing repeatedly against his forehead like angry waves against a cliff. When he tried to open his eyes, the sun stabbed down into his brain; the pain was almost unbearable.

Shadows came and went. He looked up at one point and saw Roop's face looking down at him, framed by a crown of leaves. "Stay awake, Cap'n," the sergeant said. "Don't sleep. Sleep'll kill you."

At other times he thought he saw Hansen, his eyes and teeth glittering in a mask of sweat and black shoe polish. Marlowe's body hung in suspension, slewing crazily in the air; he couldn't move his arms or legs. Hansen bent over him, his crazy upside-down grin gleaming. "We're all gonna die," he mouthed, so low that his voice was softer than a whisper. "You go ahead and catch yourself a nap. Maybe then we won't have to carry you no more."

In his dressing room, Lanois was bent over the toilet. As Chandler came in, the kid made another long, painful retching noise and dropped onto one knee, holding his stomach.

Chandler, halfway through his second cigarette, was feeling better. "Well, that's pleasant," he said.

"Oh, fuck you," Lanois said weakly, half-laughing. "Jeeez."

Chandler sat down on the low chair beside the mirror, his long legs stretched out in front of him across the litter-strewn floor. He grimaced with distaste as his foot nudged a crumpled 7-Up can and a fat roach scuttled away from it. "You ought to see a doctor about that stomach of yours," Chandler observed lightly.

"Like I haven't," Lanois said bitterly, not even bothering to turn his head. "Shit. Why don't you go shoot somebody? Make yourself fucking useful." He waited patiently, and the spasm came again—winding up from the diaphragm, practically twisting his body in half. When it was over, he spat into the toilet and let himself crumple onto his side, curling with his shoulder against the wall, showing Chandler his back.

"So," Chandler said, crushing out a butt against the heel of his shoe. "What exactly is wrong with you, kid?"

"I don't know," he answered. "No one does. I've had it since I was a kid."

"Doesn't anything help?" Chandler asked.

"Sure." Lanois hugged himself bleakly. "Smack helps it a whole lot. Give me enough heroin, I don't feel a damn thing."

Chandler chuckled. "Besides that."

"No, not much."

"That's too bad."

The shoulders heaved with silent laughter. "Sympathetic motherfucker, aren't you?"

Chandler rolled his eyes. "Hey, I just work here. Speaking of which, I've got another question."

"Go for it," Lanois said weakly. He rolled over, putting his back against the wall—eyes closed, a sheen of cold sweat standing out on his forehead. "I'm not goin' anywhere."

"Do I have to worry about that wife of yours trying to fuck me?"

Despite everything, Lanois managed a laugh. "That depends," he said. He turned his head to look at Chandler, eyes wrinkled with good humor. "Are you a Pisces?"

"Uh, no."

The singer closed his eyes and tilted his chin back up, swallowing painfully. "You should be pretty safe, then."

Chandler chuckled. "Easy as that, huh?"

"Sure." Lanois gave a sickly grin. "Unless you have something she wants."

Chandler shuddered, but said nothing.

"Why?" Lanois asked. He rolled over again and faced the chair, letting his temple rest against the wall. His smile was shy and secretive. "She try and take ya for a test drive?"

Chandler smiled sardonically around another unlit cigarette. "Must have been a misunderstanding."

Lanois' grin widened. "Yeah, she gets into a lot of those."

He struck a match and lit his cigarette. "Want one?" he asked.

"Yeah," Lanois said. "I've got a show in a half-hour. Got to get my shit together."

Chandler got up and held the pack to the singer's mouth, letting him take a cigarette with his lips, then held the match for him.

"Thanks, man." Lanois took a deep drag. "I'm sorry about Tracy. I'd tell her to lay off, but it only makes her worse if I say anything."

"She hates you," Chandler said conversationally. "You know that, of course."

Lanois grinned. "You're just saying that to cheer me up."

"No," Chandler said, more seriously. "I'm saying it because I'm afraid she might actually try to kill your little ass. She looked like she was about ready to try it this afternoon."

Lanois laughed out loud and then groaned, holding his gut. "Ow. Shit. Cut it out, that hurts."

"I'm serious," Chandler said.

The kid opened his eyes. "You mean at the sound check, right?"

"Yeah."

Lanois shook his head, his mouth quirked to one side. "She wants to be a big rock star. It pisses her off that our band is more popular than hers. That's all."

"That's right—she's got her own band." Chandler said disinterestedly. "I forget what it's called."

"The Abyss," he said. "Tracy Tone and the Abyss."

"Fits." Chandler smiled thinly. "So she wants your gig, eh?"

"Yeah," Lanois said tiredly. "That's partly it. Or it was, anyway." He took a drag. "I don't fucking know anymore. Back when we first met, I thought I knew what the hell was going on. I could see what she was after; she was just like a fucking shark." The singer looked up, his face breaking out into a sunny smile. "Always hungry. Never stopped moving. Anyone got in her way?" He made a snapping gesture with his free hand, like jaws closing. "She'd eat 'em alive." He sighed. "I knew why she was with me back then."

"And now you don't," Chandler said.

Lanois shook his head. "Not a clue." He took another drag.

"Love, maybe," Chandler offered.

"Probably," Lanois said. He looked disgusted. "Love, pity, some shit like that. Nothing wholesome."

Chandler laughed. "Just what the hell is the matter with love?"

"Everything," Lanois said. "Love kills." He closed his eyes for a moment. "You ever hear the story of this theater? Like, when it was built?"

"No," Chandler said. "Why?"

"Love," Lanois answered. He indicated the building around him with a wave of his hand. "This place was built a hundred years ago. There was this really famous violin player, I don't know what his name was. He was one of those guys that's so good, people thought he came straight from heaven—a human being couldn't possibly play like that."

"A virtuoso," Chandler said.

"Yeah. So wherever he went, people were throwing money and chicks and flowers at him. He could play anywhere, anytime. People wrote music just for him—and when no one else could write music that was good enough—you know, hard enough—to be, like, *interesting* to him, he wrote special music for himself."

"And?"

"And then he falls in love." Lanois snorted. "With a deaf girl."

Chandler winced. "Ouch."

"Yeah. She's deaf, but not really deaf, you know? She wasn't *born* deaf. She could hear, her father was a musician too, but then he died some funky way, and she went deaf—like, her father was dead, and she'd never hear music again." Lanois snapped his fingers, annoyed with himself. "What do you call that thing where you can see, you know, but like deep down you don't want to?"

"Hysterical blindness," Chandler said.

Lanois looked up, and his eyes narrowed slightly. "Yes. Like that, except it was her ears." He let a few seconds pass, holding his stomach. "Anyway, he wants her to love him back. And she does—kinda—but she can't really appreciate his gift, if you see what I'm saying. He plays, but she doesn't hear it. She doesn't really *know* him. And it drives him nuts."

Chandler said nothing, feeling a twinge in his chest. In his mind he saw Polly, sitting with her feet tucked behind the leg of a chair.

"He loves her, she loves him. They even get engaged. But he can't leave the music thing alone. He plays for her all the time; eventually it gets to the point where he won't play music for anyone else. He locks the two of them into a room and plays the violin all day, all night even, until his fingers are bloody. He does it day after day. And she sits through it, for hours, for days, for weeks, because she loves him—even though she can't hear a thing. He's got this idea that if he just plays something good enough, it'll cure her. She'll just come alive, and say, like, 'Erich . . . my angel . . . I finally understand that you are the greatest violinist ever to walk the earth.'"

"Erich?" Chandler said. "You remembered his name?"

"His first name was Erich, yeah," Lanois said vaguely. "It's the last name I don't know." He held out his hand. "Another cigarette."

"Sure." Chandler handed him the pack and held the match. "So what happened?"

"He lost his freaking mind," Lanois said. "He wrote pages and pages of music for her. Music that no one else, in a hundred years, would ever be able to play. Her family supports them by letting people go to the door of their room and listen—and their minds are fucking blown. Like, they pay a couple of grand just to stand there, with their ears to the keyhole." Lanois shook his head. "But none of this works. He's at the end of his rope. It's been two years, she can't hear a single note, even though he's the best violinist the world has ever seen, playing the best music that has ever been written. And finally he decides that all this time, the problem has been the one little room he's playing in; what he really needs are the right acoustics, to get the job done."

"Ah," Chandler said, nodding. "That's where the theater comes in."

"Very good," Lanois said. "Give that man a cigar." He grinned.

"So he builds the theater."

"Well, it wasn't quite that easy. He hasn't really worked for two years, and it takes a fucking pile of money to build a theater from the ground up. Also, he has to hire a special architect to help design it, and of course, he's completely bullshit about how the acoustics have to be absolutely perfect. He's out supervising construction every single day. If he thinks something isn't right, he makes them tear it down and do it over."

Chandler laughed uneasily. "Jesus."

"So by the time they're finished, he's run through every cent he had, and then some. And after all that, the theater still isn't finished. He needs more. By this time, of course, it's getting around that he's a little fucked in the head—" Lanois made a looping gesture next to his ear—"so nobody is exactly standing in line to lend him money, y'know? Eventually, though, he finds someone who's got the ready cash. The Mafia."

Chandler nodded. "Yeah. I guess they've been around a long time."

Lanois shrugged. "Back then they were called the Black Hand, but it was the same basic deal. I lend you money, you pay it back with heavy interest, when I say so, or I kill your ass."

"Yeah, okay. I get it."

"Anyway," Lanois took another drag. "You want to hear the rest of this, or what?"

Chandler nodded. "Yeah, sure."

"So he borrowed the money. The work went on. But he was just as nuts, so it's not like he did the smart thing and went back to playing music or anything, so he could pay them back. Hell no! He's here every day, making sure the theater is going to be perfect. These Mob guys are breathing down his neck; he doesn't give a rat's ass." Lanois sat back. "Because he's in love, and all of this makes sense somehow."

Chandler shook his head. "Not smart."

"No shit. Eventually the people who bankrolled his little project are royally pissed. He's told them to fuck off in all the major languages of Europe, and everyone in Rome knows it. After a certain point, getting their money back is just not going to cut it—they have to make an example out of him if they want to stay in business."

Chandler sighed heavily. "Yeah, okay. I think I see where this is going."

"Yeah. They wait until opening night. The guy's got everything exactly the way he wants it, all this loopy shit about how the theater is supposed to be set up. Like, for example, anyone above a certain height has to sit in the box seats; he won't let them sit in the aisles, because it'll screw up his music." Lanois rolled his eyes. "Completely nuts. This deaf girl is sitting in the

audience, in exactly the perfect seat that he's picked out for her. He gets up on stage. He knows exactly where she is; he's looking right at her."

Chandler made a face. "And what did they do?"

"They set her on fire," Lanois said. "She burned to death right there in front of him."

It was a long moment, and Chandler spent it with his hand in his coat, fingers curled around the butt of his gun. His skin was crawling, and he had a very clear image of what the final moment of Christopher Lanois' life would look like; the neat red hole appearing in the middle of his forehead, the wide circle of blood and brains hitting the wall behind him, Jackson Pollack-style, the body slumping over, sneakers knocking together in a final jitter of death. He sat there, staring at the kid, balanced on the edge of murder. All he needed was a hint—a look, a half-hidden smirk, anything—that would tell him that Lanois was playing with him, that the kid knew anything at all about seven teenagers lying in ashes half a world away . . . and he could do it. He'd pull the trigger on this obnoxious little punk without a second thought.

The moment came—and it finally passed. The emotions on Christopher Lanois' face were too complex to read easily, but real amusement wasn't one of them. Chandler took out the matches he kept in his breast pocket and lit another cigarette. There was nothing else to do.

Lanois turned his head again and looked at him, his pale eyes glittering with something suspiciously like tears. "Everyone knew that the Mafia guys had done it, of course, but the violinist never believed it. He thought he had killed her with his music. Never played another fucking note from that day on—at least where anyone else could hear him." He smoked the last quarter inch of his cigarette in one long, furious drag. "I think that's the saddest part."

"It isn't," Chandler said. "The saddest part is that he was right."

He sat up in the darkness, slowly, raising his hands to his head. There was a clatter of metal, and cool iron links slithered along his cheeks; his wrists were manacled, bound together with a well-oiled chain. Flickering light leaked into the room around a badly fitted door. He was inside some kind of one-room hut swept free of furniture. His skull still boomed with ominous pain, and he was struck with sudden unreasoning terror to realize that he'd been asleep on the hard clay floor for some time; he ran trembling hands over his forehead, touching the tender, swelling bruise over both eyes.

"Hey." A warm, heavy hand descended onto his shoulder. "Go easy there, Cap."

"Cole." He turned in the darkness. "Where are we?"

"We come a long way, sir," the black man said. "I think we're still in Laos. But maybe not."

Somewhere in the darkness, Roop spoke up. "You got a bad concussion, Mr. Marlowe," he said. "We've probably carried you another hundred miles over the past three days. All to the west."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm glad you didn't leave me behind."

"We didn't have a choice," Roop said. He laughed unsteadily. "Our friends made us carry you."

"Friends?" he asked. Something about the word gave him a spasm of nausea, but the pain in his head was too intense; he couldn't think clearly.

There was enough light in the room for him to see Roop and Cole exchange a look. Finally, the sergeant pointed his chin at the door. "Don't open it, 'less you want to get shot," he warned. "You can see just fine through the cracks, anyhow."

Marlowe crawled painfully to the door of the hut, feeling as if his head was going to split any second from the pressure of the blood pounding in his brain. By the time he reached the wall, he was soaked with sweat and on the verge of fainting again. He took a deep breath and put his eye to the crack between the door and the frame, trying not to let his delicate head touch the wood.

Outside, the fire flared bright. A number of figures were seated around it, silhouetted by the light—short, squat men with rifles slung over their shoulders, dressed in U.S. Army fatigues. As he watched, the whole group of them broke out into a gale of high-pitched, squealing laughter, which sounded like nothing so much as the shriek of pigs fighting at the trough.

He swallowed. "The Tcho-Tcho," he said over his shoulder, not bothering to keep his voice down. "They captured us."

Cole had come up beside him, holding his chain quiet in his hands; he was still silent and graceful as a panther in the confines of the little hut. "Yes sir," he said, putting his eye to the crack above Marlowe's head. "But you should look a little closer to home." He made a hooking gesture with his finger, pointing to one side.

Marlowe heard a click somewhere in the dark, and turned his attention to the shadows nearby. His eyes were so dazzled by light and pain that he almost didn't recognize Hansen, standing not four feet from the door. The man held his rifle trained on the hut, his body still and alert, his face calm and expressionless—so calm and expressionless, in fact, that just looking at him sent a chill down Marlowe's spine.

He backed away from the door. "That's Hansen," he said. "What's wrong with him?"

"Welp, he's dead," Roop said flatly. "For a start."

Chandler wove through the crowd, finding his way to a spot just a stone's throw from the stage. It wasn't hard; the average audience member was a

third his age and almost a foot shorter. They melted away from him without resistance or acknowledgement, giving him the extra few inches of clearance he needed to slip by. If the kids thought about him at all, they probably assumed he was someone's father.

The speakers were blaring some kind of loud, incoherent crap; listening to it, he couldn't pull out a single word of lyrics, or even a beat. It sounded, quite literally, like someone had stoked up a tribe of monkeys with methamphetamine and turned them loose in a music store: screams, jangling, the roar of feedback, instruments and drums being pounded mindlessly and without rhythm. He smiled, watching the kids in front dancing to it—or rather, from his point of view, clumsily stumbling around, pretending it was music. He was turning into somebody's dad, all right.

Turn off that goddamn noise, he thought ironically. *Gimme some Tommy Dorsey.*

A haze of smoke blanketed the audience. There was a brain-numbing, Algerian reek in the air, as tobacco and marijuana and opium burned in hundreds of smoldering cigarettes; just standing there he could feel it, the contact high creeping under his skin, bleeding coldly into his muscles. Nostalgia: saffron rice and black tar opium, the quavering howl and clash of Asian music in the background, the comfortable mouth of a Thai whore—a girl probably not much older than these ragged children that surrounded him now. Bangkok had swallowed him for almost five years. He killed when they told him to, bought and sold what they told him to, and never woke up, day or night, without turning to look for some way to shut himself off—bottle, needle, pipe.

The noise ended abruptly and a low murmur went through the theater. Eli Bateson walked out on the stage and climbed onto the stool behind his kit, and in a few seconds Jim Banecek walked out as well, his bass slung over one shoulder. The roar that followed, as Christopher Lanois came out of the wings, was earth-shattering—it reverberated in the theater like a hurricane.

There was no talk, no preamble; Lanois and Banecek looked at each other and the music burst out of guitars and drums all at once.

Chandler, braced for the violence of the music, was completely unprepared for the violence of the crowd. The area in front of the stage simply erupted, an instant riot; he found himself carried back almost thirty feet in a suffocating press of flesh, struggling to keep his feet, just in the backwash of the dancers not strong enough to hold their place in the center. The audience had become one being, a mad titan struggling to tear itself apart—every cell at war with every other, but all strangely synchronized.

He was completely helpless in the midst of it, at war with the sea; he couldn't keep his feet unless he pushed back—and even while he fought for

control, for space, giving his shoulder or a pointed elbow to anyone who touched him, he had to fight his own madness. There was a crawling, insidious urge to lash out, to start chopping down these celebrants with his killing hands. He could feel that the music wanted him to.

Within a minute he was losing the fight, and he knew it. He had never been physically pummeled like this, with such abandon, by so many people. The clean, remote space he had created for himself, the island of physical reserve, was eroding, being attacked; his heart was pounding, blood pressure rising steadily. Very shortly, he would lose his temper—for the first time in over a decade.

Lanois' voice was there, suddenly, weaving words into the crash of guitar and the relentless flow of Banecek's bass line. Chandler hung onto the lyrics desperately, the one thread of sense in this human maelstrom:

*Our life begins, without any words
Sometimes we don't even breathe
They slap us, screamin', play the fool
Last call, last call, everyone out of the pool.
The lies come down
Like blinding rain
Mother's milk, tender wing
Love you, love you,
You sweet little thing.
We get a new skin,
Our life begins,
In fear and pain
Plain outrage, to be here again . . .
But we drink it down, we learn to forgive,
They teach us to live . . .*

Chandler closed his eyes. There was an invitation here; Lanois' voice was full of dark seduction. The numb warmth of his baritone promised a kind of peace, an end to all suffering and confusion. There was even a vision of truth in it somewhere, if you could only accept it. All you had to do was go home—back to what you were, before you learned to fight gravity.

Silently, he accepted the invitation, and stopped struggling against the tide. He let himself slip down, obey the unspoken command.

A young girl swept by him, her eyes closed, her head thrown back in the ecstasy of the fighting dance. Chandler snatched her wrists, unthinking, drawn like a barracuda by the bright metal that winked in her ears, her nose, at the corner of her pretty mouth; without waiting for her to open her eyes, he picked her up bodily and kissed her. Her mouth opened and

she met his tongue with a strong, bitter taste; hazily he wondered how many men would have recognized the flavor of absinthe so easily.

He pulled back a little, and she bit his lip. The taste of his own blood was also familiar, not surprising, not even wrong; it was just another sensation, like the smell of cigarettes in her hair, the weight of her tiny body in his arms, or the small hand that cupped the back of his head, trying to pull him closer.

It seemed to him that the music ended abruptly. Suddenly he opened his eyes, she opened her eyes, and the link between them was severed. She pushed and twisted out of his arms, clawing at him like a wild cat; he let her go and rubbed her saliva off with the back of his hand, even opened his mouth to try and wipe the taste of her off his tongue.

Now he braced himself, steeling his body as Banecek opened the floodgates again with the dark pulse of his bass—another song, more throbbing darkness, and wild bodies that flailed past him, every face twisted into some kind of carnival mask. It went by . . . broke around him and left him standing like a pillar under the docks. He stood there and shook, sweating, cotton-mouthed. He'd been under the water only seconds ago—not drowning, but breathing the darkness like a fish.

He still had those gills. He'd never lose them. He could dive down into the depths anytime—that deathly ocean would always accept him like his mother's own womb.

Lanois was singing again. Chandler, released from the spell of the music, looked up at the stage and saw the way the kid hunched his shoulders at the microphone; there could be no doubt, looking at him now, that he was holding back—this was only half of him at best, a controlled release of his energy. Whatever he had inside, he didn't trust it; he was struggling to control it even now, in the song called "Van Gogh":

*Dream—dream in colors smeared
Color out of space,
Color out of place
Red that rips you ear to ear
And yellow that I fear . . .*

*Friends—won't—tell you what you wanna hear
So I guess that he must be a friend
Even though I lost an ear
I hear him singing loud and clear
And he'll be with me until the end.*

*I've got this friend, you know, he makes me paint
My patron and my patron saint*

*And I try to love, I try to be
But it's no good—he smells it on me . . .
Smells it on me . . .*

*Leaves of grass—fields of grain
Black birds rise
To stain the skies
Crying out in pain
This is the last time
I raise the brush . . .
I give it up
I relinquish
All that I love . . .*

*'Cause I've got this friend, who makes me paint
My patron and my patron saint
And I try to live, and I try to be
But it's just no good, he can smell it on me
Smell it on me . . .*

In this theater, the fuzzy quality of Lanois' voice had almost completely vanished; even the distortion on his guitar couldn't survive the cleansing vault above his head. Every note rang unnaturally pure, searing and painful to the ears. In the end Lanois cut loose with an unearthly shriek of protesting rage, and the song ended with a sudden crash, like a shotgun blast—one rolling crack of thunder that cut him off abruptly, slicing through his cry like a sword.

The kid was holding the microphone, leaning on it, holding the neck of his guitar with his other hand. As the concert wore on he rested longer and longer in the silence between songs, but he had the audience now; they waited breathlessly no matter how long it took him to straighten up again. Chandler could no longer say how long the band had been playing; he had lost all sense of time. It could have been a half-hour or a lifetime.

The last song began tenderly. Lanois' voice was plaintive, vulnerable, almost boyish; the words came out in a peculiar monotone, and each line seemed to dwindle away at the end into the distance, as if he might not have the strength to continue.

*Ran away from home . . .
Tried to catch the train . . .
But it doesn't slow or stop
When it passes through this town . . .*

*I'd like to get away . . .
And find a warmer sun . . .
I don't want to hurt anyone . . .*

*Ran away from home . . .
Tried to catch the train . . .
But it doesn't even slow down
When it passes through this town . . .
And even if I went, I would
Never be alone
No matter where I am
There I go . . .*

Chandler had heard this song before. Like one or two others from Bliss, it ended in Lanois' inarticulate shrieking, spewing nonsense syllables and words that had no meaning; every fan came up with a different transliteration of the same babble. This time, however, the theater's unreal clarity of sound ripped away the veil. Every syllable was clear as a bell . . . but the words weren't in English.

"*Hastur!*" Lanois shrieked. "*Ia-shibboleth!*" The singer's body jerked like a puppet, his chest yanked up unnaturally as the words poured out of his mouth. A wash of cold air passed over Chandler's skin; he looked around wildly, every hair on his body tingling with static, trying to see where in the theater the doors had been opened.

"*Rek'yame!*" Lanois roared. "*Col'kyamar!*"

There was a sense of presence in the air—an oppressive nearness. Involuntarily, Chandler found himself turning to see who or what could have come up behind him—even though he knew that there was nothing there to see. This coming thing was in no one place; it was everywhere at once, all around him.

The audience was still in tumult. Every kid who had been silently mouthing the words turned toward the stage at once, perfectly, like soldiers on parade.

"*Tuanta! J'kire cha!*"

Chandler stared at one of the children beside him. The boy stood frozen, his jaws locked wide open in a soundless scream; smoke was curling up from the collar of his jacket, rising from his skin. As he watched, a little blue ripple of flame crawled over the boy's tongue.

Unbidden, he found his own voice rising. "No," he said. "No no no . . ."

"*Ia! Shub-Niggurath! Kiri'ay! Eleison!*"

"Shut up!" Chandler screamed back. A liquid ripple of blue flame welled up out of the boy's mouth and poured down his chin, running smoothly

over his neck and chest. It was happening everywhere in the theater; the smoke was thickening.

Somewhere, a girl cried out; even in the colossal wall of sound Bliss had generated, her shrill voice was loud and clear. "Ti amo, Kreeeeeeees!"

Chandler turned. Half a theater away, she was starting to burn; her hair flared up bright in the darkness, whirling around her shoulders in a bright, eldritch wind.

Lanois saw her too. He stumbled over his music, the chords of his guitar fumbling to a halt. Banecek looked up as well, and saw what was happening; deliberately he bent and launched into a bass solo, carrying the music forward.

Lanois stood alone. He stared out at the girl, his eyes alight with the cold flames that crawled hungrily over her bare arms and breasts—his mouth open, his skin gray with sick despair. "No," he said softly. His startled, fearful eyes panned across the audience. "No way."

He looked over at Banecek, and suddenly his features twisted with violent hate. Chandler roared with the rest of the crowd as Lanois tore his instrument off his shoulders and raised it over his head, both hands wrapped around its long, slender neck.

The first blow split his guitar up the middle. The air was shattered by a shriek of unbelievable feedback, a bestial howl that drove people everywhere to their knees; Chandler, holding his head in his hands, screamed with it, unable to withstand the sound of so much power frustrated in its aims. One of the two tower speakers on either side of the stage exploded, showering sparks and flaming chunks down onto the audience.

Not satisfied, Lanois raised the guitar high over his head and brought it down again. This time the neck broke clean off, leaving him with a tangle of splintered wood and screaming wire; he gathered it up in both hands and hurled it at Banecek.

Banecek ducked to one side and took the blow on his shoulder; when he straightened again, his long face was drawn into a snarl of fury. The music stumbled to a halt.

Chandler raised his head from the shelter of his arms and looked around him. The crowd was stunned, shell-shocked; the boy beside him lifted his head shakily, his eyes wide and staring—unburned, alive.

Lanois turned and tore the microphone off its stand. "Good fucking night!" he shouted into it; then, casting a last look of defiance over his shoulder at Banecek, he reared back and threw the mike, overhand, as far out into the audience as he could.

The house roared for him as he walked off the stage.

Marlowe looked around. "We can get out," he whispered. "Dig out under the wall."

Roop grinned and tapped the floor with the toe of his boot. *"That clay is hard as rock. It'd take us a day to get through it, and we only have five or six hours till morning."* His voice, although low, was not a whisper. *"Plus, Hansen's still a good soldier. Being dead ain't hurt his ears any. We'd get shot for our trouble."*

"You don't want to be moving out there at night," Cole said softly. *"There's something up above."*

"Up above?" Marlowe asked. *"What's that mean?"*

"It flies." The black man shuddered violently. *"Maybe there's more than one."* He stiffened, his eyes rolling up to the straw roof of the hut. *"Listen there."*

Chandler held his breath, but the only sounds in the dark were his own blood beating in his ears, and the murmur of voices—almost-human voices—around a spitting, crackling fire.

Roop crossed his chained arms and pulled up his knees, propping himself up against the wall. *"This is a good night to sleep,"* he said, with the air of friendly advice. His eyes were closed. *"We got a roof over our heads."*

"I'm not waiting until I'm dinner," Marlowe warned. *"I'm getting out of this, one way or the other."*

Roop's eyes glinted through his lashes. *"Whatever you decide to do, 'sir,' you better be damn sure me and Cole like it,"* he said. *"I already lost two men, and we ain't carrying you no more."* The sergeant nestled his head back into the straw. By the sound of his breathing, he was asleep within seconds. Marlowe had to stare at the man for quite a while before he was able to follow suit.

There was a ladder from the orchestra pit to the stage; Chandler showed his pass to the security team and climbed it rapidly. He didn't trust the situation well enough to go around to the backstage entrance. There might not be time.

"Are you kidding?" Banechek was saying loudly. He laughed, a high hyena's titter of disbelief. *"He utterly fucked things up!"*

The other voice was Bukowski's. As Chandler strode into the dressing room, the little record executive was standing between Lanois and Banechek. *"Am I kidding?"* he said. *"Hell no, I'm not kidding. I wish we'd been using a movie camera—that was one hell of a show."*

Lanois flashed the goblin grin. *"Yeah, Jim,"* he taunted, standing on the other side of the company rep. *"It was one hell of a show."*

"You sawed-off little shit." Banechek's voice had gone low and dangerous. His eyes shifted; he was so angry he'd almost forgotten that he was surrounded by other people. *"How dare you fucking throw things at me?"*

"Oh, come on, Jim," Bukowski said. *"Don't be a baby. It's show business. No harm done."*

Lanois giggled, half-hysterically. "Yeah, Jim. Don't be a baby."

Banecek hesitated for a split-second. Chandler saw the pause and started moving at the same time, but there were too many bodies in the way; the bass player leaped on Lanois like a tiger and had both hands wrapped around his neck before anyone else could blink. Both men went down, Lanois flat on his back, Banecek on top; Bukowski was knocked aside like a bowling pin by the force of the lunge.

"I'm going to fucking kill you!" Banecek gritted. "You fucking—little—bastard!" The last three words were punctuated by the back of Lanois' head hitting the cement floor. Lanois hadn't lost his manic grin; his face was already turning red, but the gleeful expression was still plastered on.

It didn't stay a private party for long; Tracy Tone was already in the middle of things, screaming her rage and slapping Banecek in the back of the neck, repeatedly, with her open hand. When the bass player shifted his grip, holding Lanois' neck with one hand and pulling back the other to punch him, Bukowski and Tone's entourage jumped in; it took all three of them holding onto his elbow to keep Banecek's fist from connecting.

Across the room, Eli Bateson sat on a couch with the stuffing spilling out of its split seams, calmly lighting up a joint. If he had any intention of interfering, it didn't show.

"Leggo, you big ugly fuck!" Tracy squalled. Her voice was like the scream of an enraged cat. Her nails raked across Banecek's cheek, leaving an angry red mark, but not fazing him; although he still strained to connect the punch, his grip on Lanois' throat was also steadily tightening. She went down on the floor and started working at his fingers, now digging deeply into the flesh of her husband's neck.

Chandler cocked his head, assessing the situation. There was an opening here, now that Banecek's left side was exposed. He selected the spot carefully and drove his knuckles in, following through with his knees, to hit the pressure point under Banecek's left arm—not hard enough to break bones, but enough to paralyze the nerve bundle completely. Banecek's fret arm went dead suddenly; Tracy threw his fingers off Lanois and shoved him in the chest with both hands as hard as she could, toppling him back into a heap—then, seeing him down and gasping for air, followed by leaping on him, scratching and spitting.

Meanwhile, Chandler bent over and took Lanois by the forearm. He didn't bother asking how he was, just pulled him to his feet and held him by the shoulder while he gagged, clearing his compressed windpipe.

"Jesus Christ, enough!" Bukowski shouted. Banecek was on his feet; Bukowski had both hands on his chest, pushing to restrain him like a kid trying to hold up the wall of a dam. He looked over his shoulder to see where Lanois was, and asked, "You all right, Chris?"

Lanois coughed, gagged, and spat on the floor. He straightened up with a look of disgust, and choked, "Hell yes, I'm all right." He looked up at Banechek with hate-slitted eyes. "You can't do fucking anything, can you."

Banechek lunged again, carrying four or five people halfway across the room, but with only one arm, he didn't quite have the strength to break free. Chandler had already taken Lanois by the shoulders and spun him around; now he hit him in the back with a hard shove and drove him out of the room.

"We're out of here," he said.

He pushed Lanois out through the side exit and dragged him by his sopping T-shirt down the dark alley. He had a German-made compact parked around the block; he opened one of the rear doors and tossed Lanois in, then jumped behind the wheel and took off.

"What the fuck happened back there?" he asked.

Lanois lay on his side in the back; Chandler adjusted the mirror so that he could see his face as he drove. Now that Lanois was alone, with no one to put on a show for, his expression was shell-shocked and empty. "I don't know." His eyes opened; in the light of passing street lamps, they were jet black. "Pull over when you get a chance. I'm gonna be real sick."

"Fuck." Chandler slewed the car over a few blocks down and pulled it up to the curb. Lanois crawled out and staggered over to a post, holding his stomach with his arm and feeling his way with the other hand, bent over in agony. He braced himself and weathered the spasms, his whole body working with dry heaves. Nothing came up, despite his miserable retching; eventually he stumbled to the side and knocked over a few trash cans, trying to catch himself on the wall.

"Jesus Christ." Chandler said. "Do we have to take you to the hospital?"

"No," Lanois said weakly. "It's nothing. Just my fucking punishment."

"What punishment?" Chandler asked. "Punishment for what?"

"Fuck him," Lanois said. "He can find someone else to let him in."

"What are you talking about?" Chandler demanded. "Banechek?"

Lanois cried out sharply. "Aw, Jesus!" He buckled and went down on both knees, wailing. "Here it comes!"

If the spasms before were bad, you wouldn't have guessed it; the dry heaves were just the preliminaries. This was the main event. Now Chris could no longer keep quiet; he gave voice to his pain, bawling and cursing. When he finally raised his face, his cheeks were wet, and a thick rope of mingled blood and spit was hanging, several inches long, from his lower lip. "I don't think I'm going to make it this time," he wheezed.

"All right, kid," Chandler said matter-of-factly. "Enough is fucking enough. Where the hell are your works?" He looked around for witnesses to this event—someone was already dialing a cell phone, doubtless calling for the police or an ambulance.

"Threw 'em out," he groaned. "Tracy made me quit . . . They were going to take Cathy away from us."

"Her friends are holding," Chandler said, bending over so that he could keep his voice low. "Where does that creepy little buddy of hers keep his kit? I know you know."

"The girl has it," he said. "It's in her purse."

"Where's the spare?" Chandler asked. "He wouldn't let her keep it all."

"Back at the hotel," he groaned. "Somewhere in his room."

"Fine." He helped Lanois halfway to his feet and then put the kid's arm around his neck and dragged him unceremoniously back to the car. The singer had no more words left in him; he panted rapidly, like a dog in the summer heat, between bouts of strangled, agonized yelling.

He parked underneath the hotel and took Lanois up in the service elevator, pulling the key to the band's suite out of his pocket while they rode to the twenty-fifth floor. When the doors opened, he squatted and put his shoulder under the kid, hauling him down the corridor in a swift fireman's carry.

At the theater, they'd still be trying to figure out where he and Lanois had gotten to, which should give him a half-hour before they arrived here looking for him. He set the singer down on his own bed, and then went across the suite to the room where the blonde junkie and his gamine little girlfriend were sleeping nights. The door was locked; he bent and picked it in seconds, let himself in, and tossed the place with barbarous, matter-of-fact efficiency, not bothering to cover his passage. It took him about three minutes to shake a fresh needle and a packet of clean white powder out of a dirty sneaker; the hose was wrapped around the doorknob.

Chris was curled up on his side, both arms wrapped around his middle protectively. Chandler sat down on the corner of the bed and struck a match; he lit a cigarette for himself and a candle on the bedside table. He cooked the shot in a tablespoon from the wet bar, watching the heroin sizzle and liquefy in the silver belly, the underside darkening with smoke. He filled the syringe and turned the point up toward the ceiling, bringing it up to one eye and flicking the side of it with his finger until all the air was at the tip. Then he pushed the plunger up delicately, until a tiny clear bead of amber liquid pealed up at the point of the needle.

"Okay, kid," he said, putting his cigarette down in the ashtray. "Sit tight; it's time to tie you off."

He took Lanois' arm and looped the rubber hose around it, yanking it tight. Lanois lay with his eyes squeezed shut, offering no resistance. Chandler watched intently; when he could clearly see the vein pulsing in the crook of the singer's arm, he poked the needle into it. In the light of the bedside lamp he saw a drop of red blood dissolving inside the syringe,

driven up the needle by pressure within the vein, and he slowly depressed the plunger.

It was a hefty dose. He untied the hose and let it ride into the bloodstream, waiting for it to hit the brain. In a few seconds, the kid took a slow, shaky breath and let himself roll onto his back.

"Better?" he asked. Chandler reached up and lifted Lanois' left eyelid casually with his thumb, checking the pupil.

"Yes," was the answer. "I think so." Lanois' eyes remained open, dark and glittering. "You're good at that," he said.

"It's like riding a bicycle," Chandler answered. "You never forget." He got up and locked the door to the bedroom. "Why don't you try and get some sleep, son."

Lanois rolled over. "Okay," he said sleepily, in the baby-boy voice of opiated bliss. "That sounds good."

The next morning, the door opened and Marlowe got up off his belly before the flat, unblinking eyes of a dead man. Hansen looked far worse in daylight; in the pale glow of dawn, you could see the chest of his shirt soaked through with old blood, and when he turned his back, the exit wounds were a pinkish, rotten mass. Flies crawled over his pale lips and landed repeatedly on his cheeks; when he didn't twitch, Marlowe was almost sick. Only the fact that he hadn't eaten in at least two days saved him from puking.

He stumbled out of the hut between Roop and Cole and was prodded into a line forming in the center of the village. This was the first time he had seen their captors up close; they weren't going to win any beauty contests. The Tcho-Tcho tribesmen were all short, bandy-legged men with broad chests and hard, bulging bellies, neckless and covered with black hair. Their mouths seemed unnaturally wide; rubbery lips split their faces almost in two, and their eyes were small and deep-set underneath heavy brows. Just offhand, he couldn't see the white of anyone's eyes—they all looked as if their sockets were filled with glistening oil.

The Laotians were looking rough. Many of them had lost their sandals along the way, and their feet were cut and caked with bleeding sores. Even those who had managed to keep the shoes on their feet stumbled out exhausted and broken, their faces and bodies bruised and filthy, thin legs exposed by pants that were torn and sodden from the knee down. They were driven out of the huts around the village a few at a time with loud, croaking commands—spoken in some language he didn't recognize—viciously prodded and kicked when they hesitated a moment too long.

One woman still held a bundle in her arms; as she passed one of the swarthy little men she tried to turn her shoulder toward him, to keep her

body between him and her precious burden. He plucked at the bundle with his free hand; she hunched away, making a little cry of protest. Casually, he raised the rifle and used the butt to deliver a quick, precise blow to the back of the head, driving her to the ground; she dropped the bundle as she fell, and he bent over to take it.

The blanket shook loose from the body of a child no older than a year. The frog-like Burmese had picked up the baby by its heel; now he held it up and sniffed the limp little corpse like an animal. When it didn't move, he tossed it over his shoulder lightly into the burned-out firepit, and kicked the Laotian woman back onto her feet. She joined the line, empty-handed, with silent tears cutting tracks through the mud on her face.

Roop's voice cut into his ear just then, low and deadly. "Don't get any ideas, Hoss," he said. "It's not time yet."

The next day dawned bright and sunny. Chandler got up from his chair, stretched painfully, and opened the blinds; he was getting too old for this.

In the light pouring through the window, Lanois stirred for the first time in many hours. He picked himself up somewhat painfully and sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at the carpet. His eyes were the same color as the Tuscan sky outside the window, almost painfully blue.

"Cigarette," he said hoarsely. "You got one?"

"Yup." Chandler lit himself one and handed Lanois the pack and the matches afterward, leaning against the wall. Smoking, he nodded at the window. "Nice day."

"Yeah," Lanois said. He rubbed the dark stubble on his chin with the palm of his hand, his eyes hooded. "It is." He turned his head toward the door. "Have you seen my wife?"

"No." Chandler grinned. "Heard her, though. Hell, I'm surprised you didn't. She was up pounding on the door for half the night." He laughed softly. "The rest of 'em gave up after the first hour."

Lanois smiled slightly, looking down at the floor. "That's my baby."

"She fell asleep out there, I guess," Chandler said. "I know she didn't leave."

Lanois stood up shakily and shuffled to the door. It took him a minute to coordinate himself well enough to open it. Eventually, after some fumbling, he made it out to the living room and opened the curtains, letting in the sun.

Tracy Tone was still passed out on the sofa, one hand flung across her breasts and the other up over her head, fingers half-tangled in her own hair. Her lipstick was smeared onto the rim of a glass on the coffee table, and the neck of a bottle of vodka; she frowned in her sleep. Lanois knelt beside her, half-reverently, and touched her thigh through the rip in her fishnet hose, brushing the white skin with his callused finger.

She stirred fitfully and opened her eyes, blinking rapidly for a moment as

her over-lacquered lashes stuck together. She opened her mouth to speak; her husband put his finger in it before she could say a word, wetting his fingertip on her tongue, and then brushed it over her lips, tracing the outline. "Morning," he said. The smile on his face was angelic. "Let's take a shower."

She sulked a little as she got up, scratching at her tousled hair and pulling her rumpled dress away from her belly, but Lanois took her by the hand and led her back into their bedroom. When the door locked this time, Chandler was the one outside.

He sat down on the couch and smoked for almost two hours; when the noise was too much for him, he turned on the television. The transformation, when the two of them returned, was almost miraculous. They were still holding hands. Lanois was freshly washed, his naturally golden-blond hair slicked back behind his ears and drying in curls; he had put on a clean T-shirt and jeans. Tracy Tone's makeup was back on straight, her skin pale and her lips dark, lustrous red. She was wearing a white dress and a pair of white sandals.

Chandler stood up, unable to keep the astonishment off his face. For a moment, the woman was almost beautiful. The expression on her face was as close to happiness as it could get. He cleared his throat. "Err . . . sorry about last night," he mumbled.

She screwed up her face for a moment, and then stuck her tongue out at him. Seeing the look he gave her, she burst out into loud, crude laughter. "Fuck, what a stiff!" she said to no one in particular. "He must shit diamonds."

"I'm taking my girls out today," Lanois said, smiling. "Tracy has to go back to L.A. tonight, and she's taking Cath with her, so I want to have some fun before they go." He coughed into his free hand. "That okay?"

Chandler nodded respectfully. "Whatever you say, Mr. Lanois. I'll stay close by, but not in the way."

"Okay."

The doorbell rang, and Catherine Lanois' nanny handed the little girl over to her parents, with the air of a mother letting a child spend the day with an indulgent uncle and auntie. Lanois went down on one knee and beckoned his daughter with open arms. "C'mere, Kitten," he said.

The little girl skipped into his arms. "Can I have a rabbit, Daddy?" she asked, putting her chin on his shoulder with the tolerant attitude of a child who is hugged often.

Lanois held the toddler longer and tighter than was strictly necessary, closing his eyes for a moment and holding her head close to his with one hand, cupping the golden hair that blended so perfectly with his own. When she was starting to fidget, he released her and put on a smile. "Let's see if we can find you one," he said softly. He raised his eyes for a moment before he straightened, and saw Chandler looking down at him; for that instant, the mask slipped, and there was a moment of bleak despair staring

out from beneath, regarding the world with the eyes of a terminal patient.

"Let's go shopping!" Lanois said cheerfully. He kissed his wife on one powdered cheek. "The day's on me."

It happened quickly, when it did. Night was beginning to fall; several of the Laotians were on the verge of collapse already. They fell down more and more often as the day wore on. At first they would hurriedly scramble to their feet when they slipped, casting a fearful look over one shoulder at the dead men who shepherded them along; eventually, though, they simply were too tired to get up in time. The lifeless soldiers would stop, pick a man or woman up by the wrist, and hoist them like children. The villagers would be carried by them several steps, dangling from one arm, feet and legs dragging bonelessly along the ground, until they found their own footing.

There were one or two who were especially bad. One of them, an older woman, finally gave up completely by evening; the dying of the light seemed to kill the last of her will to survive. The corpse of the blue-eyed boy picked her up several times, hauling her along the ground behind him, but every time he let her go, she fell again—she would not get up on her own. Finally one of the little toad men went up and squatted beside her in the dusk; as she lay there, motionless and waiting, he drew a wicked-looking knife and punched it through her back with one sharp, brutal jerk.

Marlowe turned his face away, sickened, after seeing him withdraw the knife and lick the blood off the serrated blade. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have seen Roop go past at all—the man was so fast that he was literally a blur against the dark trees. The squatting Burmese soldier went down abruptly, clutching at his own opened throat; he had fallen down flopping before anyone else could see what exactly had happened.

The man made a horrible rattling noise as he tried to draw his last breath, and heads turned all along the line. Roop was already gone; Marlowe threw himself down and hugged the dirt as the living and the dead around him opened fire into the jungle. Several of the Laotians weren't fast enough; they cried out and fell all around him.

When the confusion ended, Roop and Cole were gone, and three other prisoners were dead. Marlowe stood there, shaking with desolation—his men had ditched him in the bush like any green commander, saving their own skins when it was clear he couldn't do the job.

After a low, guttural conference in the trees, the Tcho-Tcho came to some sort of decision; the dead men pushed the remaining four wounded down onto their knees and shot them. Then the train moved on.

By the time he and Lanois got back to the hotel, it was dark. Bukowski was waiting for them, sitting around the suite with the rest of the band. Eli

Bateson was lying out on a sofa, smoking; Banecek had left a track through the old shag carpet and was still in mid-pace when they opened the door, arms crossed over his chest.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in!" Bukowski said brightly. "Hey, Chris, how ya doin'?"

"Fine, Paul," Lanois said wearily. The day had taken a lot out of him, and very little energy was left for bullshit; he had run through all his steam with his family. There was still a stain on his chest where his daughter had nudged him with a chocolate gelato. "What's up?"

Paul Bukowski coughed into his fist. "Well, I think we should talk about last night, don't you?"

"No, I fucking don't," Lanois said irritably. "Unless you want me to sign commitment papers for Jim, there."

Banecek stood his ground, arms crossed, but his teeth gritted audibly.

"I don't think we should let all these hard feelings get set into stone, guys," Bukowski said, trying to sound reasonable. "Things are looking pretty good right now."

"Tell him about the phone call," Banecek said darkly.

"Absolutely," said Bukowski. He turned to Chris again. "We got some great news, actually—they want us to play Club Apocalypse again, once this tour is over." He hesitated. "Pretty cool, huh?"

Lanois ran his hand back through his hair, closing his eyes. "Yeah, sure," he said reluctantly. "When?"

Bukowski waved the question away. "Nothing firm yet; the management just called Bone Mountain and asked if you guys were available to play."

"A return date at Club Apocalypse is like a sign from fucking god," Banecek pointed out. "It means we are going to be a thing, man."

"Yes, well," Bukowski pulled his earlobe nervously. "The guys and I have been talking, and everyone pretty much agrees that last night was not a normal show. It was intense out there. Emotions running high."

"And blah blah blah, Jim's real sorry that he almost crushed my larynx," Lanois said disgustedly. "Right?"

Bukowski looked anxiously over at Banecek, waiting for him to pick up the ball. The bass player sneered. "Yep—about as sorry as you are that your lackey paralyzed my arm for twenty-four hours," he said. "Hey, why don't we shake and be bestest friends again?"

Lanois laughed weakly. "Oh yeah. I'm gonna let you turn my fingers to talcum powder." He raised an eyebrow. "What am I, stupid?"

Banecek grinned. "Sure seems like it." He jerked a thumb at Bukowski. "Anyway, Paul liked your big finish. Next time I won't be surprised."

Lanois regarded his band-mate with calm, quiet eyes. "Yeah. I guess you won't."



The march continued hellishly through the night. It wasn't dark; the Burmese had taken the dark away. The trail pulsed green before him, every leaf and branch outlined in a vile, diseased yellow glow. The unnatural light spilled over everything, sourceless, twisting through the jungle like a giant snake.

It was the light of madness, illuminating the way but yielding no warmth, no depth. Marlowe fell over and over again, tripping over an unseen root or sliding in the rotten leaves and mud; Hansen bent and picked him up each time with a cold hand, shoving him lightly down the trail. In the end, he was so tired, his belly so empty and hollow, that he simply lost the capacity to react to it. He would have let the dead man carry him in his arms like a baby if it would have given his leaden legs a rest.

The Burmese were nervous. Three of them were close by him, apparently with the thought that Roop and Cole might try a rescue. The rest of them hurried their prisoners along, barking orders in that harsh roaring tongue, looking over their shoulders into the darkness often.

Eventually one of them realized that they were missing a man; they called the line to a halt with a yell and the leader came back down along the trail. He wore no badge of rank, no stripes or bars, but the others deferred to him; by virtue of various grunts that sounded much the same whenever they spoke to him, Marlowe had given him the name Ap An.

The little man stopped before him, looking up at him with those oddly reflective black eyes, so full of the hateful yellow light. Silently, without any word or signal from the Burmese, Hansen gave Marlowe another push, back the way they had come. The entire column back-tracked along the path they had walked for the previous thirty minutes, with the Company man stumbling ahead through the jungle, driven by repeated prods of a dead man's M-16. Marlowe found himself wondering vaguely if Cole and Roop had built a pitfall back here somewhere, or set a mine. The idea was curiously abstract; the thought that he might end all this with the next step was not unattractive.

Eventually the Tcho-Tcho found their man. It wasn't hard; Roop had taken some time with the job, and made enough mess that the smell alone would have led them to the right clearing. Marlowe stumbled to a halt in front of the corpse, its head staring up blank-eyed from between its naked thighs, and looked over his shoulder.

Ap An stepped forward, his face inscrutable, and picked up the head. He brought it over to Marlowe and held it up, pointing to a crude symbol that had been cut into the skin over the heavy brows.

Marlowe looked down and smiled. He cast a glance over his shoulder, mentally counting the Burmese, and came up with the same number that

Roop had: five. Wordlessly, he held up one hand, all the fingers spread.

Marlowe braced himself, waiting for a blow or a bullet, but none came; Ap An simply dropped the head casually and walked away. Hansen pushed Marlowe back into the line, and the march turned west again, twisting on through the floodlit night. There was only one change; every five minutes, the leader barked out a word. Each of his men answered in turn, counting down and confirming their position in the line.

He stood in the lobby of a restaurant in Paris, and put through another call to the States. She answered on the fourth ring.

"This is Andrews," she said. Her voice was faint; the connection wasn't good. "Make it quick; I'm working."

"Polly, this is Ray." He coughed. "You're not alone, I assume."

"No, I'm not," she said. Her voice was brisk and professional. "Can't discuss the details of the case yet; don't have enough. Sorry."

"I've learned a lot in the last few days," he said. "I can't make sense of it all yet, but I need Giles to do a search and find out if we had another SHC yesterday. Would have been between nine and midnight, Greenwich Mean. Can you pass that along?"

"Will do. Is that all?"

"No. I need you to get me some history. Europe, nineteenth century. Some violin player, supposed to be the cat's pajamas. Built a theater in Rome. First name Erich, last name unknown. Get me anything you can; I'll find a computer and check my mail in Berlin."

"Okay—that's not usually my field, but it shouldn't be too hard."

"Thanks." He closed his eyes, savoring her competence for a moment, and then went on to the hard part. "And I need you to do me a favor."

"Shoot."

"Can you write something down, or do you have someone hanging over your shoulder?"

"I've got a pen. Lay it on me."

"Take a quick trip to Black Mountain City, Arizona," he said. "There's a Key Bank on Florence Street. If you can get an ID, it should give your name as Janis Pearl." He paused. "Got that?"

"So far. What else?"

"There's a fireproof case in a safety deposit box. The combination is 8-16-68." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "How's your French?"

"Not perfect, but it'll do. Why do you ask?"

"I have a book. I've been holding it for years, since I got back from Southeast Asia. Couldn't ever read it myself; I just knew it was important. A friend of mine picked it up in Laos, during the war."

"You probably should've sent it straight to the main office," she said.

"Weren't they interested?"

He sighed. "I wasn't with DG when I got it," he said. "By the time they brought me in, I'd got used to the idea of holding it. I thought I might need it some day, and it turns out I was right. I need it now, Polly."

"You want a transcription," she said. "French to English."

"If you could."

"Can do," she said. "How long is it?"

"Not long, I don't think. Only a hundred pages or so. Handwritten, though."

"It sounds do-able; I'll just have to rearrange my schedule. Anything else?"

Chandler took a deep breath, standing alone in the phone booth, and punched the wall a couple of times, trying to get the tension out of his throat, so he could speak.

"Yeah," he finally said—as lightly as he could, with his heart hammering in his chest like a machine gun. "I love you, Polly."

The silence on the end of the line was deafening, and he worried for a second that he had joked too often—that she would think he was kidding. "You're the only thing I love in this world," he added.

She laughed—a bright, tense laugh. "I feel the same way," she said. "Too bad I can't do anything about it, anymore." Then, once again without saying goodbye, she hung up.

The march wore on toward dawn. Marlowe stumbled on in a dream, looking neither right nor left; Hansen held a friendly hand on his shoulder, keeping him on the right path, despite his drunken staggering. The pain in his head had returned; he walked along to the pounding in his own skull like a galley slave at the oar, lifting a leg with each beat. The only sound was his own breathing, and the voices of the Tcho-Tcho along the column; the jungle had gone dead all around him, empty of birds, monkeys, anything—even the insects had stopped buzzing in his ears.

"Rau!" Ap An would roar, somewhere far ahead in the jungle.

"Deh!" a second man shouted, closer, but still several yards ahead.

"Sut!" called the man nearest Marlowe.

"Juk!" came the yell from behind.

"Kol-GO!" was the last call, from the rear of the column. Their voices never seemed to weaken, just as their legs would never tire; they went on like machines, as implacable as the dead. Marlowe marked the time by their shouts, twelve times an hour, as regular as a clock.

"Rau!"

"Deh!"

"Sut!"

"Juk!"

Kol-GO!"

He looked over his shoulder and saw the dawn coming, a softening of the darkness in the east. The yellow light was beginning to fade; there was a long moment of twilight when it finally died completely—the sun hadn't yet come. Marlowe closed his eyes and followed Hansen's direction.

"Rau!"

"Deh!"

"Sut!"

There was silence on the fourth cry, and then Cole's voice sounded in the dark.

"Well. Juk, I guess," he drawled.

The guns thundered; Hansen turned and fired with the rest. Marlowe fell face-first into the mud again and lay there, welcoming the rotten cool embrace of the earth, and then raised his head, looking over his shoulder in the dawn light. There he saw a soldier's body, jittering and finally torn apart by the impact of two dozen rounds. His heart cried out against it; the only thing that came out of his mouth was a high-pitched shrill of anguish.

Somewhere, Ap An was cursing—there was no mistaking the tone of his roaring in any language. Marlowe lowered his head and let his cheek rest on the ground. If this was all the world had to offer him, he would take it.

He was almost asleep when Ap An yanked him up by the collar and dragged him to his feet. The Burmese commander towed him down the line by his chains with one hand; when they arrived at the bullet-riddled body on the ground, Ap An began viciously cuffing one of his men with the other, his voice briefly rising to a shriek of fury.

The man cowered, lowering his head silently, and Marlowe looked down. The soldier lying here wasn't Cole; he had been dead for far longer. The limbs stirred feebly, still trying to obey Ap An's will, but the body was now beyond use.

Marlowe's chest heaved once with a silent laugh. Now there were fewer guards than ever. Of the Burmese soldier who should have been covering this section of the line, there was no sign whatsoever; the hungry jungle had swallowed him, rifle and all.

Ap An turned with a last savage snarl and hauled Marlowe back to the head of the column. There in a clearing, the little man practically threw him down on his knees in front of a tree.

Carved into the black trunk, Roop had left his mark; a circle with a new number cut into the center. Marlowe turned to Ap An with a feeble smile and raised his hand again, this time with the thumb folded down.

Four.

The Paris show was grim. It was the first sign that Lanois actually loved his

music for its own sake—or even liked it. Chandler kept his eye on the stage during the concert, and saw Lanois stop himself, again and again, from slipping fully into the embrace of the songs; he came only so close, and then would ease off, his head thrown back, and step on the distortion pedal so hard that his guitar hooted and screamed. The music was taut and jangling, the sound in the theater so bad that most of his best lyrics were lost in an incoherent roar. And still the fans flowed toward the stage like the tide, violently churning to rhythms which the human ear couldn't properly discern.

Chandler saw the look on the singer's face as he yelled down at the crowd, disgusted by their deaf enthusiasm for the second-rate product, and felt a pang of worry. He had been observing the man long enough to translate his curious facial expressions and posture; Lanois was caught between frustration and torment, despair and rage. He wasn't a good man by nature—not the type to go to his crucifixion with a forgiving smile. He screamed at it, furious.

Halfway through "Van Gogh," Lanois suddenly began beating his guitar against the stage. He swung it wildly at the ground, at the speakers, at anything within reach, flailing like a furious gorilla. Banechek watched the display with a wry grin. When Lanois walked away into the wings, the tall bass player wagged his fingers sarcastically to the audience and followed. Bateson gave them one last furious riff of booming drums, and took his sticks with him.

The morning brought up a hot sun, and through the thinning trees it pounded down on the back of Marlowe's neck mercilessly. Steam rose from the forest floor, stinking of swamp, and flies swarmed over the dead man that walked beside him.

"I'm sorry," he croaked, half-joking, as they walked along. "I'm out of insect repellent. They took my pack."

That's okay, Hansen replied—much to Marlowe's surprise. He turned his dead eyes toward his prisoner; they were filmed with cataracts of decay. I'm gettin' short anyway. You save all that stuff for yourself.

"You figure you'll re-up?" Marlowe asked incredulously, making conversation.

Hansen looked away again. Nah. I e't enough snake to last me a lifetime. His dark, swollen gray lips pulled back from his teeth. I figure I'll go home.

"Snake-eaters," Marlowe said with a low, pained laugh. "You guys aren't supposed to know we call you that."

We know, Hansen answered. Snake-eater, knuckle-dragger, baby-killer. We hear all that shit. We got good ears.

"Doesn't bother you?"

Nah, Hansen replied. It all means the same thing: survivor. He turned

and regarded Marlowe again with his cold, sightless eyes. You boys think that's a crime.

Marlowe looked ahead, feeling awkward; he didn't want to point out that Hansen was dead. Also, his mouth was drying out, tongue thickening in a coat of sour mucus; he worked his throat silently, trying to find some spit to swallow.

Noblest thing in the goddamn world is a survivor, Cap'n, Hansen said. And don't think I'm wrong, just because I look like this here. He indicated his body with one fly-blown hand. This here is what you call a temporary condition.

"Doesn't it bother you?" Marlowe asked again. "Working for him?" He nodded up the column at Ap An.

Beats a brand-new second lieutenant, Hansen said. He still wore his wolfish grin. You follow orders when you have to. Least he can't get me killed.

"How did it happen?" Marlowe indicated Hansen's chest with his chained hands.

Hansen shrugged, sending up a cloud of flies in the heat. I took a chance. Didn't work out like I thought it would, but I'd try it again, if I had it to do over. I took out three of the little Jo-Jo sumbitches before they got me.

A glossy brown beetle crawled out from between his lips and dropped clumsily to his chin as he spoke; it caught itself, wriggling, and made its way down into the dead man's shirt quickly.

"I'm sorry," Marlowe said. "I didn't think much of you when you were alive . . . but I'm sorry I got you killed."

Hansen's lip curled slightly, contemptuous. Shit, college boy—I still don't think much a' you, so never you mind. You didn't get me killed. You ain't man enough to kill a snake-eater. He shook his head. You ain't even man enough to kill a man-eater, some motherfuck eats women and babies. Ought to be ashamed of yourself. He laughed soundlessly. I got my own self killed while you was passed out like a goddamn sissy, and I gave better than I got. That's what this here is all about, so I ain't sorry.

Marlowe had stopped walking to listen; now Hansen nudged him along with his rifle. Sooner you figure out what you're going to do 'bout all this, the better, Hansen said. The Sarge and Cole and me—we can't carry you forever.

In Berlin, Lanois lost his patience with the show when he was only six songs in. As his frustration grew, so did the rage of the music and the violence of the crowd; by the time he shattered his guitar against a concrete pillar at the end, there was blood in the audience. After beating his instrument into a useless wreck, Lanois climbed up a stacked tower of speakers and swung out over the theater hand-over-hand, traveling along the line

of overhead lights. The audience screeched and whistled appreciatively as he passed over the heads, brachiating like an orangutan, almost forty feet above the floor. When he reached the catwalk he screamed at them, furious, and then dove like a swimmer down into their midst.

Chandler, who had been holding his breath all the way through, felt his heart stop completely as Lanois' body plummeted down into the audience. It didn't beat again until he saw his charge surface in the crowd, bobbing up like a fishing lure on a pond. Somehow, incredibly, the kids had caught him; now they passed him hand to hand through the audience until he was deposited safely back on stage.

Unbidden, Banecek swung into a slow version of "Ran Away from Home." Lanois went to the mike, his rage exhausted, and delivered the song tiredly to the bleeding fans, his voice dead, drained of energy. In the furious pounding of the end, he contributed nothing until the very last note, when he suddenly took a deep breath and roared, "Fuck you all!"

After the show, Lanois said nothing; he walked past roadies and bandmates wordlessly and slammed the door of his dressing room behind him. Inside, he held out his arm to Chandler and took his shot like a diabetic, then lay down on his side and stared at the wall.

Chandler let the silence hang in the air for a while, smoking a cigarette. "You're going to run out of guitars," he finally observed.

"Good," Lanois said bitterly. "Maybe they'll fucking send me home."

"You could tell them you want to quit, I guess," Chandler mused. "Might make more sense than all this shit."

"Jim wouldn't let me leave," Lanois said. "He'd sooner see me dead."

Chandler snorted. "He wouldn't have much choice about it, if I'm around. Which I will be," he added quickly, "until the end of this tour. I'm supposed to keep you alive until then."

Lanois looked up; he seemed a little too alert for a man with so much narcotic flowing in his veins. "Then what are you going to do?" He smirked. "Back to taking pictures of people fucking in hotel rooms?"

Chandler smiled to himself. "Nah. I took enough of you and Tracy to set me up for life."

Lanois gasped out a laugh. "You bastard."

Chandler blew a smoke-ring. "So. What do you want to do?"

Lanois rolled onto his back. "Nothing, really. Sleep, I guess. If I can."

"All right, kid. I'll take you back to the hotel, okay? Need to do some things while I'm in the city. Won't take me long."

By high noon, the trail had widened from a narrow track into a broad path. Eventually, Ap An stopped the column where the trail intersected with a rutted dirt road.

Marlowe stood swaying in the heat, shaking and soaked in sweat, as the Burmese commander walked down the line counting heads. He squinted up at the sun blazing in the tropical blue sky, and then turned to Hansen.

"What should I do?" he asked. "Give me a hint."

Hansen smiled. You can borrow my can opener, if you want it, he said, his voice full of sarcastic friendliness. Jesus, you're a dumb bastard.

"Shit. I don't need a can opener," Marlowe said irritably. "Besides, you lost yours. You were opening cans with a—"

He went silent, suddenly.

Knife, Hansen said, finishing the sentence for him. Swiss Army knife. My kid brother give it to me when he heard I was going to the 'Nam. The blind, fishlike eyes regarded Marlowe with amusement. Those things sure do come in handy. Think you can remember where I kept it, college boy?

Marlowe looked down at the dead soldier's boots, swallowing hard. "Yes," he whispered hoarsely. "I think I can."

Well, then I guess the question is—am I going to let you take it? Hansen asked. His teeth were blackened with dirt, but the old grin was still recognizable. 'Cause I can be a contrary sumbitch when I want to.

"Please," Marlowe said. His eyes burned; he was trembling.

Hansen's expression didn't change. Take your chance, play it your way, he said. I ain't gonna tell you yea or nay before you try.

Ap An passed by again and Marlowe fell silent. For the first time in twenty-four hours he felt almost sharp; everything had come into focus again. When the column turned north and moved again, Hansen gave him a shove, and he fell—fell as he had fallen a dozen times that morning. He remained on his hands and knees, struggling, until Hansen came to pick him up; when he stood, he took hold of Hansen's calf to brace himself.

His hand slipped on the dead soldier's fatigues and slid down to the top of his boot. The flesh here was soft and yielding, bloated against the constriction of the leather; he had to drive his fingers past it to find the lump of the knife.

Hansen stepped back, and Marlowe squeezed his eyes shut, waiting to hear the crash of his gun. The sound didn't come; instead, the soldier picked him up by his shirt and set him bodily back on his feet.

Marlowe held the knife in his closed hand. He closed his eyes and struggled to keep his feet as he walked, the mud clutching at his heels with each step, elation and panic burning in his throat.

Hansen pushed him from behind. Guess I'm gettin' soft, he said, with a low chuckle. Imagine that.

To: Raymond

From: Polly

Re: The Music of Erich Zann

Erich Zann, born 1834, died 192?. Zann was German, raised in Stuttgart, and came to prominence early as a violinist; the first public account of his music comes in 1844, when he gave his debut concert in Vienna. He studied with various teachers and rose quickly in European music circles, despite his unconventional style. By the time he was in his early twenties, he was widely recognized as the greatest living violinist in Europe--his only rival for the century, according to rumor, had been Paganini, who died in 1840.

He retreated briefly from public life at the age of twenty-five and built the Theater of the Clowns in Rome in 1859-60, spending his entire life savings to that point in the construction. Played his last concert there in the fall of 1861. His performance was interrupted when a mysterious fire broke out in the audience; one young woman was reportedly killed in the blaze, and afterward Zann ended his musical career with the public vow that he would never play again.

He stayed out of sight until 1872, when he moved to Paris and fell in with the Bohemian crowd--seen in the company of Rimbaud and Verlaine, he became one of the city's more colorful and flamboyant addicts. Reputedly, he lived by the motto "I renounce Beauty." It was customary to invite Zann to gallery openings and poetry recitals, with the understanding that if the work was above a certain level of quality, he would be driven from the room--nothing could kill an artist's reputation like Zann's unqualified praise.

His habit of interrupting concerts and recitals by rushing to the stage and breaking the instruments of a skilled performer quickly made him a persona non grata at public affairs, and eventually he slipped into obscurity. He resurfaced in Paris in the 1920s, down on his luck and on the verge of starvation, and apparently broke with his promise when he took a job with the orchestra of a cheap burlesque theater to support himself. According to a neighbor, he died one night in the small tenement flat he had been renting on the Rue d'Auseil. His body was never found, however, and with no leads the police quickly called a halt

to the search for his remains.

Ray--is this what you were after? What's the connection?
--Polly

Chandler scanned the rest of the e-mail quickly; there were four burning deaths on the night of April 30th that might have been related to the case, but all four were reported as accidents. Since then, things had been very quiet.

Frowning, he erased the message, put his gloves back on, and wiped down the laptop with a chamois. When he had the area clean, he put the computer back into the safe and left the apartment, heading uptown again on foot. It took another hour to get back to the hotel.

He could tell that something had gone wrong immediately when he stepped out of the elevator; the muffled shouts from down the hall were all he needed. He ran down the corridor and piled into the band suite to find Bukowski and Bateson pounding on the door to Lanois' room.

"Get the *fuck* away from me!" Lanois screamed from behind the door. The edge of hysteria in his voice was unmistakable. "I'm not *like* you, damn it!"

"Let us in, Chris!" Bukowski said. "C'mon, man! We're right outside!"

"I'm *serious*!" Lanois shouted. His voice dropped suddenly, into a loud moan of pleading and disgust. "Oh, fuck . . . don't take that off . . ."

"Out of the way!" Chandler said. He yanked a throw pillow off the couch and went to the door. His gun was drawn; Bateson looked back and his eyes widened appreciatively. He stepped away from the door quickly, hands raised.

Bukowski looked back to see what was happening behind him. "Jesus fucking Christ!" he said shrilly. "What're you going to do with that?"

"Get *out* of the way!" Chandler roared. Bukowski danced back.

Chris suddenly broke out into screaming—real, earnest, panic-stricken screams which sent a chill worming through Chandler's gut. With every hair on his body standing on end, he put the pillow against the lock and blew a few holes in it, splintering the wood behind.

There was a crash in the room, ceramic and glass breaking. Chandler stepped back and kicked the door hard. It gave with a crack and he staggered forward into darkness.

All he could see clearly were the white-edged shards of fired clay and scattered bits of brass over the floor, but the smell was all he really needed; he knew who was there. He reached for the light, holding his gun ready as he flipped it on.

Lanois was standing on the bed, wearing nothing but his underwear and a T-shirt. He was holding a second lamp in both hands over one shoulder, ready to throw it. His face was drawn up in an ape's open-mouthed sneer, full of fear and anger, and his eyes blazed with lunacy.

Chandler turned toward the far corner in an eye-blink, following Lanois' gaze. There was nothing there, beside the window, nothing—save perhaps for a retreating darkness that folded in on itself and vanished just a split-second too late.

Chandler held out his open palm toward Lanois defensively, in case the kid was hysterical enough to throw his lamp at anyone who came into his field of vision, and went to the corner. There was a white face staring up from the dark carpet; when he picked it up, it pulled away from melted acrylic underneath in dripping threads. Smoke drifted lazily out of two blank eye holes and a grotesquely leering mouth.

The window was open. Chandler tossed the opera mask out into the rain and leaned out the window to watch it fall, sailing and whirling down toward the brightly lit streets below.

Lanois had lowered the lamp from his shoulder; now he let it slip out of his hands completely. It rolled off the bed and hit the carpet with a thud; at the same time his knees buckled, dropping him into the middle of his mattress. Uncertainly, Bukowski peeked around the doorframe.

"What the fuck is going on?" he demanded. Seeing no one else in the room, he bravely stepped into the doorway. "It sounded like you were getting axe-murdered in here!"

Lanois looked up, speechless, wearing a look of confusion.

"One hell of a nightmare," Chandler said. He took a fresh pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. "He was sound asleep a minute ago—I went down to the lobby to get these."

Bukowski laughed unevenly. "Jesus Christ!" He put his hand to his bare chest. "About gave me a fucking heart attack." As he looked at Lanois, his face fell back into concern. "Chris . . . bud . . . you awake?"

"I . . . think so," Lanois said slowly. "I think I'm awake." He looked over at Chandler. "I . . . guess I had a bad dream."

"Yeah. We'll talk about it," Chandler said, letting his eyes carry his meaning. "Let's get you out of this room for now, okay? You'll sleep over in the bed they gave me. I haven't even pulled back the covers yet."

"Yeah . . . Okay," Lanois said. He got out of his bed and shuffled past Bukowski, dragging a pillow behind him; as an afterthought, he turned and mumbled, "Sorry."

Bukowski shook his head. "No prob," he said reassuringly. "Long as you're okay, dude."

Lanois went to the room across the way and closed the door behind him gently. Chandler turned his head when Bukowski's hand clapped his shoulder.

"Man, that gunpowder stinks," Bukowski said with a grin, his voice low and conspiratorial. "I really appreciate you going the extra mile. He's eating that John Wayne shit right up."

"Just doing my job," Chandler said. He tipped an imaginary Stetson and put on a sarcastic cowboy drawl. "Y'all have a good night."

Bukowski rolled his eyes. "Too fucking much, man."

The rutted dirt road led up a brief incline and ended at the gates of a fortress. Chandler stumbled along with the others, stopping to squint up at the high wall of cut logs, and the two M-60s which overlooked the road from the guard towers above. There were two more of the Burmese dwarves manning each machine gun; when they saw Ap An, they called down for the doors to be opened.

The muddy courtyard within the walls was a disheartening sight. Marlowe stood reeling in the noonday sun, trying not to appear too curious as he looked over the Tcho-Tcho camp. By the look of it, the previous owners had been evicted a few weeks before. Flesh was still sloughing off in flaps from their skulls, mounted on a thicket of sharpened poles on either side of the gate.

It was the headquarters of some minor opium dealer's army, to Marlowe's eye. All the modern conveniences, brought to this rustic setting by Air America: the empty supply crates stacked all around the place had once been filled with rifles, ammunition, rations—there was enough here to keep a whole division of men in operation for several weeks.

He held Hansen's knife in his sweating palm, breathing the hot air fast and shallow through his mouth, to reduce the smell of Cosmoline and human decay. The rest of the prisoners were herded into the fortress, driven along the eastern wall; he shuffled along with them, keeping his head up. Mentally he was counting the Burmese; including the four who manned the machine guns and the four left in Ap An's party, there were seventeen. Most of them were busy now, breaking up the empty crates with sledgehammers, chopping wood, or carrying the lumber to a growing pile in the center of the clearing.

Hansen put a gray hand on Marlowe's arm. Boss man wants to see you, he said, pulling Marlowe along with fingers that were starting to go soft and spongy. Come on, college boy.

By the time Chandler was able to clear up the mess, Lanois had fallen asleep again. Over the morning's room service and jokes, there was no time to ask the singer about his visitor from the night before; there were over a dozen people sitting around at breakfast, and Lanois skillfully avoided meeting his eyes—or even addressing him directly—for most of the day. To the outside observer, it probably looked as if he was just embarrassed and shy over his nightmare.

After dinner, the band and all associated personnel were loaded into a

plane at the Berlin airfield. They set down again at Heathrow around nine. At the new hotel, Lanois locked himself in his room with a pack of cigarettes and a guitar.

Bukowski shook his head, seeing Chandler sit down in a chair outside the locked door, arms folded over his chest. "You might as well get some sleep or something," he said. "He's probably not going to come out of there for a day." The little man sighed. "He's a bitch when he's like this, but at least we'll get a new song out of it," he said.

Bateson stood over Chandler and rapped on the door with the back of his hand. "Jim and I are going out and do the tourist thing," he said. "You want to come? Catch some music or something?"

"I'll go out tomorrow," Lanois said. His guitar, disconnected from the amplifier, made only a faint, tinny music behind the closed door.

"Okie dokie," Bateson said, grinning. "Wank away, prima donna."

"You can count on me!" came Lanois' cheerful reply.

Ap An stood on the far end of the compound. Marlowe stumbled to a halt before him, and the Tcho-Tcho commander took him by the back of the neck, forcing him down with ferocious strength; Marlowe went down onto his knees exhaustedly, offering no more than token resistance. He kept his hands folded.

The dead shut the gates behind their Laotian charges and drove them into an empty barracks. Marlowe rested in the mud, Ap An's fingertips and thumb gripping either side of his spinal column like steel. The sun had grown so hot that he couldn't even sweat anymore.

The Burmese were digging their cooking pits now, clearly planning a feast. Marlowe saw the crews setting to work with shovels, and looked up at Ap An. The cannibal commander's black little eyes gleamed with good humor, and he winked, raising his free hand with the thumb and index fingers folded down: three.

The Burmese poured out precious gasoline over their tinder and set the bonfire alight.

Hansen stirred beside him, shuffling forward. Well, Cap'n, he said, guess this is where I step off.

Marlowe looked up at the dead man and saw him clumsily remove the rifle that he had carried so long.

Can't say I'm sorry, Hansen said. That ol' gun was getting heavy.

The rest of the murdered men were coming now, four white soldiers and three Vietnamese. Marlowe hadn't been this close to most of them on the march, but he was numb to the sight—the cluster of shambling corpses only made him sad. These men were tired; some of them dragged a foot awkwardly, some were squirming with larva, others had flesh peeling

away from bone, where an old wound could never heal—they shuffled along in eerie silence to form a line, a last weary formation at parade rest. One by one, they dropped their rifles and turned to face the fire.

Hansen began climbing the woodpile, making his way awkwardly up through rising flames. When he reached the top, he seemed to relax; he lay down on his side and draped himself over the pyre. Even at this distance, Marlowe heard the sound he made, the satisfied growl of a working man stretching out after a hard day.

Ay-yuh, Hansen said. That's not bad.

The unnatural life went out of him, and the others, all at once. Marlowe heard Ap An mumble something, and felt the tremor through his hand; it was a ripple that went through the Burmese commander's whole body at once. At the same moment, the last soldier pitched face forward into the bonfire, and the odd twitches of reaction in the others ended. They burned peacefully, discharged from duty at last.

Marlowe closed his eyes and let the Tcho-Tcho soldiers drag him to his feet. When they shoved him into the dark barracks, he lay down in the dirt by the door and fell asleep—seeking his own peace.

"I'm looking for an album by the Technicolor Yawn," Chris said. It had taken him almost an hour to work up the nerve to actually speak to the British shop girl; Chandler felt as if he'd been standing in the doorway of the little record store for half the day. "It's called *Fish Pie*?" He looked up at her hopefully, and went on when she didn't answer right away. "I didn't, uh, see it in the stacks. I don't suppose you guys have it?"

The blue-haired girl at the cash register smiled. "That's an oldie, ducks. You must be a collector."

Chandler covered his mouth with the back of his hand, pretending to yawn so that he could hide his smile. Lanois was blushing, standing with both hands shoved into his front pockets and looking at the floor. "Er, well, I guess," he mumbled. "Just a fan, really."

"Awww," the shop girl said. She reached over the counter and squeezed Lanois' bicep affectionately, smiling again; it was a surprisingly human gesture from a girl who looked like she was waiting for the mother ship. "Don't be shy, love!" she said reassuringly. "You're in luck; I know just where you should go." She picked up a business card and jotted down an address. "There's a little antique place down the road; isn't far. Heather Pierce works at the front."

"Really?" Lanois took the card with a radiant smile. "The guitarist?" He brushed his hair out of his eyes. "Wow—how do you know?"

"She's my flat mate," the shop girl said. "If you hurry, you'll catch her before she leaves for the day."

"Cool," Chris said. "Thanks!"

Chandler turned and followed as Lanois hurried up the street. It was a rough part of town: at present he and Lanois were walking down a long line of cheap store fronts, their gaudy contents spilling out onto the sidewalk on racks and side tables. Leather, body piercing and tattoos, short plastic skirts, drug paraphernalia, fish and chips—the street was a monument to virtually every human appetite. Lanois was in his element; he shouldered his way through it all without hesitation, stopping only for a moment to light a cigarette.

Chandler, who had seen these moods in his ward before, made no effort to make conversation. He stretched his long legs and walked alongside Lanois easily, keeping his eye out for trouble until the singer found the address he was looking for.

It was a dark little place, the windows paned with squares of thick, opaque old glass. Lanois opened the door a crack and peered in for a moment, then went in.

Chandler hesitated. He heard a faint, quivering strain of music in the wind, and turned to see where it came from; on the deserted corner opposite the antique store, someone had begun to play the violin.

The black-clad violinist had his back turned, his head cocked lovingly over his instrument. The melody was a sad one, full of little hitches and hesitations, like a weeping woman gasping for breath. Chandler stayed to listen, despite his better judgement, because it was so hauntingly beautiful; it carried over the sound of traffic like a human voice, sweet and desolate.

It was only when he remembered the white mask, spinning down through the dark toward the bright traffic of Berlin, that Chandler backed slowly into the shop. He didn't want to be watching if Zann decided to turn and face the street.

It seemed to Marlowe that he was dreaming. In this dream, there was a woman with pale arms leaning over him in the shadows; he thought he should recognize her, but he couldn't recall where they had met before, or what good fortune had brought him to this place. She knelt bare-breasted beside him, gleaming in the darkness like an angel. Her heavy-lidded almond eyes were dark and serene.

In her small hands, she held a bundled rag. She still wore a pair of black pants, and held a strange round bowl between her narrow thighs. She dipped the rag into the bowl over and over again, squeezing the cool water out onto his chest, his belly, his groin. She swabbed his neck, his face, his arms, chest, shoulders, all with the same patient, gentle circular motions.

Every so often she went away, and came back with fresh water. He watched her in this dream, moving slowly on her torn feet. Crippled as

she was, there was living grace to her movements, like the sweep of willow branches in a spring breeze.

He was too weak to be aroused when she continued scrubbing below the navel, though she was as patient and thorough there as anywhere. She bent her head over his aching legs, a ragged mass of black hair falling down to hide her round face and tiny nipples, each the size and color of a tarnished penny. The bathing of his feet was almost excruciating: the wet rag, passing tenderly between his aching toes and over the blistered sole, made him moan aloud.

At last she raised his head and rested it on her delicate knee, tilting a helmet full of fresh water to his lips. He could not remember ever drinking so much before. When he was finished, she poured the remainder out through his hair, rinsing his scalp.

He frowned, fumbling with his memory as she set his head back down. "Why are you kind to me?" he asked, stringing together the words awkwardly from the Laotian he had learned.

For a moment he thought she didn't understand. She put her fingers to his lips, cautioning him to silence, and shook out the rag she had used to wash him; it was her own shirt. She put it on again, drawing it down over her painfully thin body.

"Why?" he asked again.

"Because I am strong enough," she said at last. "All the rest were too weak for mercy."

She took his hand in hers, chains clinking in the dark, and raised his fingers to her lips. He yelped when her small teeth drove into his thumb and met under the skin, but he was too feeble to yank his hand out of her grasp—he could only watch the trail of blood slowly running down the inside of his wrist.

She put her own hand to her mouth and bit it, forcing her teeth into the flesh of the palm. Now she joined his hand with hers, blood from two wounds mingling. Rapidly she whispered, too fast and softly for him to make out the words, and Marlowe gasped. Cold, living energy seeped into him, flowing down his arm and into his chest. He took a deep breath, astonished, and found himself up on one elbow, watching in fascination as she gripped his thumb tight.

The door opened suddenly and yellow light struck her, fiercely bright; she winced, raising her arms to cover her dark eyes.

"Sut!" the Burmese soldier barked. The Laotian woman lowered her hands, and Marlowe saw the dark and swollen bruises on her face and arms. She bent quickly and pressed her body against his chest, as if in a final embrace; in the darkness, the cold weight of Hansen's Swiss Army knife slipped between his fingers. He had completely forgotten about it, until that moment.

She stood up, swaying on her feet, and tottered forward a few steps before she got her balance. Marlowe rolled onto his side, trying to catch her heel before she could follow the other two villagers down the shaft of light to the bright rectangle at its end. Dark, squat shadows stood waiting for her beyond that doorway, bristling with hunger.

She turned once, looking over her shoulder. "Let me be the last," she said.

The Tcho-Tcho burst into roars of laughter, and answered her with their own tongue; they understood Laotian, even if they didn't speak it. Marlowe closed his fingers around Hansen's knife in the dark, curling his whole being tightly around the weapon and its cold capacity for murder; when the door closed behind her, he stood in the darkness, feeling around for his clothes.

He passed his hands over his face, cool and free of regrets. He and the wolfskin were one.

While Lanois asked about his LP, Chandler cased the rest of the store, wandering through its tight and claustrophobic aisles. There was almost no room to move in the place; the shelves were packed with antique bric-a-brac and bizarre artifacts. On one shelf you might find a set of wooden false teeth, three cabinet radios of Roaring Twenties vintage, and several umbrellas with strangely carved handles. On another, there were four ancient typewriters, or a brass Buddha sitting in the lotus position, its belly greening with age. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the collection; it was the flotsam of ages, washed up on these shelves like wreckage on a distant shore.

He picked up an antique dueling pistol, examining the flintlock firing mechanism with genuine interest. Elsewhere in the store, Lanois said, "Oh my god! How much are these?" Curious, Chandler wandered up to the counter in time to see the singer putting down his credit card for a collection of wooden marionettes, all of them almost two feet tall.

Chandler disliked the dolls instantly. They were grotesque, each one carved into a different human likeness, and not one of them pleasant. Dimly he recognized that they were supposed to represent different quirks of personality—an obscenely fat bow-legged doll, a spindly leering hunchbacked doll, an open-mouthed prostitute with the varnish crumbling in her white cleavage—but whatever the intentions of the puppeteer might have been, he hadn't been on good terms with the rest of the human race.

"You have a good eye," the girl said. "These are eighteenth century. They're very rare."

"I've been searching years for something like this," Lanois said. He picked up a doll with a furled brow, its teeth gritted and lips flared with rage. "Do you know what they were used for, way back then?"

"They're from a theater," the girl said. "I think originally that they

were supposed to represent the seven deadly sins . . . This chubby lad here would be Gluttony, and the lady would be Lust."

"The one in your hand is Anger," said Chandler. "The skinny one is probably Envy or Greed."

Lanois grinned mischievously. "I should give them to people as presents." He picked up the leering hunchback and shook it by the chest, making its dangling arms swing back and forth. "Which do you think it is—Envy or Greed? If it's Envy, I'll give it to Jim. If it's Greed, it goes to Paul, definitely."

"Jim should get the Anger puppet," Chandler observed. "Envy there is for your wife." He looked away, smiling sardonically. "Just make sure you keep the Pride and Sloth for yourself."

Lanois laughed out loud. He turned to the shop girl with a wry wink. "Lover's spat," he said, in a mock-confidential whisper.

Chandler rolled his eyes. "You'll have to forgive my son," he said apologetically. "He has a strange sense of humor."

Lanois made a face. "Yech! You win the gross-out contest, dude!"

The girl laughed. "I see the family resemblance," she said. A horn sounded out front. "There's your taxicab."

Somewhere around midnight, the singing began—a dark basso chant which made his skin crawl. It was an ominous sound, full of dark promise, and it had a note of the religious in it that made him uneasy.

Marlowe raised his rusty voice in the dark. "Lemme out of here!" he yelled, rattling the door against its bar with his foot.

The Burmese outside the door growled irritably. Marlowe listened, grinning, and then took up his protest again, pounding the door with his fists. "Lemme out, ya butt-ugly little bastards!" he cried.

A feather touch descended on his arm, and he turned to see a Laotian man standing beside him, rocking back and forth. These people were exhausted, on the brink of starvation, and several of them were badly hurt; nonetheless, more than half the survivors had gained their feet and now stood behind him in the darkness, thin and trembling.

"Let us out!" the Laotian man called. Like a wind through the trees, the complaint was taken up by the others—softly at first, but louder and louder as they found their voices. Small fists beat on the door, feeble but insistent.

The Tcho-Tcho cursed and pounded on the other side of the door angrily. There was no mistaking his command, in any language; Marlowe and the others ignored it.

"Let us out! Let us out!" they shouted.

At the sound of the bar being lifted outside, Marlowe slunk back into

the midst of the Laotians, crouching low. The squat little soldier opened the door with a snarl and pointed his rifle into the room with a low grumble of threat.

The Laotians fell silent, but remained standing. With a bully's irritation, the Burmese gave an old man the stock of his rifle, throwing aside the light body as easily as a rag doll.

In that moment of distraction, Marlowe came up out of his crouch like a cat leaping in the tall grass. Every muscle in his body unwound in the spring. He drove the longest blade of Hansen's knife straight into the cannibal's voice box, carrying him several steps back, out through the open door. The two of them tumbled down into the dirt. Marlowe landed on top.

With a burst of savage strength he turned the knife and tore it out through the side of the man's neck. The other guard was turning in the same second, bringing his M-16 to bear; Marlowe heard the sound of the rifle slapping down into his palm and threw himself to the right desperately, knowing he would be too late to avoid the bullets.

He heard the burst, heard the cry of pain, and turned to see a half-dozen thin bodies wrestling with the Burmese, while a gray-haired Laotian woman slumped over on her knees, her hands shining with her own blood. He snarled as he threw himself back into the press of bodies, stabbing the blade of Hansen's pocket knife into the yelling guard's eye.

The chanting in the open courtyard faltered. Chandler ripped the rifle out of the dead guard's stubborn hands and turned toward the voices, now calling out in alarm; he opened fire, running a seam of tracers into the firelight.

Lanois hung his new friends around his dressing room, stringing them up on either side of the mirror. On the mirror itself, he had pasted a magazine cover, a particularly lurid portrait of his wife; Tracy Tone was crossing her eyes and pulling a face for the camera.

Chandler looked over Lanois' shoulder as he was setting up the tableau. "That's a whole lot of ugly in one place," he remarked casually.

"Well, you shouldn't oughta look into mirrors, dude," Lanois said, grinning.

Chandler chuckled and sat down in the corner guiltily. "Shit, I could look into that one all day," he said. "Makes me look downright handsome." He lit up a cigarette, looking up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "I notice that about you, though; you like ugly shit a lot. That's a 'punk' thing, I gather."

"Yeah, it's a punk thing," Lanois said sarcastically. "But it's also my thing. I'm not a fucking fashion slave or anything. I hated Beauty way be-

fore I knew it was cool.”

“That right,” Chandler said. He lit up a cigarette. “Why?”

Lanois sat down on the couch, hugging himself. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty stupid,” Chandler agreed. “Try me anyway.”

“It’s a trap.” Lanois was rocking back and forth slightly. “The whole point of Beauty is to sucker you. To make you cooperate.”

“How so?”

“Well, look at flowers,” Lanois said. “Nice perfume, pretty colors. But they don’t do that for fucking charity, man—the beauty’s there to attract insects. So they can breed.” The singer began scratching his arm energetically; when he didn’t stop immediately, Chandler raised an eyebrow. “It’s all about breeding. Survival.”

“Survival isn’t wrong,” Chandler pointed out quietly.

Lanois snorted. “It’s not what I would call a noble fucking goal.” He waved his hand. “Not for humanity, anyway. I guess it’s okay for animals and plants.”

“What exactly are human beings supposed to do?” Chandler asked. “Just out of curiosity.”

“Find the answers,” Lanois said. His voice was full of conviction. “Look for the ugliness in life. That’s where the truth is.” He had drawn his knees up to his chest. “Death, disease, and decay—that’s what you find, when you scratch Beauty hard enough. Something that starts out ugly at least isn’t trying to fool anyone.”

“Well.” Chandler leaned forward and tapped the ash of his cigarette into the tray on Lanois’ coffee table. “I’ve got to say; that is a thoroughly fucked-up philosophy of life.”

Lanois drew up one corner of his mouth ironically. “Why, thank you.”

“You come up with that all by yourself, or did Zann help?”

Lanois looked up sharply, eyes wide, but said nothing.

“Didn’t he used to say the same thing?” Chandler asked. “‘I renounce Beauty.’”

Lanois sat for a long moment, very still. Finally, he said, “Did he say something to you?”

“No,” Chandler said. “I just figured it out.” He studied Lanois’ eyes closely. “I don’t figure there can be all that many ghost violinists in Europe. What does he want?”

Lanois held his hand out for a cigarette. “I don’t know,” he said. “I guess he just wants to haunt my sorry ass.” His hands trembled as he lit up. “Keeps trying to tell me about his life.”

“I guess it’s a good thing that tonight is your last show,” Chandler said.

"Yeah," Lanois said, with an odd, tight little smile. "I only have one guitar left."

It was beautiful to listen to them scream. A broad smile was plastered onto Marlowe's face—nothing in his life had ever given him so much pleasure. In one delirious instant the throaty voices had turned into high-pitched shrills of panic; the Tcho-Tcho scrambled away from their cooking pits in all directions, looking for cover like frightened roaches. He loped swiftly alongside the wall, stopping only to fire a long, gratifying burst into the back of a running cannibal. He laughed out loud as the man went down.

The Laotians were running as well. One of them had recovered the second guard's rifle; he heard an uncertain chatter of bullets behind him, and more pained shrieking from beyond the firelight.

One of the guard towers opened up suddenly; an M-60 rattled heavily overhead, and he heard the pop, snap and whine of lead coming toward him from the left, ripping into the wood of the palisade. He flung himself down on his side, letting the burst pass over him—then rapid-crawled on his elbows toward the fire, and the shelter it offered.

A second M-60 coughed in the dark. It was a long steady torrent, mingled with the crunch of wood and shrill cannibal screams; Marlowe rolled over on his back and looked up to see the second guard tower open up on the first, riddling the machine gun position with bullets. The crew tumbled lifeless out of the nest, and the M-60 from the second tower turned down toward the courtyard.

Thinly he could hear Cole yelling above the rattle of the full auto and the roar of flames. "Yeah, honey!" the black man was yelling aloud. "Mister Cole got some for ALL his friends!"

"Yo, Chris!" Banecek was beating the door with his fist. "C'mon, man! We're on in ten minutes! Get your ass in gear!"

Bateson was leaning against the wall nearby, rolling his sticks off the edge of a packing case to loosen up his wrists. Chandler came up behind him. "What's going on?" he asked the drummer.

"Uh, Chris locked his door or something," Bateson said awkwardly. "We need to get ready."

Bukowski came from the opposite direction. "The crowd looks great," he said excitedly. He looked at the three men standing there outside the door, and his face fell. "What's up?"

"Same old fucking shit," Banecek said bitterly. He turned and beat the door a few more times. "Let's go, lameass!"

"Errr . . . why don't you let me handle this, Jim," Bukowski said, wav-

ing the bass player away from the door. Banecek rolled his eyes and retreated.

Bukowski stepped up to the door and rapped it lightly with the back of his hand. "Chris?" he said. There was no answer, although some kind of low murmur came from behind the door. "Something wrong?"

Lanois' giggle was dimly audible. "Nope," he said.

Chandler heaved a sigh. "Well, that sounds promising," he muttered. "Does anyone here know where he could have scored some heroin, now that Tracy's gone?"

"What?" Bukowski turned away from the door, his face pale. "Oh, dear God—not this again."

"I told him I had to make a phone call," Chandler said resignedly. "I didn't think he could get into any trouble in twenty minutes."

"He's been good lately," Bukowski allowed. "Shit."

The company rep walked a few paces, his fingers steepled in front of his mouth in anxiety, and then went back to the dressing room door and knocked again. "Chris," he said. "Look, you've got to open the door, man. We're getting worried out here. People are thinking the worst."

Lanois was laughing harder now.

Chandler met Bukowski's worried eyes, then took his own turn at the door.

He didn't bother to knock. "Kid," he said, "I'm going to give you to the count of ten." He lit a cigarette. "If the door isn't open by the time I'm done, I'm going to have to come in there on my own."

"Oh yeah," Banecek said, his voice low and ironic. "This should be good."

"One," Chandler said.

Bateson chuckled, tucking his sticks into the back pocket of his jeans. "Oh, man."

"Two."

The drummer turned to Banecek, smiling. "Like, he sounds so much like my dad, it's scary."

"Three."

"Is this really necessary?" Bukowski asked worriedly.

Chandler raised an eyebrow. "Four," he said.

Banecek turned to the drummer with a grin. "Someone's gonna get a spankin'," he said delightedly.

"Five," Chandler said. He paused and took a drag of his cigarette. "Six."

Bukowski crossed his arms. "We'll have to pay for the damages if you break the door down," he said anxiously.

"Seven," Chandler sighed.

"You should have seen him open the other one, in the hotel room," Bateson said to Banecek, in a confidential undertone. He made his right hand into a gun and held up an imaginary pillow: *pkew! pkew! pkew!* "Just like Dirty Harry."

"Eight."

"Too bad I missed it," Banecek said. "I heard Chris was screamin' like a girl."

"Nine," Chandler said. He could still hear Lanois in the room—lying on the couch, still wheezing with laughter. There were some preliminary rustling noises; sounded like the singer was trying to get to his feet.

"Oh, shit," Bukowski said. He winced in advance, raising one shoulder defensively against the noise.

Chandler grinned. "Nnnnnnine-and-a-half," he said. He could hear Lanois moving in the room; kicking in the door might hurt him.

Banecek laughed incredulously. "Aw, man!" he said. "What a rip-off!"

The doorknob rattled, and Lanois opened it; the pupils of his bright blue eyes were both pinpricks, and there was a fresh cigarette burn on his T-shirt. "Hello, gang!" he said, lips drawing back into a too-wide smile. He held the door and swept his arm, ushering them in. "Puh-leeeeeeeease come in."

Chandler shook his head and walked past him; Lanois retreated to the chair beside his mirror, and the others followed him into the room.

Bukowski took one look at Chris trying to lower himself into his seat and put his hand to his forehead, heading straight for the couch. "Oh, Jesus," he groaned. "Tell me this isn't happening."

"This isn't happening," Chandler said helpfully.

Bateson had come all the way into the room; Jim Banecek just leaned in the doorway. "The little fucker is stoned, isn't he?" he said disgustedly.

Bateson laughed. "Well, beats the last tour."

"This is not fucking funny, Eli," Banecek growled. "We are fucked."

"Oh, come on," Bateson said reassuringly. "He can still play." Nervously, the drummer took a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and put one in his mouth, trying to smile. "Like, remember the time we did the Headbanger's Ball, and he was wearing that yellow prom dress?" Getting no reply from Banecek, he looked over at Chandler. "We were all ripped that night," he explained. "Chris was great."

"Aw, fuck this," Banecek interrupted. "This is bullshit." He crossed his arms over his chest, glowering at Bukowski. "Seriously—how many times do we have to go through this? How many times does he have to fucking let us down before we do something about it, Paul?"

Bukowski looked up. "And just what exactly would you suggest that

'we,' quote unquote, do about it, Jim?" he asked angrily. "I already got him a goddamn nursemaid. What do you want me to do, put him in diapers?"

Lanois was abruptly unamused. "Hey, I have an idea," he said suddenly, his voice bright and razor-edged. "Let's all talk about me like I'm not here!"

Chandler chuckled silently. No one else had anything to say for several seconds.

"Let's get on the fucking stage and play this fucking shit," Lanois said. He threw down his cigarette and picked up his guitar. "I want to go home."

He could feel the slugs hammering into the earth not far away; the ground hummed under his body with the rhythm of Cole's machine gun fire. Marlowe sighted his rifle and took out a Burmese who was trying to make the gate, drilling him through the back of the head with cold precision.

There was a scream coming toward him. A shadow moved in the bonfire, and suddenly a man came stumbling bow-legged through the sheet of flame, holding his belly with both hands. Marlowe rolled to one side and let him wade unevenly past in dying, rolling forward until he fell down on his face and burned. There was no need to waste ammunition.

Somewhere in the havoc, Ap An was still shrieking, his words rolling out unabated in supplication. Marlowe couldn't tell who or what he was calling to, and didn't care; he snaked forward on his belly until he could see the Tcho-Tcho commander standing silhouetted in front of a roaring pit of fire with his burly fists raised high, and sighted his rifle in the middle of the man's chest.

He squeezed the trigger gently, almost lovingly, and sent three high velocity rounds ripping through the air toward Ap An's heart. He saw them hit, saw the Burmese stagger and almost step backward into the flames. The man's voice was cut off, for a moment, and Marlowe almost smiled.

Ap An righted himself, lowering his head. He had stopped calling out now; he lowered his arms slowly, flexing his squat body. Marlowe met the jet-black eyes and saw them widen slightly; the Tcho-Tcho leader held up his hand with a broad, sickening smile, showing just the index finger: one. The finger slowly tipped down toward Marlowe: and it will be you.

Suddenly the hand became a claw; Ap An clutched a handful of empty air with his fingers hooked into five vicious talons. Pain flared in Marlowe's chest, and the breath caught in his throat like a strangling rag: icy fingers had taken his heart in a paralyzing grip. He could do nothing but stare, his mouth open for a scream that would not come, as Ap An

tightened that grip cruelly—and then turned his hand with slow, wrenching deliberation, his grin widening with pleasure.

Chandler, who had seen the way Asian musicians could continue their whirling rounds of rhythm under the influence of opium, was not entirely surprised that Lanois could still play. The surprise was that he could still play so well.

The kid looked like hell; there was no denying that. The way he shuffled out on the stage, with his guitar slung over one shoulder and his body half-bent in defeat, was almost tragic. Chandler's eyes narrowed, looking him over; he couldn't reach Lanois from where he was standing, which made him nervous—but seeing the performance, he reasoned, was more important.

As Lanois walked out of the wings, the crowd roared as always, like a beast with ten thousand throats. Chandler was already braced for that; he'd found a wall to put his back against and he was ready to weather the concert one way or the other. Lanois tossed his hair out of his eyes and looked out into the audience, the sea of humanity in which no individual could be discerned, and smiled feebly. He raised his right hand a little and gave them a half-guilty wave and nod, as if to say, *Oh yeah. Forgot about you guys—how ya doin'?*

They roared again, in greeting, in exultation, in joy, as he bent over and picked up the lead for his guitar. He was grinning as he plugged it in; he rested the axe on his thigh and tore into the strings like a maniac, letting rip with a burst of five power chords. Chandler didn't recognize the song until the third repetition of the same chords, which was about when Banecek and Bateson caught on as well; they came in behind Lanois hastily as he went to the microphone.

It was fast, it was mean, it was completely unexpected, and it was as strong and focused as he had ever heard Christopher Lanois sound.

"Guuuuuuurrrrrlllll," the singer snarled, his voice full of power and ironic hurt. "*You really got me now . . . You got me so I don't know what I'm doin'.*"

They stomped and snorted and whirled through the first half-hour of the show, playing a dizzy stream of garage-band anthems. Sometimes the sound was so alien that Chandler could barely make out what the original had been—it was only the chorus that gave away "Smoke on the Water" and "Johnny B. Goode." Banecek and Bateson followed the lead guitarist reluctantly, mystified, as Lanois rolled into one song after another without giving them a word; he was possessed, interested in them only peripherally, and half the time would play alone for several bars before they found a place to enter.

Banecek's jaw worked with unspoken fury, but he bent his head with a will and fell in as quickly as possible with every new song, determined not to be left behind. Bateson simply let his drums do the talking, adding what he could to the music and carrying it during the spaces that Lanois had to leave empty.

When it became dangerous, Chandler couldn't say. Eventually Lanois ran out of tunes from Bo Diddly and the Troggs, and came to face to face with himself; he played his oldest songs first, the ugly boiling fury of them rushing out of his guitar. He was screaming with such acidic rage that Chandler almost didn't hear the change in the lyrics, here and there:

*I said I loved you—I lied.
I said I loved you—fuck, I lied.
I loved myself better than you,
Because of that, you died.*

*I love the jacket, I love my nurse.
I love my master, love my curse.
I love my fucking medication
I love creamed corn and light sedation*

*And here I am—in bliss . . .
Here I am, in bliss
All I've got now is me
And funny thing . . .
It's you that I miss.
It's you I miss
It's you I miss . . .*

Lanois carried the last note, letting that lonely cry of mingled longing and self-disgust hang in the air, and the rest of the band left the space empty for him; he launched into an ear-scorching guitar solo that made Chandler's teeth ache. Something about the high, squealing rhythm of the notes was wrong, far more deeply and terribly wrong than anything he had heard Lanois play before. Chandler winced, feeling the cold ripple pass over him and a bolt of nausea strike deep in his gut.

Even Banecek was disturbed by the sound, but Lanois played on, the notes whirling higher and higher up the fretboard of his guitar, faster and faster. His face shone with sweat; his eyes were wide and wild, and his jaw was set with stubborn determination.

Feedback broke off the music with a brain-drilling shriek and Chandler bent over, clapping his hands to his ears. Lanois stopped playing,

surprised, and looked around as if to see where it had come from; when he turned his head to the left, he froze suddenly, staring for a long moment.

The crowd was silent; they'd gone quiet during the solo, the wild churning dance stuttering to a halt as unearthly, piercing rhythms spun out over their heads. Lanois' voice was clearly audible, picked up by the microphone despite the distance. "Well," he said softly, "that was pretty fucked up."

Yeah, no shit, Chandler thought. Sweat had broken out on his face, greasy and cold.

Lanois was far from finished, however. Doggedly he went on, through every single on the Lysol LP and every b-side, then drifting into the darker, more dream-like songs from *Eternal Bliss*. His guitar cut out or wailed into feedback repeatedly, and he had to stop over and over during "Van Gogh," "Duty Calls," "Thorazine," and "AfterBirth" to shake the lead, struggle with the pedals, anything . . . trying to wring some sound out of the damn thing for long enough to finish the song, and never able to play any single tune from beginning to end without interruption.

His frustration grew palpably, the crowd becoming increasingly nervous as the band played on. Banecek was soaking with sweat now, his black hair hanging down around his face in long, dripping strings; Chandler checked his watch and saw that Bliss had been playing for nearly four hours. At last, there was nothing left; Lanois stepped away from the mike and Banecek launched into the slow bottom of "Ran Away from Home." All the anger had drained out of the bass player—he was exhausted, and looked as if he'd be grateful to leave the stage at last.

"Ran away from home," Lanois moaned sorrowfully. *"Tried to catch the train . . . but it doesn't slow or stop . . . when it passes through this town . . ."*

He had never sounded sadder; the audience was respectfully quiet. He held them now, quietly certain of his power. This performance was clean, honest, at least to Chandler's ear—and despite Lanois' medicated state, he seemed somehow more awake than usual. In the end, the singer extended the music, leaving Bateson and Banecek to back him up with the same gently throbbing bass and the hiss of high-hat, with no backbeat at all but a stick rapping off the rim of a snare drum. Lanois' baritone was soft, sensually appealing, as he gave the song a new conclusion.

*I tried to run away . . .
I tried to go back home . . .
But there isn't any place . . .
Where I can be alone . . .*

*I sat down at the table . . .
 I ate all I could hold . . .
 Could be I'll get hungry, on the road . . .*

Lanois was weak, vulnerable, as the music ticked on to the end of the last quiet measure. At last Bateson drew himself up and launched into a long, rolling thunder of drums, and the near-silence was broken by a nightmarish cacophony; Lanois trembled in the rush of chaos like a willow tree, and suddenly began screaming incoherently, tearing at his guitar like a madman.

The instrument yelled for a few seconds, and then simply would not obey him. No sound came out of it; it was dead, and no amount of shaking and thrashing and wiggling of wires would yield so much as a whistle from the thing.

"Aw, fuck this!" Lanois shrieked, furious. He whipped off the strap and took the guitar by the neck; Banecek was already doing the same with his bass. With one last contemptuous burst of strength, the singer hurled his guitar end-over-end, and Banecek swung his own instrument like a baseball bat.

The two instruments met with a howl and a flash of light. Lanois' guitar shattered, spinning away into the dark in a million keening shards. By the time the feedback died, he was gone; he had vanished from the stage, leaving nothing but smoke and a crowd that roared, too vast and inhuman even to speak his name.

When the band had gone, Chandler could see at last that the stage was not completely deserted. Far to the left, against the speaker, there was an extra shadow; he hadn't noticed it while Lanois occupied the spotlight, but now that the lights were off, he could be seen clearly. His white gloves flashed again and again in the darkness, silently applauding.

Marlowe rolled over on his back, his whole body arched up between head and heels in one agonizing spasm. Hungry blackness swallowed up his peripheral vision; Ap An was rushing toward him down a tunnel, hunched over and stiff-backed, leading with his left leg like an angry ape. His hand still clutched the air before him, fingers crooked around an invisible heart.

Marlowe found himself trying to fight that dreadful grip, one hand clasped to his chest as if he could tear Ap An's fingers away, the other straining to hoist the monstrosously heavy rifle up, straining to point it and pull the trigger. Ap An slapped the gun out of his hand contemptuously, and it sailed away into the fire.

The Burmese squatted beside him, his dark face twisted with cruel delight. He took hold of Marlowe's shirt in both hands and wrenched it

apart, baring the white chest.

Marlowe could no longer see. Dimly he was aware of his buttons giving way with a sudden jerk, but he was too far away from it now; his consciousness had contracted into a tiny nugget—just a handful of life left, an ember surrounded by crushing fingers of ice, slowly being squeezed out of existence.

Suddenly the grip was released. Marlowe sucked in a few inches of painful breath, feeling his heart give a tentative, half-reluctant beat. The blood in his veins stirred feebly, and against one cheek he could distinctly feel hot, dry dirt. He turned his head, lifting his eyelids with a heroic effort of will.

Ap An hovered over him, his wide unlovely face split with a grin. He raised his right hand again, and the fingertips glowed like the yellow point of a hot poker. The pain when they struck was intense, overpowering; it awakened Marlowe's body fully, and he drew in a breath that he could not release.

He could hear the sickening crackle as those fingers drove into him, penetrating his chest. The skin liquefied and flowed under Ap An's touch, tearing free of a million tiny nerve-rich moorings to the meat and bone below; Marlowe choked out a rattle of disgust and pain, unable to contract his belly enough to scream properly. The fingers cut again and again, dragging great messy swaths of his flesh after them and leaving runnels behind, as if Ap An were running his fingers through wet sand.

Ap An smiled down at his handiwork, pleased, and rubbed his mouth with the back of his hatefully glowing hand. Marlowe tried to squirm away, pushing desperately with his heels, but the man took him by the throat, holding him down; three white-hot fingers descended toward his face. He could already feel his cheeks and chin prickling anxiously, full of pins and needles.

He stared up at Ap An's hand, unable to make a sound. His own scream filled his head instead—his brain was deadened by an endless, wordless shriek of horror.

"Yo, dude. Wait up," Lanois said.

Chandler turned to see the singer hurrying to catch up to him on the concourse.

"Where you going now?" Lanois asked.

"Back home," Chandler said mildly, trying not to sound impatient. He still had his bag slung over one shoulder; he was anxious to get to the airport lockers and pick up his new weapon, and then there were phone calls to make. "Why do you ask?"

Lanois stopped, head bent, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I dunno.

Just curious, I guess." He looked up a little shyly. "So, you still working for me, or what?"

Chandler laughed. "Naw. Paul gave me my walking papers back in London. He was pissed that I let you get high before the show."

Lanois looked down at the ground. "Wasn't exactly your fault," he mumbled.

"Technically, no," Chandler agreed. "But I let myself get distracted, and I shouldn't have. I've been trying to call a friend of mine for a few days, and she hasn't been answering her phone."

"Ah." Lanois swallowed, looking pained. "Sorry about that."

Chandler shrugged. "Well, it's not like I could argue with him, when he started screaming it was all my fault." He readjusted the bag on his shoulder, grinning. "Imagine how he'd feel if he knew I started you back on the stuff."

"Saved my fucking life," Lanois gritted. "Goddamn . . . everyone is so stupid."

"Yeah, well . . . anytime, kid." He was still smiling. "'Course, I didn't think you sounded any worse than usual in London. Better, maybe."

Lanois rolled his eyes. "Jesus—I must have been sucking hard, then."

"Seriously," Chandler said. "You can obviously do your thing while you're high. If you can learn to keep your shit together, there's no reason you can't go on with your life."

Lanois looked up at him with sad eyes. "Yeah . . . well, the problem is that my stomach isn't the only thing that goes numb, when I get high." He looked away, thoughtful. "When I'm floating around up there, I just don't give a shit. About anything—even Tracy and Cathy and stuff." He sighed. "It gets too damn attractive after a while . . . not giving a shit, I mean."

Chandler nodded. "I heard that."

"Usually, when I want to just cut loose, I think, 'No . . . that would be real bad.' When I'm high, I start thinking, 'Yeah, sure . . . why not?'" His eyes were dark and serious. "If you see what I'm saying."

"Maybe that's reason enough to be worried," Chandler allowed. "What're you going to do about it?"

"I don't know," Lanois said. "But I was hoping you'd stay in touch, or something." He cast about awkwardly. "We're going to work on a new set on Monday, over at my house. If you're not busy—y'know, like have something else to do—maybe you could be there."

"I will be, if you want me to." Chandler put out a hand for a shake. "Just tell Bukowski that you hired me or something, so I don't have to listen to his crap."

Lanois looked down at the open palm for a second, surprised, and then put out his own hand and clasped it, once. "I didn't think you did the

whole 'shaking hands' thing," he observed lightly.

"I don't do it with people I don't respect," Chandler said. "And that's about nine-tenths of the human race."

Lanois blushed. "Yeah, well, cool. Me too." He took out an airplane napkin out of his pocket and handed it to Chandler. "That's my address and my phone number," he said. "Come on over around two and we'll have a beer or something."

"Take care of yourself, kid," Chandler said. "I'll be in touch."

When the terrible fingers stopped, inches from his eyes, he couldn't even feel relief. They quivered for a moment, and then curled, the light fading from the blunt fingertips. As they fell away, clearing his field of vision, he saw Ap An—the Tcho-Tcho commander's head was thrown back. A dark, dirty fist was pressed tight against the side of his neck, just under the jaw.

The fist was wrapped around the hilt of a long knife. As Marlowe watched, the blade of that knife was twisted to one side and emerged from an irreparable three-cornered breach in the cannibal's carotid artery.

Ap An fell to one side, clapping his hand to a surreal jet of black blood. Marlowe almost laughed to see Roop standing there, holding the dripping knife.

The sergeant nodded down at Marlowe politely, wiping the blade on his thigh. "Sorry we're late!" he shouted, casually, over the roar of fire and the occasional bark of bullets.

The phone rang once. "This is Giles."

"Giles," he said. "Where the hell is she?"

"Raymond." There was a wealth of dismay and relief in the voice. "Jesus, I've been waiting for you to call for days."

"Where's Polly, Giles? She doesn't answer her phone."

"She's in the hospital," Giles said. The sound of strain and fear was still sharp in his voice. "I—I was scared. She wouldn't stop . . ."

The hairs on the back of Chandler's neck bristled. "She wouldn't stop what, man?" he demanded. "What have you fucking done?"

Giles dropped his voice. "Nothing," he said—so low that Chandler could barely hear him. "I didn't do anything—I didn't know what the hell to do. I was too bloody freaked. I just . . ."

"Just. What," Chandler gritted. "You just what, Giles."

"I just took the gun away from her when it was empty." Giles said bleakly. "When she was trying to re-load it." He took a deep breath.

"Oh, god." Chandler slumped back against the wall. "What happened? Who did she shoot? Where is she?"

"She tried to kill herself, Ray." Whether the sound on the other end of

the line was a horrified laugh or a choked-off gasp was impossible to say. "She was pretty thorough about it."

"No."

Giles let the silence hang on that denial for several seconds, and then went on. "She's at Harborview," Giles said. "I didn't know where else to take her. She was bleeding a lot at first, I didn't know that it would stop so soon . . ."

"I'm going to be there," Chandler said. He looked at his watch. "In twenty minutes."

"Yeah, okay . . . good," Giles said. "It's . . ." He hesitated, as if he would like to say something else, but caution took over. "Third floor."

His lips were moving, he knew, but there was not enough air in him to make a sound.

He's not dead, Marlowe was trying to say. Finish him . . . finish it.

He turned his head, looking for Ap An. The Burmese was lying on his side, blood pulsing out from between his weakening fingers, his eyes still open and staring. Marlowe's body tightened in protest as Ap An smiled at him feebly. Deliberately, the cannibal let go of his neck, his life slopping out messily over his chest, and used the last of his unnatural strength to make a back-handed sweep with one arm.

The earth exploded all around them. Marlowe tumbled end over end, surrounded by a chaotic maelstrom of burning tinder and flying bodies; everything flew as if a gigantic arm had slapped all the playing pieces from a chessboard.

The end of the game. Everybody loses.

He was running when he came around the corner. Giles stood at the end of the hall, silhouetted against the windows with his hands in the pockets of his black trenchcoat.

Neither one of them said a word as Chandler covered the last fifty feet of hall. He took Giles by the shoulders and squeezed them once, hard; the fat man regarded him with eyes full of dark misery. If he had eaten, slept, or shaved in the past week, there was no sign of it.

It had never occurred to him, until this moment, that Giles might have feelings for Polly too. He never thought much about Giles at all—he was a useful tool, like many other men. He had skills. Could follow orders. Had a tendency to tell bad jokes. Looking at him now, realizing that he had not left her alone for long enough to scrape the graying stubble off his chin or even sleep in a hospital bed nearby, Chandler actually felt something for the man. For the first time, it was as if he were looking at a brother.

"She's awake," Giles said. He coughed into his fist. "She asked me to,

uh . . . keep an eye out for you."

Chandler let go of Giles' shoulders. "Tell her I'm here. I'll stay . . . as long as she wants me to."

"Tell her yourself," Giles said shakily. He took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. Putting a filter between his lips, he added, "I've heard enough about you lately, thanks."

Chandler swallowed, trying to drive the strangling lump back down his throat. The silence was broken by the sound of Giles striking up a lighter and inhaling sharply.

"I didn't think you smoked, Giles."

"I quit fifteen years ago." He pointed to the door. "She's in there."

Chandler faced the door and let himself into a high-ceilinged room with pale green walls. The central feature was the bed, stark and white; Polly lay in the middle of it, a tiny sliver of woman almost lost amidst the piled hospital linens.

"Raymond," she said softly.

He couldn't speak. Someone had drawn a sheet up over her chest, to cover the restraints that held her wrists to the bed; her clenched hands worked restlessly and involuntarily as she lay there, the only part of her body which still moved. There were bandages wrapped around the top of her head and the right side of her face, covering her forehead, her eye, her jaw.

It took him some time to realize that he wasn't breathing. When he finally let his mouth open, he gasped for air like a drowning man—that was as close to a sob as he could come. "God," he said quietly, shaken. "Some people will do anything to get out of a date."

Her belly tried to jump with laughter, but instead the tremor triggered some kind of convulsion; she turned her head to one side, grimacing painfully, until she managed to cough something up. "Oh," she moaned softly, thrusting out her tongue delicately. Her voice was thready and faint. "Nngah. Don't . . . don't make me laugh . . . Raymond . . ."

He went to her, sitting down on the edge of her bed beside her knees. "All right, Polly. No more jokes," he said tenderly.

"Ack," she croaked. "There are some bodily fluids that you're never supposed to taste."

He smiled painfully. "Hey—that promise has to work both ways, woman." He put out a hand, almost accidentally, and let his fingertips brush her restless hand beneath the sheet. The fist went still, but she didn't pull away. "Giles said you asked about me."

"I translated your book," she said. Her single blue eye regarded him seriously.

"Book?" It took him a few seconds to realize what she was talking

about. Before he knew what he was doing, he had withdrawn his hand—and although he instantly regretted it, he couldn't think of any good excuse to reach out again.

Abandoned, her hand resumed its restless motion . . . straining, flexing tirelessly against the leather wrist cuff.

"You wanted to tell me about the book?"

"It's called *The King in Yellow*. A French play—people who haven't read it think it's eighteenth century, but this version is probably from the Renaissance."

He made a wry face. "Renaissance play? Shit."

"It has to do with the court intrigues of a city called Carcosa. The King in Yellow is the king of that city, but . . . he's more than a king. He's a god, a patron of the arts . . . a thing swimming in a lake . . ."

She had begun trembling violently, and Chandler cut her off. "It's okay. I can read it for myself—you made a translation. Doesn't sound promising, but maybe . . ."

She turned her face away and looked straight up at the ceiling. "I burned it, Ray."

"No." He stood up abruptly; he couldn't have been more surprised if she had slapped him across the face. "You wouldn't."

"Not normally," she said, addressing no one. "I wouldn't normally shoot myself, either." She turned her face further away from him. Her bandaged cheek rested on the pillow; he could only see her closed eye and the corner of her pale mouth, folded down unhappily. "I hope you understand that."

"So . . . what, exactly . . . why, exactly?" Chandler asked slowly, his voice heavy with disbelief.

She took a deep breath. "I burned it and I burned my translation as well. Then I tried to destroy myself . . . but as you can see, that didn't work out as well."

His body had begun to shake, and his voice shook as well. "Why? What the hell would you do that for, Polly?"

She turned back to face him. Her one eye glittered. "It's a bad book. Those things should never have been written down; there are some things that no one needs to know."

"That's not really what I was asking," he said impatiently. "But sure—let's go there." He turned away, struggling to master himself—to be reasonable. "You've read plenty of books that were just as bad," he said at last. "What about that thing we found in New York? It was bound with human skin—that mark on the cover was a concentration camp number. I checked." He snorted. "I mean, you're Jewish—how fucking horrible was that?"

"Pretty horrible," she agreed quietly behind him. "And the things inside it were worse. But your little book made that one look like Dick and Jane."

"God-damn you," he said. Frustration and anger coiled in him like a nest of snakes; he couldn't stand to look at her. "I *trusted* you. I held that book for twenty-four years."

She didn't answer for a long moment. "I'm . . . not very strong, Ray," she said at last. "Maybe you better go."

"Aw, Jesus!" he said, half shouting now. "Fuck!" He slammed the wire screen over her window with both open palms, just for the satisfaction of the violence and the noise. Gripping the screen with hooked fingers, he turned his head back over his right shoulder. "What have you done to me, woman?"

"Nothing," she said unevenly. "I . . . didn't want you to read it."

He let go and turned back to her with a sarcastic smile, feeling the cold flow through him. "Well, looks like you saw to that. Enlighten me, by all fucking means. What else did the book say, before you burned it?"

"It said that Christopher Lanois' music is a poison," she said simply. "A beauty which corrupts the soul." She closed her eyes, breathing in slowly. "All art is inherently dangerous. It opens us to realms beyond our understanding. It can serve as a window—but we shouldn't always see what lies beyond."

"What?"

"New planes of existence," she said, her voice laced with fatigue and desolation. "Dark places where the human spirit cannot survive. An atmosphere suffused with tainted gas, like carbon monoxide—first euphoria, then madness, then death." She took another breath. "A lake filled with mercury—swim in it, and the poison leaches in through every pore . . ."

A creeping shiver passed over his skin. "Stop it."

She trembled, half-choking. "Black city, ruled by the gods of insanity . . ."

"And what am I supposed to do about it?" he asked, trying to cut her off. The sound of her voice was all wrong; it was erosive, stealing his anger out from under him like flowing water thinning a sheath of river ice. He had a powerful sense that if she went on, he'd be left with nothing to stand on at all—he'd fall through into the cold dark. "What about the kid?"

"Crush him, the way you would any poisonous thing," she said. Her voice was sharp again, clear—but scalpel cold. "Like a snake, an insect."

"No."

Her eye opened wide with surprise. "What?"

"I said no," Chandler said simply.

"You must. *Fronti nulla fides*—he only looks human. He's as deadly as a black widow in a baby's crib."

"Sorry, hon," he said. "I've just spent four weeks with him. He's as human as the next punk-ass kid. Not the Dalai Lama, maybe, but I've met worse. And I can't just shut him off like a light switch."

"You have to!" she said urgently. "He has the ear of the King! *Ecce signum*—Lanois publishes His mark for all to see!"

She was struggling now, wrestling feebly against her bonds and blankets, trying to raise her shoulders, her legs; Chandler frowned down on her, disturbed by the sight.

"Polly," he said uncertainly. "I think you'd better calm down."

"*Ecrasez l'infame!*" she cried aloud. Her voice was loud—shockingly loud, hoarse and desperate. "Whether he kills by *lapsus linguae* or *laus deo* makes no difference, Raymond! He kills!"

"I—I don't think it's that simple," he said. "You didn't used to either . . ."

He backed away slowly, wide-eyed, as she began thrashing in earnest. Tiny, spreading red stains had begun to appear on her pristine bandages—one in the socket of her left eye, one over her breast, another on the side of her neck. He found himself staring at her, wondering how she could have shot herself in those places—the bullets should have pierced heart, spine, brain . . .

"He will raise the King!" she shrieked. "*Nolens volens, ore rotendo, furor canti, furor loquendi, furor poeticus!*"

The door burst open and Giles was standing there, holding his .38 in one hand. "What the fuck is going on?" he said.

"*lā shibboleth!*" Polly roared. Her voice no longer sounded like a woman's at all. "*Ashtura f'taghni!*"

One of her wrist restraints suddenly gave way; the chain that held it to the side of the bed whined and then parted with a snap. She lunged up into a sitting position, thrusting out her hand, the shattered link still hanging from the leather cuff—reaching for him with all her strength. "Raymond!"

Chandler danced backward, then bolted past Giles and rushed out into the hall. "Jesus!"

"Raymond!" she screamed after him, straining. The scream wound down into loud, moaning sobs as he was lost from sight, and then slowly built up again as she summoned the strength to chase him with her voice. "*Respice finem!*"

The nurses went past him on the run, pushing a crash cart through the door he'd left open. Chandler turned and put his forehead against the wall, eyes closed—one arm bent up over his forehead, the other pounding into the cinderblocks repeatedly as she called his name, over and over.

Giles took him by one shoulder and spun him around. Before he could say a word, the muzzle of the .38 was digging into his cheek. "You bastard,"

Giles said. "If you've made her worse, I swear . . ."

Chandler reacted without thought; he had Giles by the wrist and his burly arm bent almost on the verge of breaking, hyper-extended in a way that Nature never intended, in the blink of an eye. "You'll what?" he gritted; his chest was still heaving with unshed tears. He reached around to remove the pistol from the FBI agent's nerveless fingers, snarling. "Don't you point your fucking toys at me."

Giles spun, taking the pressure off his arm, and came back with everything he had. It was just a punch, but there was passion behind it; Chandler staggered back and the gun slipped away from him, hitting the floor with a dull clunk.

Giles squatted and scooped up his weapon, bald spot gleaming, and straightened with a fat man's dignity. His eyes were slitted with murderous hate. "I'll see you dead—that's what," he said. His lips peeled back into a contemptuous sneer. "Don't ever lay your hands on me, you fucking reptile."

Chandler leaned against the wall, wiping his mouth; looking down, he saw blood on the back of his hand. He passed his tongue between his lips and teeth, feeling for the place where the canine had pierced through, and looked up at Giles with a bitter smile. Oddly enough, he was grateful; being attacked had hit the switch inside, deadened the pain.

Somewhere in the room across the way, Polly's scream was cut off abruptly as someone gave her an injection—after a moment, her quiet hooting tears continued.

"Goddamn it," Giles said brokenly. "She was doing better."

"She burned my book," Chandler explained, his voice low and mechanical. "I can't resolve any of this without it."

"She didn't burn anything," Giles said. "She had no time." He looked at Chandler disgustedly. "Your stupid fucking book is still sitting on her goddamn desk in the goddamn office, right where she left it."

Chandler gaped. "But why would she—?"

"Because she didn't want you to read it, you stupid fuck. She thought it would hurt you." Giles turned away. "She begged me to go burn it a hundred times, before you could get to it, but I wouldn't leave her."

"But . . ." He cast about desperately, reaching for a handhold, but there was none.

"Go get it," Giles said. His voice was flat and full of loathing. "Read it cover to cover. I hope it does everything to you that it did to her, and worse. I hope it fucking kills you."

"Oh . . . shit." He looked towards the door of the hospital room and turned his head up toward the ceiling, closing his eyes. "Maybe I should go back in there."

"Maybe not," Giles said acidly. "Here's a better idea: why don't you get the fuck out of my sight?" His voice was deceptively friendly. He kept his back turned, bending his head to light another cigarette. "Because if I see you take one step toward that door, we're going to find out if you're as bulletproof as she is."

Chandler sighed. "All right. But I'm going to need you later. This isn't over."

"It is for her," Giles said firmly. "Don't even think of coming near her again."

It was dark, and quiet, and the darkness pulsed like a heart.

Marlowe remained where he had fallen, tossed up against the wall like an abandoned rag doll. Dimly he could make out his own legs, stretched before him on the ground. Between his splayed feet, the rest of the compound was lit only by a thousand flickering fragments of wood, burning alone in the dust; this was all that remained of the great bonfire which had flooded the area with its light.

Among the embers, bodies crawled weakly about, generically human; he could more hear than see them, and it was no longer possible to tell Burmese from Laotian or American. The darkness above pulsed . . . pulsed . . . pulsed . . . the sound was growing louder, as if the heart of the night were descending from above.

Out in the dark, something whistled through the air and snapped with a thunderous report, like the crack of a gigantic whip. A human scream shot up into the air like a bottle rocket on a hot June night, cut off at its end by a clash and a crunch.

Pulse. Pulse. Pulse. Rhythmic gusts of hot, stinking wind swept past his body, carrying the smell of the beast.

Marlowe raised his eyes to the sky above, straining to see the thing that beat its groaning, leathery wings in the darkness. Ap An's guest had finally arrived, but he couldn't see it; there was only a coiling, pulsing Something that writhed impossibly in limbo, visible only because its serpentine bulk blotted out the stars.

Cole screamed and opened fire with the machine gun from the tower. In the hot lightning flash of the tracers, Marlowe had a clearer vision of the thing, a winged, armor-plated black worm squirming angrily in the heavy air. The dark scales glittered, turning a storm of bullets, and he had a brief glimpse of great goggling black eyes and gaping jaw full of red swords as the head turned, screaming its defiance and rage against Cole, the lead, and the light; then that head moved faster than the eye could see.

The tower simply exploded under the impact, shattered wood flying in every direction. Overhead, three savage crunching snaps, each followed

by a light rain of debris, and Cole was gone as if he had never been.

Someone cried out in fear, and the whip struck again, the scream sounding for a split second as it shot up into the night. Bodies still crawled feebly amid the flaming wreckage; the whip lashed out unerringly three times in the space of as many seconds, plucking them up like grubs from an overturned log, and dropping the bitten-off halves from forty feet above.

He woke up to the mechanical jangling of his cell phone, singing off somewhere in the night-time semi-dark, and raised his head groggily from the slick pillow. His body was numb and leaden, the whole bag of his skin filled with warm, heavy, inert water; he turned his head, trying to part his gummed-shut eyelids, and the weight at the base of his skull pulled him over onto his side.

He rolled, naked chest and groin and thighs pulling away from the bare skin of another human being, and wound up on his back. Turning his head, he realized that he had just raised his ear from the pooled breast of a sleeping woman, and broken a bond of slippery sweat between their two bodies. She still slept, sprawled on her back with one of her slack thighs caught between his. The phone jangled on, somewhere impossibly far away and difficult to get to, and he sighed loudly.

With a groan he sat up, belly heaving to hoist him upright. He looked down into the face of his bedmate as he thrust his arm under her pillow and recovered his .44, trying to remember who she was, or what her voice had sounded like earlier that night, all the usual little games . . . a name, a phrase, an incoherent yelp as he thrust deeply into her, perhaps . . . but there was nothing. She was a mystery, silent and nameless as the Sphinx. The best he could do was pass his tongue over his lips and pick up the taste of her—that, and the way she looked now, were all he'd ever know.

Rubbing his forehead with the back of his gun hand, he stood and picked up his jacket; the cell phone was still in his pocket. It took some last-minute fumbling to unfold the wedge of plastic and get it to his ear, but he finally managed it.

"A-yuh."

"Ray. This is Giles. What took you so long to answer the phone?"

"Hello, Giles. Uuuhhr . . . what's happening?"

"All hell is breaking loose up here. I've been sitting out in the van all night, and I'm seriously wondering if we should call the cops. Tracy's making a ruckus with those junkie friends of hers, and I think she might have . . . done something to the younger girl."

"Where's Lanois?"

"He's freaking out. I think he's got a gun."

"A gun?" He shook his head, trying to clear away the fog. "Who the hell would give that kid a gun?"

"You haven't been in his house; he's got quite a collection. Pistols, rifles, shotguns—you name it. I was tempted to saw all the firing pins out of 'em when I was planting the taps." In the background, he could hear the faint voices—Tracy screaming, Chris shouting back, things breaking. Giles must have the headphones around his neck. "Look, this has been getting worse and worse. Are you going to get over here, or what?"

Chandler shook off some of the heaviness. "Yeah. Okay. On my way."

"Do that. I don't like having my ass hanging out in the wind. If you don't get here in time, I will go in—I can't just sit here anymore."

Giles hung up on him and Chandler went around the room in a baby elephant's walk, bent over at the waist searching for his clothes. It was such a familiar ritual—climbing into his clothes dead drunk, pocketing all his gear—that he found himself in the end with the gun drawn, and pointed at the chest of the woman asleep on the bed.

"Oh . . . that's right," he said out loud. He eased his finger off the trigger, amused at himself. "I don't have to kill you." The gun went away; he used his right hand to smooth the ragged banner of black hair that swept across her pillow. "I'm glad."

He left her sleeping, his kisses drying on her lips, and went out into the rain.

Now the silence was overpowering, broken only by the obscene stroke of wings, and the occasional crackle of the wood that still dared to burn. No one moved; no one made a sound in camp. Movement and sound were instant death.

Sudden swift footsteps skipped across the ground, off to his left. The whip cracked thunderously, slamming into the hard earth, but the shape that darted in the darkness leaped ahead of it and soared, catlike, against the field of burning embers.

The outraged, whistling squawk that followed would have been comical, had it not come from a throat so huge. Again the light footsteps sounded; the agile shadow leaped earlier this time, sailing neatly away as the tail slashed down—then rolled, sprang up, and went running again at full speed. The scream from above was terrifying, full of inhuman fury, and the tail came hurtling down again like black lightning, but it was too late—the last two steps took Roop into the open door of an equipment shed.

Out on the dark street, he didn't bother trying to find the car that actually matched the keys in his pocket; he just wrapped his jacket around his fist

and punched through the front window of an Audi parked behind the building. The fine art of drunk driving had not deserted him; he arrived on the manicured streets of Magnolia in less than fifteen minutes.

The van was parked in an alley. Giles was no longer in it. Chandler stood in the rain, cold water pounding his hair flat and crawling over his scalp, and tried numbly to make sense of it. At last he turned and jogged heavily up to Lanois' house.

The gate was locked; Giles had taken the small wrought-iron door beside it and left it open. The wires still hung from its electronic lock, sizzling and snapping occasionally in the downpour.

There were no cars about at this time of the night. Bright jewels dripped from the trees, shimmering orange with sodium light, and rivers rushed down the gutters. He walked through a dark sheet of water as he went up the paved drive toward the house, a broad stream flowing down an unnaturally smooth and featureless bed. About halfway to the house, there was a stone in that stream; the rainwater broke around it, leaving a little white-cornered ripple.

He squatted and picked it up, keeping one eye on the trees. It was a .38. Rainwater ran out of the barrel, and he stood up slowly, trying to see some other sign of a struggle. Eventually he found it beside the road: the two deep troughs that a man's heels made in the mud as his heavy body was dragged across the ground. He followed the wide trail of flattened grass, clearly visible in the overgrown field, and found the guard dog crouched over the body in the shelter of the wall.

The animal wasn't well trained. It looked up at him, the crescent of seven pale eyes shimmering with orange light, raising a muzzle festooned with blood and gore, and gave him a low, warning snarl. The speed that had taken Giles down before he could fire a shot was only for the first spring—now that it had filled its belly, it thought only of protecting its kill until it could eat again. It wanted him to go away.

As he watched, it bent its semi-transparent neck again and took another mouthful from the organ cavity, shearing through flesh and gristle with the power of a broad, flat saurian jaw. It never turned away its eyes.

Distorted ghosts twisted along the low, reptilian flanks and down the long tail—images flashing with the pastel haze of memory. The contents of a human mind had been smeared over this beast, playing out over its body like home movies on a warped old screen. Someone's mother smiled on that reflecting skin; someone's father bent and offered his arms. A dozen little heads in pointed hats bent over the flaming candles on a birthday cake.

Chandler smiled as the beast continued feeding. "Nice doggy," he said reassuringly, raising the .44.



The beast was mad, lashing furiously at the corrugated steel roof with both jaws and tail. Its wings beat wildly above; the blasts of putrid wind were strong enough to crush Marlowe back against the log wall behind him.

Something in the shed ignited with a hiss, and cherry-red light spilled out through every crevice. Roop stood silhouetted against the half-crumpled doorway for a moment, holding the flare in one hand; then the worm struck with its supple tail, snatching him up.

It raised him clumsily toward its mouth, blinded by the light, and made as if to bite him. Marlowe could see the dreadful little head come to bear, long spines flaring from its rubbery lips and brow ridges, lid after nictitating lid sliding across the bulging eyes as it tried to shut out the flare's painful brightness. Roop thrashed wildly, avoiding the clashing teeth once, twice, again—then screamed aloud as the jaws snapped shut with his left arm between them, snipping it off at the shoulder.

The shed below them huffed and detonated abruptly, sending up a gout of yellow-white fire. Marlowe smiled, his face bathed in the light, the heat, the wind of it; distantly he realized that Roop had set a second flare beside a spreading pool of spilled gasoline, and now the barrel had gone up.

The beast screamed, light and fire licking along its black, plated side, and its entire body unwound in one great convulsion. For a moment it curled itself up in a ball in mid-air, trying to hide its head in the middle of itself like a startled snake. Then it fled. The air boomed with one last whip-crack as it hurled itself upward at impossible speed into the night sky; the last inky speck of its being was gone before Roop hit the ground.

Lanois woke up sometime on the second day, stirring on the floor. Chandler put down the bottle and picked up the gun, trying to remember whether it was loaded.

"Morning," he rasped. With his free hand, he put a cigarette between his lips.

"Guh," Lanois said. He tried to lift his head, gasping at the pain in his head; the bruise on his temple was still blue. "Where?"

"My place," Chandler said. He picked up a second match, trying to light it with his shaking left hand; it snapped in half between his fingers. "Yours was . . . crowded." He took the last match out of the box carefully. "Tracy's friends."

Lanois' shoulder shook as he lay on the cold floor; whether that shaking was laughter or tears was impossible to tell.

"I have something for you to read," Chandler said. "Shouldn't be too hard for a smart kid like you." The third match popped alight at last and he put it to the end of his bent cigarette awkwardly. "Even I managed it, in a couple of days."

Lanois got up on his elbow, opening his dishwater-gray eyes blearily. "Why?"

"Should explain a few things," Chandler said hoarsely. "Once you're all finished, you and I can decide what to do."

From behind him there came a low, sibilant whispering. Chandler didn't turn, but he nodded in acknowledgement of Zann's voice, filling his lungs with smoke to try and kill the smell. "And you too, Erich," he said. "All of us."

He opened his eyes, and saw the old man sitting beside him. He had been eating for some time, he realized, mumbling the food and swallowing half-conscious. Now, coming fully awake, he almost choked. He coughed up a few grains of rice, and almost yelled aloud as the contraction of muscle in his abdomen opened up a shocking new world of hurt.

The old man waited, patiently, holding the dark red sliver between his chopsticks until Marlowe was breathing again, however raggedly. Then he put the morsel to the white man's lips, nodding slightly to indicate that he should open his mouth. Eyes still watering, weak and nauseous with pain, Marlowe let his lips part and accepted food.

It was meat, slippery and hot; the mush in the old man's bowl was pink with its juices. Marlowe compressed it between his teeth and let the blood drain into his mouth, swallowing with as little muscular effort as possible. He was a mass of agony from the neck to the navel; his heart still ached with every slow, unwilling beat, and he held each breath as long as possible out of sheer dread for the suffering it would cause him.

It was tough, spongy tissue which he couldn't properly chew—still raw, touched by fire only long enough to make it hotter than the inside of his mouth. He coaxed the sliver down his throat with his tongue and opened his mouth again, like a bird, welcoming the distraction.

The old man smiled and placed another sliver of the meat on his tongue. "We have all had a taste of him," he said. "But we saved his heart for you, and the other American."

Marlowe closed his eyes, letting the rim of the bowl rest against his lips. Warm, thick congee spilled down his throat, and eventually there was tea as well, bitter and full of sweet, numbing opium.

By the time he was fully awake again, he was in a private hospital in Rangoon.



Lanois turned the last page over and stood up from the desk at last, exhausted. "Okay," he said. "Gimme a cigarette now."

Chandler stood up and staggered across the room, using one hand on the wall to keep himself upright. He pulled the kid's cigarettes out of his pocket and handed them over awkwardly.

"Interesting," Lanois said mildly. "I've never read it before. But I can tell that Jim has." He picked up the book on the table and showed Marlowe the crumbling gold leaf symbol, its outline stamped into the leather. "That must be where he got the design for the album cover."

"I wondered." Slowly and painfully, Chandler lowered himself back into his chair.

"You were right. A lot of things make sense now." Lanois stretched painfully, twisting his neck from side to side. "A lot of other things still don't." He plucked a cigarette out of his pack. "I had a hard time following all that stuff about Cassilda and them."

"Yeah."

Lanois lit up thoughtfully. "I bet a lot of people have . . . a bad reaction to that." He inhaled sharply. "Reading the play, I mean."

"Polly did," Chandler said. "Very bad." He wheezed. "I guess I didn't do too well either." He lifted the bottle on the table beside him and tilted back another long swallow, sucking back a hot numbing liquid which he could no longer taste—it could have been formaldehyde just as easily as whiskey.

"Yeah. Obviously." Lanois chuckled. "You're a fucking mess. It's strange . . . I feel better."

"No kidding," Chandler muttered hoarsely. "That's strange, all right."

"Did you ever seriously wonder if you were insane?" Lanois asked. "Like, if you were having paranoid delusions?"

"Sure," Chandler said. "More often than most people, I bet."

"Well, fuck, put yourself in my position," Lanois said. He raised the book again and shook it casually. "This shit has been in my head since I was eight. How did you think that felt?" He tossed the book down. "I'm just fucking relieved. It's all so simple."

"Not so far as I can tell."

Lanois smiled, a pure angelic smile of happiness. "Sure it is. All I have to do is kill myself."

Chandler shrugged. "I don't see how that changes . . . the basic situation."

"I can't do anything about the basic situation," Lanois said reasonably. "I don't give a fuck about the basic situation, if it comes right down to it. Maybe I would if I weren't so fucking high, but hey—it wasn't easy reading."

Chandler let the alcohol spread its heat through his aching chest. "Ayuh. It wasn't."

"Christ," Lanois said. He laughed again. "And all that time, Erich was trying to warn me." He shook his head. "No wonder I was so scared of him."

"What are you going to do?" Chandler asked.

"I'm going to go back home," Lanois said. "Write a note. I've already been writing it in my head; pretty much know what I want to say."

"Okay."

Lanois cleared his throat. "Should have done it years ago. Shit, I'm a time bomb." He frowned. "Rock and roll is perfect—huge audiences, and everyone is really into it. Must be like a fucking all-you-can-eat buffet to the King in Yellow." He shook his head. "To be honest, I'm surprised that people haven't died already."

"They have," Chandler said. "Just not anywhere near you." He closed his eyes. "That Lambert girl died when you were on stage in the Midwest. And the end of the runaway song is deadly. It burns people to a crisp if the conditions are right." He pointed to the desk. "You can open up my second drawer and take a look at the file, if you want. We've got nine confirmed cases."

Lanois turned pale. "Jesus."

"Yeah. Not good."

"How do you know about all this shit?" Lanois asked. "What is the deal with you?"

"I'm from the other side," Chandler said. "To the extent that there is one."

"No shit." Lanois grinned. "So you weren't kidding. About that 'reverse bodyguard' thing." He nodded his head, smoking. "Well, that's cool."

The silence between them grew and ripened for almost a minute; there was no sound in the room but the rattle and hiss of Zann's breathing, as he crouched in the corner of the room.

"So, how come you didn't just kill me?" Lanois asked. "I bet you could have gotten away with it."

"Sure," Chandler said. "But I couldn't say for sure it would help anything. I try not to do that sort of thing nowadays. Not unless it's going to make things better."

"I wish you fucking had," Lanois said bitterly. "Would have made things easier on me."

"What about your daughter?"

Lanois turned to him, and for the first time it didn't occur to Chandler that he was looking at a kid; the face staring back at him was a man's,

without any question. "Did you read that stuff about the Promise?" he asked softly. "Like what happens if I make the Promise, and die before He collects?"

"Maybe I missed it," Chandler allowed. "I was probably drunk by then."

"If I die before I change—into something like Erich is now—the debt falls on my closest living relative," Lanois said. His eyes were hard and calm. "Cathy."

"You don't have to make that Promise," Chandler said. "I know that much."

Lanois laughed, loud and bitterly. "You have more faith in me than I do," he said. "I'm thinking I'd get ripped one night, and pretty much be ready to say yes to anything." He dropped his cigarette and ground it out under his sneaker. "But sure, let's go there. The worst-case scenario doesn't happen. I hold out for a lifetime. Seriously—what do I have to offer?"

"I guess I don't follow you," Chandler said. "Seems like you love the kid." He tilted back the bottle quickly. "No offense, but Tracy is into some shit . . ."

Lanois shuddered. "She can't keep Cathy anymore." He put his arms around himself for comfort. "I don't want Cathy growing up around that."

Chandler gave him a skeptical look. "You think there's any chance of her growing up at all, around that woman?"

"Don't be fucking stupid," Lanois said. "Maybe Tracy has her own promises to deal with, but that doesn't mean she doesn't love her baby," Lanois said. "It's just that she'll do anything—has done more than most people ever dream of—to get what she wants." He leaned forward. "But whatever you may think of her—even if she raises Cathy to be a serial killer—at least she won't pass along a sickness like mine. She can't." He sighed. "Aw . . . fuck. I'm not a great guy, see."

Chandler chuckled. "No kidding."

"Seriously. The only thing I've ever had that was worth shit, to me or anyone else, was my talent—and if I can't use it, there's no fucking point."

"But Tracy," Chandler said urgently, trying to argue; a horror which he had no name for was beating against the back of his teeth. He thought of the junkie girl staring up at the ceiling, the charred, star-shaped hole blown out through the top of her empty skull. "She—"

"I know about all that," Lanois said, cutting him off. "I know what she is . . . what she does. And I don't care." He hunched over. "She hungers. That's her big sin. And I love her for that. She might be the most human being I've ever met." He grinned. "We're not pretty creatures, you know—we're fucking cannibal apes. Sometimes we can be beautiful, but mostly

we're ugly as hell. Like Tracy." He took out another cigarette.

Chandler laughed. "You actually think she's human?" he said dubiously.

"Sure she is," Lanois replied. "She's got all the parts. Love and hate. Maybe more hate than love in the end—but fuck, at least she's got something going on, at least she gives a shit. She's a better person than I am, when it comes right down to it—I just don't care, most of the time." He pushed the hair back out of his eyes wearily. "I don't want Cathy to catch this from me." He closed his eyes and rubbed his face with open hands, cigarette poking out between two fingers. "I don't want her to catch Tracy's bugs either, don't get me wrong—but if it came right down to it, I'd rather she had some appetite for living."

"Maybe you're right." Chandler allowed, turning his face away. *I can deal with your wife later.* He looked around, his own cigarette hanging off his lip. "I can't find my matches," he said sadly.

The scratch of the head on a rough surface sounded, and a burning match floated before him. Erich Zann was holding it, between the rough white lips of a mouth at the tip of his finger.

"Thanks," Chandler said lightly.

"Give me a ride back to the house," Lanois said. "I need someone to help me with the gun. I don't want to fuck it up and be a vegetable."

Chandler's chest hitched as he drew the flame from Zann's match. "Sure," he said, coughing. "Hell, I'm good for something."

"I'm here to see Sergeant Emmett Roop?" he said. "I believe he's in this wing."

The nurse raised an eyebrow, looking him over. "Down the hall," she said at last. "Room 218."

Marlowe followed the blue corridor around the corner. The room he was looking for was at the end of the hall.

His first impression was simply that it couldn't be the same man; surely it was impossible for the soldier he remembered to dwindle to such a size. The man in the bed didn't weigh an ounce over 130 pounds, although he was still over six feet tall. He was nothing but skin and bones, his face as white and full of dark shadows as a skull.

Roop looked up at him with eyes that blazed maniac blue. "Well now," he said. "If it isn't Captain College Boy, Champion a' Justice."

Marlowe looked down at the game of Solitaire on Roop's lap desk, still only half-played. "Red eight goes on the black nine," he said mildly.

Roop looked down, grinning. "Damn medication." He swept up the cards with one hand and slapped the whole messy stack down on the bedside table. The empty left sleeve of his hospital gown hung loose beside him; he saw Marlowe looking at it as he straightened up, and turned his

head to glance at it.

"I keep waiting for it to itch," Roop said. "Never does." He pointed his chin at Marlowe. "How's your chest?"

"Only hurts when I laugh," Marlowe said.

Roop chuckled. "Hell, I'm too goddamn doped up to hurt."

"Most of the time, I am too." Marlowe hesitated awkwardly. "Not today."

"I got something for you," Roop said. "I got it off one of them Jojos. Over there in that foot locker."

Marlowe went over to the chest and opened it; there were only a few things inside. The biggest by far was a leather-bound book. The symbol on the cover made him put a protective hand to his chest, with a sickening surge of pain. He took it out reluctantly.

"I figured you might be interested," Roop said apologetically. "So I hung onto it."

"Thank you," Marlowe said, trying to wipe the queasy expression off his face before he turned to face Roop again. He tucked the book under his arm. "I appreciate it."

"Pshaw," Roop said.

The two of them remained silent for a moment; then Roop spoke up again.

"What about you, Mr. Marlowe? You bring me a present? I been waitin' on you for a week."

"I have it here." Marlowe patted his chest, just under the left armpit. "I just want to know why you need it."

Roop regarded him with a sarcastic half-smile. "You got eyes. Take a look."

"You can't walk," Marlowe acknowledged. "But there's more to life than walking. Or having two arms, for that matter."

"Sure," Roop said sourly. "I jerk off with my right anyways."

Marlowe rolled his eyes. "Yeah. That's what I was talking about."

"All right," Roop said. His voice was laced with contempt and anger. "I guess I got to give you some bullshit before you give me what I want. That how it is?"

Marlowe drew the .45 and held it out, grim-faced. "No." He slapped it into Roop's palm firmly. "You want it, it's yours. My life is worth that much to me."

Roop took the gun and sat with it in his lap, savoring its weight. Just having it in his hand seemed to strengthen him. He looked down at it for a few long seconds, smiling; when he looked up again, his eyes were oddly gentle.

"When I was growin' up, my daddy raised huntin' dogs," he said. "Good

ones. They could track or tree just about anything, from a coon to a cougar." He looked into Marlowe's eyes searchingly, his voice low and friendly. "I like to think I got pretty good too, out on patrol. I sure loved the shit out of it, anyways." He sighed. "Dogs ain't no good unless they love the shit out of it."

"You were the best I've ever seen," Marlowe said reassuringly. "Probably the best I ever will see." He cleared his throat. "But you're too hard on yourself. It was war. Us or them."

Roop laughed. "You been drinkin' too much, son." He tapped his temple with the muzzle of the automatic, and Marlowe winced. "I had some dogs of my own, too. You know, one at a time, over the years. Had me a real good one when I was 'bout eleven. He and I used to go just about everywhere—all through the hills and gullies huntin'. We didn't worry much about what season it was."

Marlowe stood quietly; it was by far the longest speech he had ever heard Roop deliver, and nothing short of a three-alarm fire could have persuaded him to interrupt it.

"Anyways." Roop sighed. "One day he got himself busted up. Cougar done him. He got himself home, so I figure the cougar got the worst of it, but he was dragging his hind legs, and his jaw was broke, and he was tore up too." He caressed the pistol grip with the ball of his thumb. "I asked my daddy to drive us to the vet, but he just told me to get the gun; you don't spend money fixing a dog."

Marlowe shifted on his feet, uncomfortable, and Roop fixed him with his terribly clear eyes, stabbing through him like two steel pins. "I wouldn't let him shoot m'dog. He tried to slap some sense into me, but I was old enough to duck it and give him some back. I kept telling him the dog wanted to live, or he wouldn't have come home, and all he needed was some help."

Marlowe nodded.

Roop grinned, but there was no humor in the expression; seeing it, Marlowe finally recognized it for what it was—a twisted grimace of pain. "I kept him out in the woodshed and splinted his legs up and I tried to feed him like a baby for a few days—pieces of bread with whatever kind of gravy I could get, real soft dog food from the can." Roop smiled down at his gun again, his voice soft with nostalgia. "Kids are mean-spirited when they love a thing, see. That poor old dog couldn't lift his own leg, couldn't hardly take a shit without messing himself, but I wouldn't let him go."

"You aren't a dog," Marlowe observed. "You're a human being."

Roop smiled his disagreement. "I didn't catch on until my daddy took his own dogs out. I was out in the shed with General, and they was outside barkin' and making a fuss, like dogs do when they know they're

going out to hunt.” He turned the gun in his hand and took off the safety with his thumbnail. “I don’t know what done it. He was a good dog, and I loved the hell out of him. He couldn’t walk, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat or drink right; he was hurting like a motherfuck, but I was willing to let him suffer through all that, ’cause I wanted him around. But I couldn’t take the way he raised his head when he heard that barking outside—just looked at that shut door . . . and looked at me . . . and laid his head back down again, like saying, ‘Well, that’s all over for me.’” He sighed. “So I got the pistol and I shot him in the head.”

“You aren’t a dog,” Marlowe said again, patiently.

“Naw, I ain’t,” Roop said. “If I was, you’d have to do this for me.” He put the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Chandler let himself in through the doors that opened onto the back deck; the cabin was dark, all its curtains shut tight. As he closed the door behind him, he heard a soft, rolling click in the room behind him.

“Raymond,” she said quietly.

He held up his open hands and turned. “Polly.”

Straining his eyes, he could see her silhouette; she was sitting on a couch beside the black, cold fireplace, her legs neatly crossed. She held the cocked pistol on him for a few seconds longer, and then slowly eased the hammer back down. “I don’t want to hurt you,” she said at last. He couldn’t see her face in the darkness; her entire body was in shadow.

“I’m glad,” he said. “But I wouldn’t blame you, if you did.”

She wiped her mouth with the back of one hand nervously, and then returned it to the two-handed grip on her pistol. “I read the autopsy report on Christopher Lanois.”

“Yeah. That’s taken care of,” he said.

“Sloppy,” she said. “He couldn’t possibly have gotten a shotgun into his mouth after injecting such a large dose of heroin. He was probably dead before he could pull out the needle.”

“Actually, he wasn’t,” Chandler said conversationally. “He had an amazing tolerance.” He indicated the floor in front of her with his chin. “My feet hurt,” he said. “It was a long walk up the mountain. Do you mind if I—?”

She made a sharp little gesture with the gleaming gun. “Make yourself comfortable.”

He went down on his knees awkwardly, keeping his hands in sight, and sat back on his heels. His kneecaps made an ugly crunch as he shifted his weight.

“Getting old,” he said lightly.

She sighed wearily. “You don’t have to be charming,” she said. “Are

you here to kill me, Ray? If so, please get it over with. I'm sure my resistance won't amount to much, by your standards."

"No," he said. "Jesus, woman." He lowered his hands abruptly and slapped his palms down on his thighs, scrubbing the sweat off on his jeans in annoyance. "You don't really believe I could do that, do you?"

"I don't know." The pistol, which had been drooping slightly, snapped back to attention at the first sudden movement. "I hadn't really considered it, until I saw who it was." She paused. "Could you?"

"Please," he said disgustedly. "If you really think I'm that far gone, just shoot me in the head right now." He reached into his coat pocket and slowly fished out his cigarettes and matches. "You'd be doing us both a favor."

A light shiver went through her, all at once, like a breeze passing over the surface of still water, but she said nothing.

He lit up a cigarette and shook out the match. "Here you go," he said. "This'll be my last one." He closed his eyes and put his hands behind his back. "Fire when ready."

She made a ragged sound, and he opened his eyes to see her shaking, the gun slowly turning away from him. He was beside her in an instant, both hands cupped around the pistol, working it out of her grasp above both their heads before she could turn it on herself.

"All right," he said softly. He put the safety back on and laid her revolver on the coffee table behind him, reaching with the other arm to encircle her slight body.

She sobbed out loud, a gasp of anguish that made his heart hurt. Disarmed, she covered her face with both arms, wrapping them protectively around her head, but made no other effort to resist him as he pulled her down from her perch and onto his knees.

"It's all right." He took the cigarette out of his mouth and whipped it into the cabin's empty fireplace, then gathered her up and hugged her to him, blowing the last plume of smoke into the air above her sweet-smelling scalp.

"I'm s-sorry," she said. "I—"

"I just scared you," he said, his voice low and soothing. His embrace tightened, folding her little chest in half as he squeezed her fiercely. "That's all right. You scare me all the time."

She trembled, and her voice emerged from the labyrinth of her sheltering arms, tiny, but clear. "That's ridiculous."

"No ma'am," he said. Despite himself, he smiled a little at her voice, at its self-assurance—at how reluctant he was, even now, to argue with her. He kissed the crown of her head, breathing in the warm perfume of her hair. "You scare the devil out of me."

"How can I?" she asked. "You're so . . ."

"I was scared to death when I first met you," he said. "I saw you come into the room and I said to myself, 'There's no way she can be in this thing. She's on the wrong floor.' You were so . . ." He took a deep breath. "So warm, so bright. I just wanted to hold up my hands and warm them on you."

"Oh, god . . ."

"It's true." He squeezed harder for a moment. "I knew right away I was in trouble. I was scared to death that something would happen to you. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep—I couldn't drink." He kissed her head fiercely. "Every time I passed out, I had these dreams that the dark was going to swallow you up."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I never knew that."

"Don't apologize," he said, laughing a little. "They were the worst nightmares I ever had. They got worse between assignments, when I wouldn't see you for weeks, even months. So I tracked down your house in Arlington. I used to sit outside your window for hours."

She froze for a moment, and then she laughed, once—incredulous. "You didn't."

"I had to. I had to know that nothing was happening to you." He tickled her side tentatively. "I like those blue pajamas, by the way."

"Oh my god."

"Don't be angry, please," he said, half-begging. He touched her hair lightly and kissed the top of her head again, rearranging the pale, tangled curls with clumsy fingertips. "I didn't mean any harm by it. I don't want you to think I'm some kind of—"

She trembled. "Pervert?" she offered. Her body had relaxed, slightly. "Degenerate?"

"God, don't say that."

"Why not?" She quivered again. "Why shouldn't I?"

"Because you can hurt me, Polly," he said. "Nothing else in this world can hurt me." He ran his hand over her forearm, teasing the smooth white skin with his callused thumb.

She hiccupped out a laugh. "That's not true. I've seen you bleed before."

He took up her hand and pressed the bone of her wrist to his mouth. "I don't mean death," he said, murmuring over her skin. "The world is full of death. It waits in everything." The blue vein quivered softly beneath his lips. "Anything can kill me—half the time I'm asking it to, even. But only you can hurt me."

"Oh, come on," she protested.

"I need you." He took her by the wrists and drew her arms away from

her face. "I need you to believe that I'm still a human being." He put his finger under her chin and tipped it up. "Polly." He looked into her wide, dark eyes. "You're the whole human race to me. I need you to believe that I can still love you. That I wouldn't hurt you, no matter what." He ran his blunt fingers down the left side of her face, tracing its soft curve. "If you don't believe me, I might as well be dead."

In her silence, looking down into her wide, dark eyes, he went on. "I can't ask you to love me back." Something twisted deep inside him, painful, and he took an unsteady breath. "I know you said you did, but I can't see how you could mean it—seeing how I am."

She closed her eyes, and he kept on talking softly.

"There's not much of me left," he said. "But whatever there is, whatever I've got that isn't sick and mean or just plain broken—it belongs to you."

"I don't deserve it," she said. Her face contracted painfully, lips bitten back, and she tried to pull away from him. Tears slipped down her cheeks. "I'm not even a woman anymore. I'm some kind of thing . . ." Her chest hitched. "Some kind of awful thing."

"Crap," he said. He turned her face lightly. Even in this light, the scar looked painful, a twisted pink mass of tissue over the temple. He brushed it lightly with his fingertips, pressed his lips against it. "You're all the woman I want."

She turned back. He felt the soft hot brush of her lips on his chin, and closed his eyes; he couldn't open them again, even once her lips had found his own and retreated.

"I love you," she said. Then, startled: "Raymond . . . you're shaking."

"I'm scared," he said. "It's been years since I kissed a woman sober."

"Well," she said breathlessly. "Let's try it again."

He was paralyzed, half-numb with fear, as she pressed her body close. He had to remind himself, over and over, to keep breathing, despite the fact that his heart and lungs both wanted to stop—as if he could make the moment last forever, if only he didn't disturb it with so much as a heartbeat. She kissed him in places he couldn't remember letting anyone touch: his cheeks, his ears, his neck. She peeled him out of his jacket, took away his gun, and slowly unbuttoned his shirt, never taking her lips from his skin for more than a few moments.

"Oh." She gasped softly. Her fingers trailed over his chest, passing like a whisper over the twisted circle of scars—tracing the mark that had been left on him, the sigil of madness and death. Pleasure stabbed into him like a needle as her fingernail skated over one of his nipples, dragged out of its natural place in a fold of melted tissue. "Oh, love," she said again. "What have they done to you?"

He swallowed and reached for her hand, guiding it to the firm, fast pulse that beat under his ribs, and flattened her palm against it.

"Nothing important," he said softly. "My heart is still in there." ▲

John founded Pagan Publishing and began producing a magazine and books for the Call of Cthulhu horror role-playing game at the age of 19. It was just two years later, in late 1992, that he created Delta Green. He is now a self-employed freelance writer, editor, typesetter, graphic designer, and web site creator, in addition to leading the staff of Pagan. John's fiction credits include "The Dark Above" in Delta Green: Alien Intelligence and the novel Delta Green: The Rules of Engagement, as well as "The Second Effort" and "The Nullity of Choice" in the horror anthologies Made in Goatswood and Singers of Strange Songs, respectively. His roleplaying game work has been published in French, German, Polish, and Spanish.

This tale presents the legendary last op of Major General Reginald Fairfield, the op which led to his assassination and triggered the reorganization of Delta Green in 1994. As Tynes' novel included characters from "The Dark Above," so too does this story feature one of the novel's main characters, a few years before the events of that book.

THE CORN KING

JOHN TYNES

David Nells ran his fingers through his hair, pausing to scratch at his scalp. The NRO had sent over a new batch of satellite images showing a Chinese missile base in Tibet, and he had to prepare a preliminary update for his superiors in the CIA on what appeared to be a new construction project. He'd already worked through dinner. Jill had been pissed when he'd canceled their date a couple hours ago, but Jill was always pissed at him for one reason or another and he'd just hung up on her when she started to yell. Relationships usually bored him quickly, but his thoughtlessness and her temper kept them in a cycle of break-up/make-up that he found invigorating. David suspected that was why they were still together after fifteen months.

The fact that both were Delta Green agents probably had something to do with it, too. The scale of their secret life dwarfed that of their romantic life, putting things in perspective. Or so he liked to say, when he was

getting that weary feeling and wanted to pick a fight with Jill.

He took a gulp of coffee laced with bourbon. Just a little. His boss had instituted an unofficial policy for his small analysis team when they had to work late: bourbon after Brokaw. They were all old China hands, marking time until retirement, and regarded the clean-cut academics who staffed the other groups with something approaching contempt. What business did you have analyzing imagery of a country you'd never lived in? David knew it was a ridiculous attitude for his team to hold, given that they spent their time staring at bird's-eye images of silos and structures that could be in Nebraska as easily as China, but like attracted like and everybody needed somebody to look down on.

The phone on his desk buzzed and he picked it up. A delivery at the front desk. He stood and yawned, looking down for a moment at the photos on his desk, taken by a sleepy satellite glimpsing the Earth far below as it drifted through the silent twilight of orbit. Then he wandered off through the halls towards reception to see what the delivery was.

It was a single long-stemmed rose, wrapped with a green bow. Martha had him sign for it. There was no card, but it didn't need one.

David went back to his desk and typed up a brief report on the images; looked like the Chinese were building a new barracks, nothing to wake the president for. He put the images back into their envelope and dropped them and the report into his boss's document safe. Then he got his coat on, picked up the rose, and headed for the door.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Nells," Martha said politely as he walked by. David grimaced. No wonder Jill was so pissed; he'd forgotten. It was Christmas Eve, 1993.

Jill Sanders sat at the small dinner table in her apartment, picking at a slice of pie. The voice of Billie Holiday filled the room from a boom box. She'd had other music picked out for tonight, but then David Fucking Nells blew her off on Christmas Goddamn Eve so out came Billie, her favorite music for doing a slow burn. As she fiddled with the lemon meringue she'd picked up from the neighborhood bakery, her thoughts were on the diatribe to come, when she'd tell David she was through with him and his bullshit and so on and so forth. They'd had so many arguments that it was getting harder and harder for her to come up with new ways of telling him what a jerk he was—but the challenge only whetted her appetite for conflict. The trouble was that David was a charismatic guy who could be really charming and considerate when he felt like it. Plus he'd almost taken a bullet for her when he didn't have to, and that had to count for something.

Fucker, she thought. No. She'd used that one before.

There was a knock at the door. *Shit!* It had to be David, come to make

up, and here she was with her battle plans still sketchy. As she got up and walked to the door she just tried to flow with Billie, confident that she would be ready to tell David a thing or two, at least. She opened the door.

Sure enough, it was him, holding a *rose* for God's sake. "Ratfucker!" she blurted, then saw the green bow around the stem—a DG op signal.

David grinned.

"You have *got* to be kidding," she managed, totally flumoxed.

"Merry Christmas, kiddo. Get strapped and let's go."

Billie sang on.

As they walked to the car, Jill reluctantly agreed to table their discussion of David's merits and flaws until later. Business came first.

"So where are we going?" she asked once they left the parking lot. "Joe?"

"Nope, Joe's not in on this one." David sounded cheerful, infuriatingly so.

"Where, then?"

"It's time for you to meet the old man. He's leading this op personally."

"I thought Joe *was* the old man."

"All right. We're going to meet the *older* man."

"David, who is this guy?"

"Major General Reginald Fairfield, retired."

"Never heard of him."

"You aren't supposed to. He's the captain of this whole ship of fools. The guy's a fossil, but for some reason he's going out in the field with us. Usually he just pulls our strings."

"So what's the op?"

"Beats me. I called him from a pay phone and he just said to grab someone and come over, on the double."

"And you chose me."

"Hey, you were the one who wanted a date tonight."

"Don't start."

"Fine."

"So where are we going?"

"The Bentson, downtown. He's got a suite."

They drove in silence for a few minutes. It was snowing on the Potomac and the highway was a white snake, ghostly in the dim. Eventually David spoke, hesitantly.

"There's something you should probably know."

"Yeah?"

"Reggie . . . I don't think he's ever worked with a woman before."

"*What?*"

"I mean in the field, you know. On an op. He's kind of old-fashioned."

"You mean he's an asshole."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Thanks for bringing me along."

"Hey, if you're going to be mad, you might as well be mad at someone else for a change."

"I've still got plenty of mad left for you."

"Never a dull moment, kiddo."

They reached the Bentson around 11 P.M. and drove into the parking garage. Leaving David's Chrysler behind, the pair walked outside to the front doors and into the lobby. At the front desk, David rang the bell for a clerk. A young man emerged from a doorway. He was impeccably groomed.

"Yes sir?"

"Please ring Mr. Fairfield's room and tell him his guests have arrived."

"Oh, yes. He left a note for you."

"He's not even here?" Jill said, irritated.

"He just left," the clerk said, handing David a small envelope. David and Jill drifted away from the desk while David opened the note.

Outside, it said. In your car.

David looked up sharply. Through the front doors he could see his Chrysler, idling in the snowy street outside.

"Oh hell," he muttered.

"David, isn't that your car?"

"Yeah. We're in for it now."

The man in the driver's seat was a vigorous kind of old. Jill guessed he was in his early eighties, observing the hunched shoulders but muscular arms as she climbed into the back seat. David got in the front.

"Fucking amateurs!" the man bellowed. "I could've taken both of you in the goddamn garage."

"Sorry, sir," David said quietly.

Reggie wrenched around to look at Jill and then scowled at David. "What the fuck is *she* doing here?"

"She's my partner, sir. You said to bring someone."

"I didn't say to bring some goddamn broad!"

"Agent Sanders is a capable field operative, sir. I've done three ops with her and she's cool under fire."

"I'm at your service, sir," Jill said diplomatically.

"You couldn't service me with a tire jack, Sanders. Who cuts your checks?"

Jill turned red, though no one noticed in the dim car. "I'm a criminal investigator for the Office of Export Enforcement," she said, straining to keep an even tone.

"What the hell is that?"

"Department of Commerce, sir."

"You're an accountant with a strap-on! Nells, have your brains turned to shit and shot out your ass? We've got serious work to do tonight and I need men I can count on."

"Sir—" David began, but Jill interrupted.

"Shut up, David. Listen, you toothless old fuck, if you don't think I can pull my weight we can step outside and I'll hand you your ass on a platter. It's Christmas Eve and I've got better things to do than get screamed at by some dickless poster child for prostate cancer. So put up or shut up, motherfucker, because I'm not going to tolerate this bullshit for another minute."

David stared straight ahead and tried to pretend he was somewhere else. In the rearview mirror, Jill could see Reggie's eyes, alive with some weird kind of excitement.

"All right. You'll do." Reggie put the car in gear and punched the gas.

Back on the highway. Back in the snow. Reggie drove like a madman, swerving through traffic to pass car after car, cursing loudly at the other drivers. But for all his seeming recklessness, he kept an iron grip on the wheel and moved the car with a precision Jill could only admire—he drove aggressively, yet he had the confidence to back it up. When she whistled quietly after a particularly dangerous but deft maneuver, Reggie grunted. "Try booting a Willis through the Ardennes at twice this speed and then you'll have something to whistle about, agent." Soon they entered Virginia on I-66, and Reggie seemed to relax a little as the metropolitan traffic thinned out. David eventually worked up the nerve to ask a question.

"Can you brief us now, sir?"

Reggie nodded gravely. "Not much to brief. There's a party tonight on a mountain called High Knob, and we're going to crash it."

"What are our objectives?" Jill asked.

"Shoot anything that moves."

"That's it?"

"Torch whatever's left."

"And then?"

"Go the fuck home and wait for Santa."

David spoke again. "What kind of opposition are we facing?"

"Wetworks death squads. Demons from higher dimensions. Partridge in a pear tree. Fuck if I know."

"Are you sure we have enough agents?"

"I'm sure we have enough bullets. Assuming you and your lady friend can shoot straight. Either of you handle a rifle, or am I hauling my cata-racts up a tree to pick off punks at five hundred yards?"

"I'll take sniper," Jill offered.

"Don't shoot me by mistake, you hear? I'll be the screaming bastard with the big balls."

Jill shook her head. "Don't tempt me."

Reggie laughed, then glanced at David. "Nells, bourbon."

"I'm out, sir."

"Don't shit a shitter, boy, I smelled it on your breath when you got in the damn car."

"I left it at the office."

"Give me the goddamn bourbon or I'll turn this car around and make you buy me some."

David grimaced and took a flask out of his coat pocket.

"Mary, Mother of God," Reggie muttered as he took a swig, then held the flask towards the back seat. "You want some of this, agent? I'm slap outta tea and cookies."

Jill took the flask and had a slug, then handed it back to the driver.

"Finish it off, Nells," Reggie said. "That shit stinks like a pig but isn't fit for one. We've got a long way to drive."

They reached High Knob a little before midnight, taking a lonely road through the snow flurries. After a few turns, Reggie wheeled the car off into the bushes and got out. David and Jill followed.

They opened the trunk. Inside were several large plastic cases. Reggie removed an M21 sniper rifle and a twenty-round magazine, then handed them to Jill. "Load it," he barked.

Jill put the mag in and chambered a round, then briefly sighted on a tree through the scope. "Ready," she said, slinging it over her shoulder.

Reggie handed her three more magazines, which she stashed in her jacket, then pulled out two AK-47s for himself and David and bags of mags for both. Finally he strapped on a backpack.

"Demolitions," he explained. "Let's go."

For the next eighty minutes they slogged uphill through the trees, Reggie guiding them by compass at brief intervals. It was cold and quiet. No one spoke.

At last they crested a stout rise, crawling up slowly under Reggie's direction. About two hundred yards below was a clearing fed by a dirt road. Three Broncos were parked end to end, blocking the road. About a dozen men in tactical gear loitered near the trucks, setting up some large light sets to illuminate the clearing and running power cables back to the trucks. None of them wore any sort of uniforms or identifying logos, and the trucks were unmarked.

"Cocksuckers," Reggie muttered.

"What now?" David asked.

"You two watch close. I'm going to get down there and set a charge on the outermost truck. We blow that one and it's instant roadblock. Anybody gets too close to me, Sanders picks them off and Nells, you just start spraying so I can get clear. But don't shoot unless you have to—this party hasn't started yet. If we get separated, meet back at the car."

"That's the plan?" Jill asked, incredulous.

"No, that's the clusterfuck. The *plan* is that I'm back in half an hour and nothing happens until the others show up because these jokers aren't going to notice me playing partisan with their truck."

"Ah," she said, not at all relieved.

"Keep sharp," he muttered, and walked off into the trees.

The minutes pulled past slowly. Jill and David kept an eye on the men in the clearing, who finished setting up their lights and now seemed to just be milling around, waiting for something. Jill identified a tall man in an overcoat who seemed to be in charge.

"Who are these people, David?" Jill whispered.

"You know as much as I do. They look like special ops to me."

"Fuck. This is ridiculous."

"Wait—I see him. By the truck."

Jill trained the rifle on the outermost Bronco and spotted Reggie, creeping up in the stark shadows cast by the vehicles and the trees at the edge of the well-lit clearing. She swiveled the rifle slightly, picking out the men closest to the trucks. None noticed Reggie in the darkness. He moved like a cat, surprisingly nimble for his age and weight.

Reggie had spent five minutes in the trees down the road, just catching his breath. He couldn't afford to be wheezing when he went in close. Once he got his breathing down to a quiet pace, he advanced through the snow until he was behind the truck. Then he took an explosive charge out of his pack and quietly stuck it to the undercarriage of the Bronco. He could hear voices and occasional laughter from the armed men nearby, idly waiting for their guests to arrive.

I'll give them something to laugh about, Reggie thought, as he slowly retreated from the clearing and back into the woods.

"So tell me about this guy."

David chuckled. "Not much to tell. He plays things pretty close to the vest. I know he was the one who reorganized the group after the Joint Chiefs shut us down, and he's been in charge ever since. But he's sort of a big-picture guy. Joe sweats the details. It's gotta be years since he went on

an op.”

“I wonder why he’s out tonight,” Jill said thoughtfully as she watched the old man in the distance disappear back into the woods, unnoticed by the men in the clearing. “And why the hell isn’t Joe involved?”

“Reggie’s a contrary old bastard. He likes to do things his way.”

Jill lowered the rifle and sat back to look at David. “So you’ve been taking lessons from him then?”

He grinned and winked at her. “Does it show?”

Atop the rise again, the old man rejoined his companions. He had spent another few minutes catching his breath in the darkness so his agents wouldn’t see him panting. He’d also taken the opportunity to watch them, long enough for him to establish that they were probably lovers. The thought made him frown, but he had more important things to worry about.

They stood up as he approached. “Ready to blow,” he said quietly. “Nells, come with me. We’re going to halve the distance and spread apart. I want you in that copse over there. I’ll be in the rocks on this side.” He gestured to the two locations down below.

“Sanders, you keep eyeballing these sad sacks. Sometime soon, they’re going to have some guests show up. You’ll know them when you see them. Once they arrive, count to thirty and then start shooting. I want you to tag the guests first, then hit the troops. As soon as you fire a shot, I’ll blow the truck, then Nells and I open up. Nells, you need to fire a burst, change locations quickly, and fire again. Don’t let them spot you. Between the two of us moving around and Sanders picking them off and the truck going up, they’ll be shitting themselves in no time. Number one priority is to kill the guests. Once they’re dead, do clean-up on the rest. When I fire three single shots, David and I start falling back. I’ll move while David fires, then I’ll fire and David moves, and we keep alternating until I fire three more shots and that means get the hell out. We meet back at the car no later than two hours after the first shot. Keys are tucked in the driver’s sun visor, doors are unlocked. Make your approach carefully in case they’ve found the car. If anything looks hinky there, ditch your rifles and make your way to the state road we came in on, then get home however you can. Any questions?”

“Yeah, who are these people?” David asked.

“The enemy,” Reggie said. “I said any questions, not any *stupid* questions. Let’s go.”

“Hold up,” Jill said, raising her hand. “What is this, some kind of vendetta? That your ex-wife down there? Far as I can see, you’ve circumvented the chain of command and pulled us out of our homes to kill a bunch of people who look to be guilty of nothing more than littering. If I’m going to pull this trigger, I want to know what I’m doing it for.”

David glanced away, once again wishing he were elsewhere. What little interaction he'd had with Reggie Fairfield in the past told him that the guy was not used to having his orders questioned.

Reggie stared at Jill for a moment, saying nothing but with a deepening frown on his face.

"We're putting our lives on the line, sir," Jill said emphatically, not breaking Reggie's stare. "We deserve to know what's up."

Finally the old man broke the silence. "First off, girly, I'm not circumventing the chain of command. I *am* the goddamn chain of command. You chose to join this organization. That means you do what you're told and you accept it like a good soldier. If you don't trust the people in charge, what the hell are you doing here?"

Jill started to speak, but he cut her off.

"Shut up! I'm not finished. Despite being an insubordinate bitch, you're still one of my people. And you're right. We are risking our lives here tonight. Those people down there don't fuck around, and the bad news is they've got our whole government behind them. So the simple version is this: they're collaborating with the enemy to sell out our country, and tonight we're going to provoke a little diplomatic incident. If we're lucky, their whole project will blow up in their faces."

David looked wary. "But sir, if they're here on behalf of the government . . . isn't this a big risk? For the organization, I mean?"

"Of course it is," Reggie replied confidently. "That's why we have a corn king. Someone to sacrifice for the sake of the harvest."

Jill's brow furrowed and she shook her head. "I don't get it. Who's the corn king?"

Reggie grinned. "I am. Now quit this foolishness and let's go."

David and Reggie were in their positions in about ten minutes. Jill stayed on the rise and watched the clearing. The next hour passed slowly, but it passed quietly.

When the others arrived, it was almost as if nothing had happened at all.

Jill wondered briefly if she'd fallen asleep for a few minutes. She was looking around, watching the men in the clearing, when she noticed that there were two more people down there, and the man in the overcoat and a couple of the guards were walking over to chat. No one seemed surprised or in a hurry. Where had these two come from?

She cocked her head against the rifle, which she had resting on a bipod, and took a look through the scope. If her finger had been on the trigger she probably would have fired out of shock.

The two new arrivals were not human—close, but not quite. They were short, naked humanoids with indistinguishable round faces and huge, soul-

ful, black eyes.

It's fucking Close Encounters, she thought. *It's fucking Close Encounters*.

She had seen some things in her time with Delta Green—worse things than this, terrifying things of eye and bone and muscle. But none of them had been shaking hands with representatives of the United States government. Jill's orderly understanding of the Way Things Were pirouetted in her mind and folded in on itself, a tesseract of incomprehension. *Oh my God*, she thought, trying to come to grips with the implications of the meeting in the clearing.

Then she noticed the countdown that was already progressing in the back of her mind, the countdown Reggie had told her to start when she saw the guests arrive: *Eighteen, seventeen, sixteen . . .*

Jill sighted in on one of the visitors and slipped her finger into the trigger guard.

Six, five, four . . .

She was ready. She just hoped Reggie and David were, too.

One . . .

The rifle crack broke the night like a twig. One of the visitors staggered, flesh and fluid spraying in an arc across the smooth white snow. The liquid splashed back almost as far as the thing's first footprints, which seemed to have begun their trek out of thin air.

Good girl, Reggie thought, as he pressed a button and the outermost Bronco exploded in a burst of flame and shrapnel, catching two men in the blast. They were knocked to the ground and lay there, burning, the sounds of fireworks as the bullets in their suits touched off from the flames, riddling their bodies with gaping wounds.

Oh shit, David thought, as he sighted down the barrel of the AK and tracked a line of rounds up the chest of a guy in tac gear, releasing the trigger after the man's head snapped back and the snow behind him was spattered with brains. Then he raised the rifle and dashed off to change position.

Jill swiveled the rifle slightly and caught the other visitor, who was looking at its companion nonplussed as the little figure fell over backwards, like a cartoon character slapped with a two-by-four. *Don't think don't think don't think*. She squeezed the trigger again and the second visitor joined the first in slack-jawed oblivion.

Reggie brought the rifle up to his shoulder and opened fire, targeting a man near the trucks. As he did so, several men began firing into the woods towards where David had been, then spun as the rattle of the second AK drew their attention. Reggie lowered the rifle and hurried laterally through the trees to find fresh cover.

In the clearing, men ran to get behind the trucks once they realized the fire was all coming from the same general direction. Jill picked off a guy who was staggering near the burning truck, evidently stunned from the concussion. She tried to find the man in the overcoat, but he was already out of sight.

David reached a large tree. He was breathing heavily, but he immediately brought up the rifle. The men were behind the surviving trucks now, so he sent a couple volleys into the tires and engine block of the lead Bronco. A hundred yards to the west, Reggie found his new cover and followed David's lead, working over the last truck with the rest of his magazine. Both men moved off again, swapping mags as they did so, while Jill kept ping-ponging at the trucks to keep the troops down. Her fifth shot caught a careless man in the top of the head, and he fell backwards into a snowbank.

A couple of the men began firing into the woods from the edges of the trucks, more or less shooting blindly. Reggie and David blew through another magazine with several short bursts, disabling the trucks and keeping the targets down. Then Reggie switched to semi-automatic and kicked off three shots in succession. David turned and ran, as Reggie switched back to full auto and let another burst loose. Then it was his turn to run while David fired. They repeated this pattern six times, falling further and further back as Jill kept ping-ponging, until Reggie gave the final signal and they hauled ass. Jill spent another minute firing at the trucks, and then she got up and took off down the back of the rise. The car was well over an hour away.

In the woods, in the dark and the cold, Reggie moved swiftly. He was panting, but this was no time for authoritative decorum. He had to get back to the car, and fast, to protect his people. They had proven themselves tonight, and he wasn't going to let them down.

Some ways off, Jill plunged down the slope, rifle slung, mind reeling. She had joined Delta Green to fight insanity, to destroy things that perverted her sense of order. What she'd seen in the clearing told her that the sense of order she'd been fighting for was a sham, and that the stakes she'd been gambling with were far greater than she'd ever imagined. *He's got to tell me*, she thought to herself. *When this is over he's got to tell me everything.*

Further distant, David marched. Hands on head. A gun pressed against his back.

Reggie got there first, a lifetime of soldiering guiding him back through the woods like a homing missile. He approached the car carefully, spending ten silent minutes sneaking around to make sure the scene was clear. When he was sure that all was well, he took up a good position to watch the road.

Jill arrived twenty minutes later. Reggie heard her coming. *Not so loud*, he thought. He clicked his tongue a couple times until Jill clued in, and the two hooked up in short order.

"Fucking great," Reggie said, his eyes alive again. "Clockwork."

Jill nodded, a little distant. She had a thousand questions to ask him, but now was not the time.

David arrived not long after. They heard him moving through the woods a ways off.

"Shit," Reggie muttered.

"What is it?" Jill asked quietly.

"He's not alone."

David emerged onto the open road nearby, hands on his head. The man in the overcoat stood close behind him, a handgun against David's spine.

"Come on out, folks," the man called jovially. "Party's over. Five seconds and I erase this boy."

"Ho!" Reggie called. "We're coming out."

"*What are you doing?*" Jill whispered.

"Follow my lead. He's not going to kill David."

"Why?"

"Shut up and come along."

As Reggie and Jill entered the road, two of the armed troops came out of the trees near David and his captor. Reggie tossed his rifle to the ground and nodded at Jill, who did the same.

"You folks have got some fucking balls," the man with the gun said. "We're gonna go someplace quiet and have us a little chat."

Reggie shook his head slowly. They were all standing close now. "We're not going anywhere. It's not time yet."

"Time for what?" the man said, looking at Reggie guardedly.

"You don't get to kill me yet. It's not harvest time. Tonight we walk away."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"In the old days, the good old days, people chose a corn king to sacrifice for a better harvest. Until the day came, they couldn't lay a finger on him. He did as he pleased. But on the appointed day, the corn king had to die. The bad news for you is today is not that day. The good news for you is when that day comes, you'll be the one to pull the trigger. See, I'm the corn king."

The man in the overcoat stared at Reggie for a long moment before he finally spoke. "You know, I would say that you are absolutely fucking nuts. But there's really no need to state the obvious."

"You're right about that. Hey, you two," Reggie said, glancing at the

men with submachineguns standing a few feet away. "Make your peace with the Lord. Time's almost up."

The men looked levelly at Reggie, barrels fixed on him and Jill. The guy in the overcoat watched, baffled by the proceedings. David stared at Reggie, fear in his eyes.

"The Lord is my shepherd," Reggie said, as he flexed his right wrist and a small pistol ejected into his palm. "I shall not want." He raised the pistol and fired it in the time it takes to blink, tagging one of the men square in the face. The other man squeezed the trigger and blew a burst across Reggie's torso. The old man staggered but still swiveled his arm crisply. There was a crack and a moment later a red welt blossomed in the shooter's forehead. "He makes me lie down in green pastures," Reggie said as the men dropped to the ground.

The man behind David turned his gun at Reggie and pulled the trigger. There was a click. David stiffened.

"Oh look, your gun jammed," Reggie said idly, as he shot the man in the left arm. The man dropped his gun and took a step back, clutching the wound with his right hand and making a sound like a kitten. Reggie walked forward, implacable, pistol trained on his target. David staggered forward, fumbling in his jacket for his sidearm, momentarily forgetting that the men had taken it from him in the woods. Jill hurried to David's side, keeping an eye on the confrontation unfolding before them.

"Tell me your name," Reggie said.

"Adolph Lepus," the man replied through gritted teeth.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Adolph." He kicked him solid in the crotch. Adolph went down, gasping, on his knees. Reggie put the pistol away and took out a combat knife, then kicked Adolph in the shoulder and sent him falling back into the snow. He knelt down on Adolph's chest with a terrible smile.

"Kevlar," he said cheerfully, thumping his chest with his free hand. "You should try it sometime. Not that I could have died today anyway." He put the knife against the man's throat and his face hardened. "It's the same with you—I wish I could gut you like a goddamn pig, but I can't. Two months from now you're gonna wax me like a Pontiac and there's not a thing I can do to change that. But right now I can at least see that look in your eyes. And enjoy it." He pressed the knife a little harder, and a thin line of blood welled up and ran down Adolph's throat. The man gasped and moaned, hands between his legs.

"I just wanted you to know what it feels like to be under the sacrificial blade. When the harvest comes, you'll remember this night. Fuck, I'll *re-mind* you. And you'll know the only reason you're still alive is because I let you live. Because all of this was set in stone at the moment the void shat

out this ball of dirt.”

Adolph's face was covered in sweat. His eyes were huge pools of panic.

“The book of life told me when I was going to die, and it told me that you were going to kill me. The only thing I'm not going to tell you is this, you sack of shit: whether or not I'll take you with me screaming into Hell when it happens.”

Reggie pulled the knife away and stuck it back in his jacket. Then he slapped Adolph, hard.

“Think about that two months from now, when you're walking towards my door. Think about that when you see me again, in the moments before my death. Think about that.”

He stood up gingerly and turned to his companions. “Get the car started. It's time to go.” David and Jill, both still wide-eyed, nodded vaguely and stumbled over to the sedan. Reggie watched them for a moment and then looked back down at Adolph with a terrible grin. He unzipped his jacket, which was riddled with bullet holes, and plucked at the white t-shirt inside that hung loose—loose over his bare, unmarked chest.

“Be seeing you,” Reggie said, his words cutting through Adolph like a plow through soil. Then he turned and walked away. ▲

Mr. Adams writes, "I'm 33 now. Currently single. I knew Philip K. Dick when I was a kid, and he read some of my early writing and encouraged me to keep at it. He also listened avidly to precognitive dreams I'd had and said I was a 'shaman.' I've sold almost every story I've written in the last six years. I managed a record store in Seattle during the dying days of the grunge scene, but now run a software shop."

This tale posits the idea of the pariah as a social hero. Delta Green agents sacrifice their sanity to Mythos knowledge even as they fight its contagion. The terrible price they pay can never be known by those they hope to protect. Mr. Adams introduces another group carrying out the same work, at a similar, if somewhat more visible, cost.

GOOD NIGHT, BACH MA, GOOD-BYE

BENJAMIN ADAMS

<<DELTA GREEN EYES ONLY>>

TITLE: Excerpt I from *Ghost Tales of the 'Nam* by Horace Feldman, self-published, 1995

QUARANTINE NOTES: 94/100 copies confirmed destroyed.

CATEGORY: Text, English

REFERENCE #: I276-TEng

ENTERED: 3/29/98

TEXT EXCERPT FOLLOWS:

The Mountain, haunted by spirits.

Alone on the border of Vietnam and Laos, Bach Ma—the White Horse—keeps its own counsel. The French built holiday homes here during their occupation of Indochina. Strange things were seen and heard on

Bach Ma during the 1960s, when American troops used the mountain to guard the coastline near Hai Van Pass. Soldiers' reports of strange lights in the sky survived the war, of odd buzzing noises in the dense forest, and most notably of the disappearance of several servicemen from their bunkers at night. The guards on duty saw no one enter or leave. The servicemen had just vanished.

And inside the bunkers, burnt into the walls, was reportedly a whole text of the odd signs and symbols to be seen in the close-up photograph on the insert, pg. 75 [see attached photocopy]. This picture came from a camera belonging to one of the missing men and was passed on to me through an acquaintance of his "widow." Unfortunately, according to a language professor I consulted, the photograph depicts too small a character sample for meaningful study. Maybe with the easing of tensions between the U.S. and Vietnam someone will be able to probe this mystery more deeply.

This wasn't his country. Vietnam was no more his home than Ireland was for the majority of marchers in Boston's St. Patrick's Day parade. And yet someone in Delta Green thought it made sense to send Nguyen on this mission, escorting the linguist Allison Montmartre, and the thoughtless stereotyping rankled at him.

Nguyen was *Viet Kieu*: taken from the land of his birth when he was an infant and raised in the United States. He knew only enough Vietnamese, learned on his mother's lap, to get by. It was difficult for a *Viet Kieu* even to pass through Vietnamese customs. The officers had known he wasn't a native as soon as he opened his mouth.

His father would be rolling in his grave. If he were dead. Might as well be . . . The elder Nguyen had disowned his son when David entered the FBI training academy at Quantico. After escaping from the oppressive regime in Vietnam in the 1970s, Hien Nguyen was distrusting of all government agencies and felt they were part of a vast conspiracy to crush him and his family.

David often reflected on how ironic it was that his desire to join the FBI wound him up in the middle of a true conspiracy. And now Delta Green had sent him back to the land of his birth, and everything was full circle.

His parents had told him stories of the small town where they had operated a grocery store before the war had turned everything upside down. They had fled South Vietnam with little more than the clothes on their backs, escaping from the vast, indifferent monsters that were governments in battle.

"Stay out of the way, son," his father had told him. "Do not allow yourself to get crushed. To live is a good thing."

"You mean do not fight for what you know is right?"

"I mean do not fight a losing battle. Realize how small you truly are to these blind, rampaging forces, and stay away from them."

David had never really understood what his father had meant, until now. The people he'd met in Vietnam were like ants scurrying to avoid being crushed by the Communist foot. An all-pervasive subcurrent of fear permeated the very land. There may be peace, but these people were still afraid. They did not know what freedom was.

They tried to fit into cracks in the sidewalk, into the boles of trees.

All to avoid being crushed.

And with a horrible pang of sympathy, David knew how they felt. Because he too was trying to avoid being crushed—not by a government, but by the forces against which Delta Green maintained its vigilance.

Forces blind and rampaging and utterly indifferent to the human race.

At the end of the paved road, Nguyen joined Allison Montmartre in staring up at the magnificent, fog-shrouded slopes of Bach Ma. Nguyen had just been thinking how odd it was that the good road stopped precisely at the edge of the mountain's cloud cover, when Montmartre's rough-edged voice cut his musing like a buzz saw. "I hate this. I'm an academic, not G.I. Jane!"

He sighed at her latest complaint. Allison Montmartre was a striking woman in her late 40s: tall, slender, with shoulder-length blonde hair and sea-green eyes.

Oh, but she was unpleasant as hell.

On the flight over from the States, she'd been pretty much stonily silent. But since they'd reached Vietnam, she'd seemed to awaken to her predicament and felt more inclined to comment on it, much the way a surly dog comments on passing strangers. He didn't know how much more he could stand.

"We'll hide our motorbikes here," he told her.

"That's it," she said. "Then I'm staying here too."

"Look, the road is too bumpy; we'll have to walk."

"I'll wait back in the village. You can take pictures of the bunkers and I'll translate from them when we get back to the States. In fact, why didn't anyone think of just doing that? It only makes sense . . ."

Nguyen rubbed the bridge of his nose and prayed for strength. She *knew* that wouldn't work. The bunker walls weren't all intact. "I can't photograph every pebble up there, so we get to play jigsaw puzzle. Or, rather, you do. I'm only qualified to lend moral support, just like all your colleagues. Unfortunately."

He hefted his daypack and adjusted the straps, which had gotten uneven during the long ride. In addition to a gallon of water each, they car-

ried small lunches they'd packed themselves, and bean cakes, wrapped in colorful cellophane, handed to them by the villagers. Evidently the bean cakes weren't really meant to be eaten, but were more of a good luck charm. Even with Nguyen's decent Vietnamese, he couldn't quite grasp what the villagers told him about the cakes.

He noticed Montmartre watching him sidelong. "What kind of jibe was that?" she asked, her eyes quickly darting away. "Because if you're saying you'd like to have one of my peers here, rather than me, I concur. In fact, I'll just go back to the village now and you can get one of them up here on this damn mountain."

He took a deep breath. He'd been warned not to provoke or irritate her. "You know we need *you* here," he said, then took off walking.

He glanced back a few minutes later to find her trudging after him. It could have been worse, he mused. He'd been expecting one of her probing questions about government resources. Delta Green was an illegal conspiracy, not an agency. Allison Montmartre herself represented at least half of the "resources" that could be spared.

A Vietnam War-era photograph in some vanity press book had stirred the organization's interest in Bach Ma. Apparently the photo showed rather ancient and unhealthy writing left on a bunker wall. Delta Green's head honcho, Alphonse, classed the picture's scrap of text as "lower-division psych," which meant that, though worthy of concern, it wasn't part of the known major arcana and probably wouldn't drive a stable reader to murder or suicide. Probably.

Unfortunately, Montmartre, the one linguist who could translate what was on the bunker walls, wasn't even a "friendly." She had to be handled delicately. Delta Green called in some heavy cards it held on the dean-provost of Northwestern University's College of Arts and Sciences, and he'd agreed to coerce her with a promise of tenure. According to the fiction she'd been handed, the government needed her to translate the text for a war-crimes investigation on some soldiers who'd served on Bach Ma. And Nguyen, a Vietnam-born FBI agent, would lend his assistance.

After arriving in Hanoi, they'd spent long hours on the Reunification Express to the center of the country, then rented motorbikes to drive the fifty-odd kilometers southwest to Cau Hai, at the base of the mountain. Along the way, they'd made tourist stops, small side excursions designed to make anyone tailing them think nothing was out of the ordinary.

Now their goal finally lay within an afternoon's hike, and Allison Montmartre couldn't even see the glory of the mountain rising before her.

The ground fell away to their right. Beyond the clouds that loomed above and chilled the air, the valley shone emerald green in the sunlight, the ocean sparkling far beyond. The distant warmth seemed to beckon

them away from the dense forest and foreboding gray that swallowed them step by step. Nguyen imagined the people back in Cau Hai chattering and wondering if the trees and orchids had eaten the Westerners up for lunch. Bach Ma's reputation was evil.

The villagers had warned Nguyen and Montmartre to stay away from the mountain, that the ground could suck the goodness from the soles of their feet and make them ache later with a mysterious illness. The altitude and air could cause hearts to react . . . strangely, the villagers said.

Looking up into the healthy jade growth of firs and scattered broad-leaved trees over the trail, Nguyen couldn't see the harm in breathing Bach Ma's misty fog, but in his line of work one learned to pay attention to the whisperings of a local populace. Behind every legend lay a germ of truth, and Bach Ma had too many legends to dismiss lightly. Somewhere behind its ever-present clouds it hid something. Perhaps the long-tailed, dark-skinned demon magicians of folklore still practiced their spells up there. . . .

In Cau Hai, nervous laughter had greeted his questions about the mountain, and children ran jumping about his outstretched arms, yelling, "The Westerners go up the White Horse. Good-bye. Good-bye and good night."

Good night? Now, on the mountain trail, the memory gave him pause. How odd. "Good night" was a phrase used very rarely by the Vietnamese. Anyway, he only planned on being gone for the afternoon.

He hoped with all his heart it wouldn't take any longer. A night on the mountain and he'd probably strangle Dr. Allison Montmartre with his bare hands.

They followed the path for an hour until they came around a bend and saw something curious: a set of pots and pans abandoned right in the open.

"Now that's a little bit of what I'd call eerie," Montmartre said, shrugging down inside her jacket.

Nguyen scanned the area with a practiced, sharp gaze. "Let's keep it quiet," he said softly.

Montmartre stared at him. "Mr. Nguyen."

"Now what?"

"I think I have a right to know if I'm in any real danger here."

"You're asking me this on a mountainside in Vietnam?"

"Forget it. Forget I asked. Just let me tell you: if any of those Laotian bandits come out of the woods, don't worry about them. *I'll* be the one ripping out your throat."

That was it. Nguyen said slowly and evenly, "Listen, lady, you've bitched and moaned every klick, every step we've traveled since we left the States. But it's *my* job to take you up this mountain, right here, right now. I'm responsible for your safety, and while you're on my watch, nothing will

happen to you. You understand me?"

Montmartre seemed about to fire back; apparently thinking better of the situation, she merely shrugged.

Nguyen took several deep breaths. *She's not worth the trouble*, he thought. *Do your job and don't let her get to you.*

In silence, they continued up the path.

Further on, they found something that disturbed him: two small forts literally fastened to the side of the mountain. There were bamboo bed huts, loosely constructed with no side walls and only enough room to sleep.

"This doesn't make any sense," he whispered.

Montmartre looked up from where she was giving one of the beds a cursory examination. "What do you mean?"

"Why are there people even living up here? Down in Cau Hai all they could talk about were the demons that were supposed to live on the mountain. They wouldn't even consider coming up here."

"Well, someone doesn't seem to have a problem with it."

"There's not supposed to be anyone up here," Nguyen insisted.

Although apparently deserted, the place gave Nguyen the most unpleasant sensation. He felt eyes gazing from the neighboring jungle, but saw nothing. A glance through his binoculars, which had the added feature of being IR-capable, showed no glowing human forms among the dank vegetation. So who was watching them?

Perhaps he'd listened to too many tales in Cau Hai. There was no one and nothing here.

But still he felt the eyes.

Another hour upwards, and they found a second trail branching off from the main path. A battered signpost stood there, its weathered, year-scoured face bare of any notation. "We should turn here," Nguyen said. "The old American base should be down that way."

Montmartre grimaced. From the trailhead the narrow path led into darkness; the jungle of bamboo and feathery evergreens was thick and dripping with moisture. "I can't go in there."

"Just a little further."

"No! I don't—I don't like confined spaces."

Nguyen didn't know what to say.

"I don't have a choice, do I?" She sighed, took off her aqua-foam baseball cap, and rearranged her hair. "Okay. Let's do it."

Nguyen smiled at her fiercely. "That's the spirit, Doc."

"Yeah, whatever."

The darkness lay so heavy that Nguyen almost removed his flashlight from

his daypack, but soon his eyes adjusted to the dim light leaking through the growth around them. The trail was surprisingly well marked, probably due to the same people who kept the primitive beds they'd found earlier.

Where were they, anyway? Had they seen or heard Nguyen and Montmartre crash up the stone path?

Slipping along the moist and muddy track, Nguyen realized how easy it would be to disappear and never be found again. He suddenly knew how insignificant he was, a speck wandering through the vast forest covering the White Horse. Strange how just that morning he and Montmartre were the main attraction at Cau Hai, the center of an excited mob of Vietnamese bursting with eager chatter.

Then the tunnel through the jungle opened up wide again, and Nguyen pulled up short with a gasp.

A second later Montmartre came up behind him. "What's the matter?" she said, then stopped and exhaled softly. "Oh. Oh, my."

The trail tapered off along a cliff, and the stream paralleling the path went from a gentle trickle of water into a clear, green-glass pool. From the pool, the water plunged in a startling roar over the cliff's edge, falling some three hundred meters or more into what appeared an eternal valley. The backside of Bach Ma mountain showed a different face to Laos: perhaps a face of tranquility and luck.

"It's gorgeous," Montmartre breathed.

Nguyen could only nod in stunned agreement. After a few moments, he blinked away the sensory overload and turned to her. "Sorry. Looks like we went the wrong way."

"That's—that's okay," she said. "This is spectacular. This—just this, alone—almost makes this whole damn miserable trip worthwhile."

She moved forward, nearer the edge of the cliff, passing through a rainbow of mist.

"Be careful, Doc," said Nguyen. "And we need to get moving again in a couple of minutes. This detour, nice as it is, was not part of my timetable."

She waved him off.

Nguyen glanced at his watch. "Two minutes."

And then something in the air *changed*.

An uncanny silence fell; the drummer birds ceased their beating and the tiny clicking of insects dropped off. Even the leaves stood still. The sound of the waterfall faded and the air held a pregnant hush.

Nguyen narrowed his gaze as he looked around. His gut clenched, sending a message to his brain: *Something's wrong. Move. Take cover. Move. Move!*

Then the force came.

No spirits, no cryptic gray hand clad in yellow rags reaching out from

the jungle. Instead, a tremendous yell broke the eerie quiet, followed by an enormous blast very near the clearing where Nguyen and Montmartre stood. They crouched instinctively; a split second later the concussion of air hit them, picking at their hair and clothing like a mob of angry ghosts.

Nguyen's ears rang in the subsequent hush.

"Come on!" he yelled, jumping back to his feet.

Montmartre nodded. Together they ran for the forest trail, whose close, dank greenery seemed like the entrance to some subterranean hell. Twigs became fingers plucking at their clothes; the rich smell of decay became an infernal stench.

Another blast sounded near them, and Nguyen half expected a ball of flame to burst along the trail behind and engulf them.

"What—what the hell is it?" Montmartre gasped.

"Just keep running!"

As he exerted himself, his stomach muscles knotted, as if to contain the fear that softened his guts.

Ahead, a spot of light grew. The trailhead.

They emerged staggering and gasping. Nguyen bent over, hands on his knees, to recover his wind.

"David," Montmartre said in a ragged, breathy voice.

"What?" he said, not bothering to glance her way.

"David!" she said, more insistently.

He brought his head up and saw the inhabitants of Bach Ma.

Five people crouched in the road a few hundred yards away. Hands over their ears, they looked like perched birds on a wire. For a moment the tales told in Cau Hai came to Nguyen's mind, unbidden. Were these ghosts?

Montmartre took his hand and clenched it, tightly.

Bewildered, he squeezed back.

As one, the people raised their heads and stared wide-eyed at Nguyen and Montmartre.

One man began waving his arms about furiously, then stepped forward, screaming in Vietnamese.

Nguyen was glad these spirits spoke a language he knew, but they were too far off for him to understand their frantic behavior. He moved toward them but halted when the man put his hands to his head in desperation, as if Nguyen were about to step on a land mine.

The people crouched down again. Turning their heads away, they covered their ears.

See no evil, hear no evil, Nguyen thought wildly.

Then a huge weight moved above them on the mountain.

The sound was tremendous, ripping through the jungle like something

alive, and for a moment Nguyen was sure a monster was about to surface from the ground, some kind of immense, primordial being, tearing through the very bedrock beneath Bach Ma, remorseless and beyond comprehension.

It's coming, Nguyen thought. *It's coming and we're going to die here, on this mountain.*

From the trees, a square granite rock catapulted from nowhere and landed with a bone-shaking concussion not five feet in front of him. With the ringing in his ears, Nguyen couldn't tell if the screaming he heard was his own or Montmartre's. A cloud of dust rose as the stone continued down the mountainside with a fading rumble.

"My . . . God," Montmartre said.

As the dust settled, the man who'd yelled at them looked up again. When he saw the Westerners, a grin broke across his strangely mottled face. He trotted forward.

"You are lucky to be alive, young people!" he yelled.

"Hello, mister," Nguyen called, careful to address the man properly, by Vietnamese custom. "What is your name?"

Montmartre quietly disengaged her hand from his.

The man arrived before them, smiling, with brown and yellow teeth. "I am Ngoc Huang, young brother."

"What is he saying?" Montmartre asked Nguyen.

"We just exchanged greetings. He's friendly—I can tell by the way he addressed me."

"Do they speak English?"

A brief exchange with the old man resulted in a negative. Montmartre accepted the news sullenly. Nguyen resigned himself to translating the conversation as it ran.

"Why are you here, on the mountain?" Nguyen asked.

"We're from many villages. We have . . . an illness . . . and live away from our families."

The four other Vietnamese had all stood, and now slowly approached.

When they neared, Montmartre inhaled sharply. "David—these people—they're lepers."

Nguyen searched their faces for signs of decay: the rotting skin, missing limbs—the tropes of leprosy. All he could see were mottled scars on their faces, more unpleasant than horrifying, but in his next breath, Ngoc confirmed what she said.

The conversation continued as the group led them downhill, back to the encampment Nguyen and Montmartre had found earlier.

The lepers' job, their tedious lives' work, consisted only of bombing granite from the mountain and cutting it down to surface roads. Every day they broke stones the size of a redwood trunk into manageable chunks.

Each chunk then was broken down with a sledgehammer, then given to the next stonecutter who would chisel it again, and so on to the last leper, a woman who fit the pieces by hand into the grooves of the road.

Nguyen could see in their eyes that they felt their lives no longer had any true meaning. The legends of inhuman beings living on Bach Ma began to make sense. The people of Cau Hai hadn't told him of lepers, only monsters. The only thing monstrous here was their plight. According to Huang, if they broke their exile, their own people would shoot them.

For years the stonecutters had worked on Bach Ma, left in peace only because the place had an evil reputation. They occupied themselves by making the road easy for others to travel, thereby claiming a place, however anonymous, in the world at large.

At the encampment, just after noon, Montmartre sat away from the group's fireside gathering as they chatted over a steaming pot of artichoke tea. Nguyen wanted to ask her what was wrong, but he already knew; and he also knew there was no way she'd admit the truth. The linguist was afraid of these poor people, these lepers. Nguyen, however, was not. He took a tin cup from his daypack and dipped it into their tea without a qualm.

"Tell me, older brother," he said to his host, "where are the American bunkers?"

"Why would you want to go there?" Ngoc Huang asked, idly rubbing his finger along one of the plaques on his face, which had a red, raised rim around a pale, flat center. Behind him, Nguyen heard Montmartre make a small choking noise.

There could be no harm in telling these unfortunates the truth, Nguyen decided; abandoned by their own people, there was no way the leprous stonecutters could compromise Delta Green's mission here. Besides, these people lived on the mountain. Who knew what they'd seen or heard?

"We go to investigate a mystery," Nguyen said. "Once, during the horrible conflict, some Americans disappeared from there, without a trace. Our government would like to know what happened to them." He glanced at Montmartre, half afraid she would betray some latent proficiency with Vietnamese and question his story.

Ngoc Huang sipped some tea. "Mmm. I will tell you now—do not go to where the other Westerners vanished. It is too dangerous."

"But what is dangerous?"

"There are ghosts there; they are whispering, insidious, evil things that will corrupt your flesh and remove your thoughts."

"But that is what we were told in Cau Hai," Nguyen said, puzzled. "I thought the people there meant *you* were the ghosts."

"In many ways we are but forgotten ghosts to our own people," Ngoc

said. "But I tell you, do not go to this place of which you speak. Some ghosts are better left alone and unraised. Besides, it will soon be night, when spirits walk of their own accord. You would do best to either stay with us or leave the mountain now."

Neither was a viable option, Nguyen thought. If they left the mountain now, there would be no way he'd be able to convince the skittish Allison Montmartre to return the next day. The whole mission to Bach Ma would be a wash. He couldn't accept that possibility.

And Montmartre looked ready to bolt from the stonecutters' encampment, anyway. There was no way in hell she'd agree to stay there for the night.

"Older brother," Nguyen said, "I appreciate your wise words. But we have no choice. We must go to this place and see for ourselves. If we must, we will spend the night there. We will be all right."

"You will not make it through the night," Ngoc Huang said flatly. "At the very least, you will not be the same people I see before me."

"We must go. I am sorry, older brother."

Ngoc Huang nodded. David Nguyen studied the old man. His eyes seemed moist now. Beyond that, the leper's face was as much stone as the granite he blasted from the side of the mountain.

"Very well," said Ngoc Huang. "Here is the path you must take. . . ."

Nguyen saw where he'd gone wrong. If only they'd stayed on the main road for another half-mile and then turned to the right at the next trailhead, they would have found the remains of the American bunkers without a problem. Operating from nearly thirty-year-old intelligence as he was, Nguyen realized it could have been a lot worse.

In the watery late-afternoon sunlight, the two American bunkers were ragged sentinels of nothing, their gaping black windows peering out onto green jungle. Mute witnesses to the horrors of war, their cracked, crumbling, pale-blue walls appeared ready to collapse at any moment.

"These were once French villas," Nguyen told Montmartre. "There were over a hundred holiday homes up here at one time."

"Quite the vacation getaway," she muttered.

They moved forward warily. The sounds of the jungle were muted here, as if passing through a thick cotton veil. Montmartre readied her camera and flash, and with Nguyen in the lead, they passed into the first bunker.

He trained his flashlight on the water-stained walls. At first he couldn't make out anything, but then saw the thin, burnt ridges of the scrawlings. They seemed to appear out of nowhere, growing out of the paint and plaster like bruises.

"Do you see?" he asked softly.

"Now I understand why I was asked to come here. Let me do my job."

Suddenly Montmartre was all business. She flicked on a small microcassette recorder and held it near her mouth with her left hand, speaking calmly and assuredly as she snapped photos with her right.

"Quite unusual. Very similar to the fragments of the G'harne texts, also to writings found in Innsmouth. This, here, appears to say, 'Long time ago . . .'"

Flash. She snapped a photo.

Nguyen watched her move around the room, struck by her newly professional demeanor. He'd never have dreamed that the nervous, nasty Allison Montmartre he'd escorted here would become so enthralled with a series of ugly brown scratch marks on a crumbling wall.

"Exposure seven mentions the worship of Angka and its relationship to Suthoggua. . . ."

Flash.

Strange how the marks showed up so well now, even in places where the pale-blue paint was peeling away from the plaster and the plaster was falling away in chunks.

What Montmartre was saying sounded like so much inane gibberish, like speaking in tongues. A particular set of scrawlings excited her in particular. "'The stars will turn in the heavens, with their axis the dark center of all creation . . . ' My God, it's just as it appears in the Niya tablets!"

Flash.

"What does all this stuff mean?" Nguyen asked, waving a hand around the room.

Flushed with excitement, Montmartre said, "There's a primal set of myths that recurs in primitive populations around the world, myths dealing with unknowable gods and demons that arrived on our world when it was still young. There are pockets of people who still worship these creatures, and are devoted to bringing them back to cleanse the world's surface of all humanity. These markings here—these markings are in a dead language known as Pnakotic, and deal with that myth-cycle."

David Nguyen felt a bead of sweat trickle down his spine. In the span of time he'd known Allison Montmartre, he'd grown to know one certainty about her. The woman had no sense of humor.

She was absolutely serious. Which implied things that he didn't want to think about. Ever since he'd seen that black, chitin-shelled *thing* hatch from the espionage suspect, he'd begun to lose his human-centered worldview. Then Delta Green had taught him about the extinct alien races and the ones that might not be extinct, living deep beneath the oceans or on the fringes of the solar system. But that it all fit together in some truly bizarre cosmology—that was something he'd only recently begun to guess.

And Montmartre already *knew*.

He had to play dumb. "Uh . . . so what does all this stuff mean?"

Montmartre frowned. "It's all rather . . . vague . . . and incoherent. Almost like graffiti."

"'Kilroy Was Here,'" Nguyen said.

"Exactly. Someone just wanted it known that they'd been here."

Nguyen said, "Look, I want to get a breath of fresh air. You want to come?"

"Yeah, I'm finished with my impressions on this bunker anyway."

Nguyen kept to himself one of *his* impressions. Something awful had happened here. Maybe something within the mountain itself . . .

Lord, he wanted to go home.

He had no mystical blood tie to this land. This place was as foreign to him as Israel or Yugoslavia or Peru.

He was *Viet Kieu*, and didn't belong here.

The second bunker held more of the writing on its crumbling walls. Montmartre continued her routine, while Nguyen hung just inside the doorway, wishing for a cigarette.

Montmartre's running commentary had him thoroughly spooked. Between this and the rumors he'd heard in Cau Hai, Nguyen was ready to pull the plug. Not much daylight left, but maybe if they hurried they would have enough to make it most of the way down the road to the stonecutters' encampment.

"The beast inside the mountain," Montmartre read from the dim bunker. "'Held in check by a piteous few. Their corrupt flesh will fail, and they will be flensed from this sphere . . .'"

"Hurry up," Nguyen called. "We don't want to wind up spending the night."

"This is important," she replied distractedly. "These scrawls tell much more of a distinct story. A cult lives here . . . preventing the emergence of something living inside the mountain. Some kind of apocalyptic beast . . ."

Nguyen shivered, remembering his primal terror as the boulder had crashed down the mountainside before impacting on the dirt road.

Some kind of immense, primordial being, tearing through the very bedrock beneath Bach Ma; remorseless and beyond comprehension

He bit the inside of his mouth to quell the image. The metallic taste of blood faintly washed against his tongue. "A cult," he muttered, and the puzzle pieces began falling together. Not enough to form a complete picture, but enough to provide an image of the primary players in this mystery. "A 'piteous few' with 'corrupt flesh.' Now, who does that sound like to you? Anyone we know?"

"The stonecutters," Montmartre said. "'Corrupt flesh' sounds like a description of leprosy."

"Yeah, it sure does. I have a few more questions for Ngoc Huang." He jerked his head toward the door of the bunker and the rapidly vanishing daylight outside. "Ready?"

She nodded and snapped off her flashlight.

In the waning light, they quickly moved down the trail into the darkening jungle.

Ngoc Huang's eyes widened as he saw the Westerners approaching the campsite. A huge smile bisected his face as he yammered in rapid Vietnamese, "Younger brother! It is good to see you once again! Did you find any clues to the disappearance of your people, so long ago?"

"No," David Nguyen said. He maintained a neutral expression as he stared at Ngoc Huang.

The stoncutters' campfire hissed and sputtered in complaint as the old man laid another piece of damp wood in the weak flames. "That is too bad," he allowed, wiping his hands on his tunic. "And now you return down the mountain. Stay with us awhile; join us by the fire."

"No, we will not," Nguyen said.

"What are you saying to him?" Allison Montmartre asked. "Don't go burning any bridges. We need these people."

"You do your job and let me do mine," Nguyen snapped. Montmartre stepped away from him.

Ngoc Huang wagged a twisted finger at Nguyen. "You speak to me rudely, younger brother. Perhaps that is your way in America, but it is not ours."

"Is it your way to lie to those who come to you with questions?"

The old man rose unsteadily to his feet. For a moment it appeared he would topple backwards into the fire. "How have I lied to you?" he spat. "Every word I told you was the very truth! I am an honorable man. How dare you—"

"Tell us about the beast in the mountain."

Ngoc Huang staggered at the words. "What—what are you talking about? I know of no 'beast.'"

"You heard me," Nguyen pressed. "We know about the beast in the mountain, and we know it has something to do with the disappearance of the American servicemen from their bunkers."

The faces of the lepers were filled with consternation and something very close to panic.

"We had nothing to do with the disappearance of the Americans!" the old man yelled.

"You are full of lies!" Nguyen shouted back. "I cannot listen to you for one moment more! I will not hear one word you say unless it is the *truth!*"

"You will not believe the *truth!*" Spittle flew from Ngoc Huang's lips. "*The beast took them! The beast took your men!*"

"Tell me what happened! *Tell me!*"

The old man turned his head away from Nguyen's glare. "I—I am ashamed," he said softly. "It is my fault. I was much younger then."

He sat down, roughly, near the fire.

In the flickering light, Nguyen saw tears beginning to trail down the old man's dirty, plaque-marked face.

"This is the truth you seek," Ngoc Huang said. "We are not merely stonecutters. We are the guardians of Bach Ma. Our kind have been here since time immemorial. The stones we cut are laid into the ground to keep the beast within the mountain."

Nguyen sat down before the leper. "I do not understand."

Ngoc Huang nodded. "Neither did your people, thirty years ago. And I did not try hard enough to explain.

"We cut the stones from the mountain and laid them in the ground, like . . . like the stopper in a bottle. There is a sign, a sigil, we carve into the stones. It keeps the beast at bay. It keeps the beast from emerging back into the world.

"Your people moved the stones around their bunker. Some used the stones for sport, tossing them down the edge of the mountain to hear what may break on the way! Fools. But I could have warned them. If I had only tried harder . . ."

"What made you stop?"

The old man stomped his foot angrily. "We were at *war!* The Westerners should not have been here. I did not feel it was my place to keep them from harming themselves."

"And so you did not try harder."

"No." Ngoc Huang daubed at the tears on his cheeks with the sleeve of his tunic. "No. I did not try hard enough. And I should have. For the sake of all the countless generations who have toiled here to keep evil at bay, and for the sake of the generations that may now never be born.

"I should have tried harder."

The mists above Bach Ma had parted, allowing a glimpse of the star-speckled sky.

David Nguyen lay with his head upon his daypack, his hands interlaced on his flat stomach. *So beautiful*, he thought. Like so much else he'd seen on this trip, the sight took his breath away. *So much beauty and so much horror in the same place.*

Would Vietnam ever fully heal from the atrocities that had been visited upon it? In the fullness of time, he supposed—he hoped—it would. Dur-

ing the *train ride* south from Hanoi, he'd scanned the countryside for scars left from the war, but the only signs he saw were left on buildings like the bunkers further up Bach Ma. The landscape itself was lush, green, and thriving. Long after people were gone, Vietnam itself would remain.

Maybe there was more of this place in his soul than he'd thought.

Near him, Allison Montmartre grunted and sighed. "David—are you awake?"

"Uh-huh," he murmured.

"When you told me what Ngoc Huang said to you . . . you didn't scoff or laugh. You were completely serious."

"Does that surprise you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it does. Stories like that are my stock in trade, but you don't seem the type to buy into it."

Nguyen turned on his side and faced her in the dim starlight. "Whatever actually happened up on the mountain all those years ago, that old man is still feeling the guilt for it. It was in his face and voice. He believed every word he told me."

"But you were so angry when we left the bunkers—"

"I'm not now."

She remained on her back, staring up at the heavens. "We've been through a lot today, and it's made me realize a few things."

"Such as?"

"I think—I think I owe you an apology."

He didn't answer.

"I've been . . . rude. I could have made things easier for you."

"Really."

Allison Montmartre sighed. She rolled over onto her belly and raised herself up on her elbows, looking toward him. "David, this is very difficult for me. I'm not the type to apologize for my actions."

The woman *was* making an attempt to connect. "I'm listening."

Montmartre said softly, "You have no idea how long I've been devoted to the study and translation of these ancient tongues. Since I was practically a child"—her voice caught in her throat—"since I was a child, and I would crawl up on my father's knees, and look over the pages of his own translations."

"Your father was a linguist?"

She looked down at the ground, idly playing with a soft green twig. "I'm continuing my father's work, yes."

"He must be very proud of you."

"My father . . . died a long time ago."

"I'm sorry."

"He disappeared," she said, continuing to work at the twig. "Vanished

on a trip to Easter Island. He wanted to look at the untranslated writings found there. He . . . he always had to look for himself. Have you ever been to Easter Island? It's a tiny place. Not much there. Rolling green hills, volcanic rock, empty stone quarries, those damn staring idols. Nobody knew what happened to him. He just vanished off the face of the island. Off the face of the earth."

She tossed away the twig.

"His name was Edmund Montmartre. Have you ever heard of him?"

"No—no, I'm sorry. I haven't."

"He died practically unknown," she said. "His work was dismissed at the time as ridiculous. It's taken me my whole life to rehabilitate his ideas. But all the work I've done has been based on his research, and on whatever photographs I can obtain, on whatever specimens I can examine in museums and in the laboratory.

"He died in the field. That's why I didn't want to come here with you. I fought like mad. I raised some kind of goddamn hell over it. But the dean told me I'd make tenure if I came, and I gathered I almost certainly wouldn't if I didn't. I don't know what kind of strings you guys pulled, but he was hanging from them like a damn puppet.

"And that's why I've been giving you such a hard time. You represent everything that made me come halfway across the world, that made me confront my fears about what happened to my father."

David Nguyen lay on his side, stunned by Montmartre's outpouring. "I don't—" He stopped. "I don't know what to say. I didn't realize any of this."

"For God's sake, how could you?" She turned to face him again, and for the first time he saw the new fire in her eyes. "David, the writing on the wall in the bunker—all that Ngoc Huang has told you—it verifies everything my father was trying to prove. Coming here was the best thing I could have done.

"Say—for argument's sake—that there *is* something inside this mountain. If we brought back proof of it, do you realize how famous we would be?"

Nguyen's gut began churning. This was exactly what he'd been dreading from Montmartre. "Um, I don't think—"

"David, this could be the discovery of a lifetime!" The excitement in Montmartre's voice was palpable.

"I don't think you realize what you're saying."

"Oh, but I *do*! This is exactly the kind of find I've been hoping to make all my life. For my father and for myself. If you don't want to help me, then fine. I'll return here with a team from Northwestern and investigate more on my own."

The air seemed deathly still.

"No, you won't," Nguyen said, his voice like iron.

"What are you talking about?"

"You have no idea who I work for; how desperate they are. When I file my report, they will watch this place to make sure it remains undisturbed. A kind of secret quarantine. This is a 'hot zone' as far as they're concerned. They're watching for something very like the plague, and they'll sacrifice any individual to contain it."

"What kind of 'plague'?"

"I can't talk about it," he said firmly. "I absolutely will *not* talk about it."

"What are you saying?"

"If you breathe a word of anything we've discovered, you'll be terminated."

"Terminated.' And that means?"

"Assassinated."

She took a sharp breath, then began laughing uneasily. "This is a joke, right? A put-on. You wouldn't!"

"Probably not, but someone would. I'm telling you this for your own safety. I'm dropping the bull now. I've put up with your garbage in the interest of finding out what I needed to know. Now I have, and if you push me, you'll find I'm not the long-suffering government shill you've taken me for. These people are to be left alone; do you understand me?"

"But—just a short while ago, up at the bunkers—you didn't seem to believe any of this!"

"That has no bearing on what I believe now."

"You're a damn hypocrite."

He shrugged.

She attempted changing tack. "Come on, David! We've wound up with more questions than answers on this trip. Aren't you intrigued at all?"

"No. It's not our place to tamper with these people."

Montmartre twisted her cap in her hands. "How dare you—"

"There are things in this world bigger than both of us. This has nothing to do with you or your father. These people, the stonemasons—they're doing something that could save the world. You *will* leave them alone. Do you understand?"

Montmartre scooted away from him across the damp ground and sat up in horror. "My God . . . I knew I didn't like you, from the moment I met you." She shook her head sadly. "You son of a bitch."

He said nothing, although he wanted to so very badly. There was no way he could ever make her understand. Anything he said to explain himself would fall on ears made deaf by sadness and loss.

I lost my father too. It's not quite the same thing, but he's as dead to me as yours is, and I have no way to show him who I am now.

I cannot make him proud of me, no matter what I do.



Nguyen awoke with the sickening sensation of falling between worlds. For a moment he was a blank slate, unaware of where or who he was, only knowing that something was terribly, devastatingly *wrong*. His eyes popped open and for a moment he imagined the disorienting sight of the stars sliding across the heavens in a bizarre whorl, like time-lapse photography.

Then the motion stopped, and he was enveloped in a muffled hush. The utter lack of sound reminded him of the moment before the stonecutters' blasting began by the waterfall, with Montmartre . . .

"So. It happens," said Ngoc Huang, who sat on his haunches near David. He too stared at the night sky.

Nguyen scrambled to his feet. "What? What is happening?"

"The woman you brought with you. She has gone back up the White Horse and has disturbed the balance of things."

David looked around wildly. Allison Montmartre's sleeping pad was vacant, and she was nowhere to be seen.

"That goddamn woman . . ." he muttered in English.

Ngoc Huang sighed. "The heavens change tonight. Our time comes to an end, and our ancient knowledge is no longer of any use. We have done what we could to keep the beast within the mountain, but all is now lost. We will pass away as the new age begins."

Again, for a maddening second, Nguyen thought he saw the stars waltzing across the vault of the sky. He forced his eyes away.

"Where did she go?" he demanded.

"She went back up the mountain," the old man said. "I told you this."

"But *where*?"

"There is only one place she could go."

"You're a lot of help, you know that?" Nguyen said. He fumbled by his daypack and grabbed his binoculars. With their IR filters, he'd be able to see her in the darkness on the mountain. "You can stay here and wait for the end of the world," he snarled at Ngoc Huang. "I've got to find her."

The old man merely shrugged.

David started away. He'd gotten maybe twenty feet when he heard Ngoc Huang cry, "Stop, younger brother! Stop!"

Nguyen turned back and saw the old man shuffling toward him, bearing some kind of artifact in his hands.

"Take—take this with you. It may be the only thing that will work."

"What is it?"

"It is one of our protective stones. The Western woman has disturbed the circle; this may right things. You must place it in the circle."

"I—I don't even know where the circle is," Nguyen said. He took the

six-inch, roughly circular stone from Ngoc Huang's shaking hands and turned it over. On one side was inscribed a number of symbols, including a simple five-pointed star.

"You will know it when you see it," the old man said.

"Come with me, older brother," Nguyen said suddenly. "Help me."

"I am too old and ill. I will make the going slower. Go, now."

Nguyen nodded. Without another word, he turned and started back up Bach Ma, disappearing from the stonecutters' campsite into the ominous, yawning night.

The only sounds he heard were the crunching of his boots on the path and his ragged breathing. From the black jungle to either side he heard nothing—not the rustle of a lizard or rodent, not a chitter from an inquisitive monkey, not even the sigh of the wind through the trees. The air was still and heavy.

Phosphorescence, dim and yellow, flickered near the peak of the mountain.

He raised his binoculars to his eyes and saw nothing, not even a hint of the glow ahead. Without the binoculars, he could see it dance and shimmer against the sky.

A cold fire. The sight of it felt like expanding slivers of ice in his heart.

His teeth were clenched so tightly that his jaw ached.

How could Montmartre have done this?

The ground rumbled beneath his feet, as if something were stirring from an ancient slumber.

The beast. The beast in the mountain.

Nguyen paused momentarily, feeling those shafts of ice move into his veins. He remembered Montmartre's words at the first bunker—"*There are pockets of people who still worship these creatures, and are devoted to bringing them back to cleanse the world's surface of all humanity.*"

What if the stonecutters were actually working toward that end? What if he had been tricked into doing their bidding?

The image of Ngoc Huang's haunted, defeated eyes came back to his mind.

No matter what else they were, they were not the eyes of a man who longed for the death of the world.

Nguyen could imagine his own eyes looking like that, after a lifetime of working for Delta Green.

A *basso profundo* rumbling sounded beneath Nguyen, and the earth . . . moved.

The effect was like an eight-pointer on the open-ended Richter scale. Nguyen flew off his feet, landing about a yard away from where he'd

stopped climbing. Smaller aftershocks continued shaking the ground as he staggered upright.

No more time to wait.

He sprinted up the hill, only the balls of his feet touching the ground. It felt almost as if he were flying. The cool night air rushed past his face.

The source of the sickly yellow phosphorescence became visible now, in a small flat area near the top of Bach Ma. A twenty-foot circle of fine mist, a spectral cloud more pale than pale, hovering over a dead area on the ground.

Holding his arms out like a tightrope walker, Nguyen kept a precarious balance outside the circle, studying it warily. There was definitely a correlation between the glow and the movement of the mountain, as if the glow were taking life from the earth itself . . . or perhaps whatever was in the mountain was taking its sustenance from the glow.

The dead space beneath the phosphorescence was decorated with the same pattern of sigils as on the granite disc handed to Nguyen by old Ngoc Huang. The phosphorescence flickered around the five points of a six-foot-wide star at the center of the circle. At each point was set a disk like the one Nguyen held.

Except one.

And at that point of the star was a hole. The phosphorescence led there, as if it were a liquid being drained into that dark space. Dark with the utter absence of light. So dark Nguyen could barely look at it, because he felt it was eating at his sight.

Then he discovered he'd been approached.

With an unearthly, grinding shriek, something leapt at Nguyen and knocked him roughly to the ground, then stood in a low crouch and *hissed*.

He shook his head.

It was Allison Montmartre.

Or had been. It wore her tattered hiking clothes, and dirty blonde hair trailed out from underneath a hideously out-of-place baseball cap. Twin red eyes blazed forth from a blackened, disfigured face filled with leprosy plaques. Its skin, everywhere, was covered with the same sores.

"David." Its hiss was a horrible approximation of Montmartre's gravelly voice. "You . . . were right."

"Allison?" He struggled not to look away from her blazing eyes, not to show any sign of disgust or horror at her appearance. "What happened to you?"

She spoke haltingly, in obvious pain. "I ignored what you said . . . I thought I could . . . come up here . . . and take some photos . . . maybe get some . . . physical proof. And when I . . . took one of the stones . . . it burned me . . . it burned into me . . . oh, God, it's still . . . burning me!" She

howled and wept, and Nguyen had to look away from her, unable to face this once-proud woman.

"Do I look . . . that bad . . . David? Do I . . . really . . . look that bad?"

"Allison," he said, attempting to keep his voice steady. He didn't move an inch from where he lay. "You're sick. Come with me and I can get you some help."

She stared at him, distrustful. "You said . . . I would be . . . assassinated."

"There's no harm done." He reached his right hand up toward her. "I promise; nothing will happen to you."

Another tremor shook the ground beneath them.

"How can you . . . *say* that?" she shrieked. "Can't you . . . feel the beast awakening? I know . . . everything now, David . . . As soon as I touched the stone . . . and it burned me, I knew . . . I knew all the horrors of all the eons . . . locked away under this piteous world . . . It's coming now, David. It comes for us."

She leapt at him. He rolled away. With a shriek of disappointment, she landed on bare ground, and glared at him as he struggled to stand.

Clutching the granite sigil given him by Ngoc Huang, David Nguyen hopped toward the circle of phosphorescence. He heard her land behind him, felt claws sink into his tender Achilles' tendons. He fell again but crawled on his forearms like he'd been taught at Quantico, his teeth gritted against the pain, prodded by the knowledge that if he failed, it would be the end.

"*Damn . . . you!*" hissed the Montmartre-thing as she hung on grimly, ripping Nguyen's tendons. "*You . . . must . . . stop!*"

She drew herself up his legs, digging into his calves and then his thighs with those dagger-like nails. Through the dust raised by their struggle on the dead ground, he could see the five-pointed star drawing steadily nearer.

Five feet.

Four feet.

Three feet . . .

Blood welled up, warm and wet, where she pierced his skin. "*I . . . hate . . . you!*" she wailed as she reached his waist.

Nguyen's right arm strained toward the point of the star. Only two feet away, but he could not move another inch with the full weight of the creature on his body. The hole was so close . . . so close. But he had failed. He couldn't move.

Claws sank into his back.

And a pair of scarred, sandalled feet entered Nguyen's field of view. The granite disc, covered in sigils, was gently pried from his weakened grasp.

Montmartre wailed, "*No!*"

The old man placed the granite disc into the hole.

Plugging it.

The phosphorescence didn't fade away. It simply *ended*.

Darkness fell like a soft black shroud over the peak of Bach Ma.

The ground gave one final shudder, and with the last of his consciousness, Nguyen imagined he heard something deep within the mountain roaring in impotent anger.

The stonecutters bore David Nguyen down the mountain on an improvised pallet. Ngoc Huang strode beside him, talking gently with Nguyen about the history of the stonecutters and why they had isolated themselves on Bach Ma, the White Horse, in their lonely vigil. The old man's sense of purpose in life seemed restored.

"I promise that you will not be disturbed on our account," Nguyen said, hoping it was the truth. "The people for whom I work are very circumspect about such things."

The old man smiled, somewhat sadly. "I believe you. But if they do not come again, others will. It is our duty to make sure they do not unleash the beast in the mountain."

Nguyen nodded. There was only one other thing on his mind.

Doctor Allison Montmartre.

He knew she hadn't meant to set the events of the previous night in motion. She'd only wished to rehabilitate her father's reputation . . . and perhaps bolster her own in the process.

And as payment for her single-mindedness, she had changed. . . .

The group of stonecutters had passed the end of the dirt road and were now walking on the cracked asphalt leading to Cau Hai.

A small group of children saw them coming first, and ran, screaming for their elders.

Slowly, the entire population of the village filled the road, silently staring at the ghostly visitors from Bach Ma.

The stonecutters lay Nguyen's pallet down on the street.

He groaned and shifted himself to a sitting position, looking up at Ngoc Huang's kindly, mottled face. "I wish you luck, older brother. We are very much alike in our duties, you and I. We both guard against the darkness."

The old man merely nodded, the shadow of a smile playing around his lips. Then, without another word, the stonecutters turned and began walking away from the village. Back toward the mountain, their home and guard post.

Back toward the newest member of their small band.

Nguyen looked down at the battered aqua-foam cap in his hands, reflecting on it guiltily. A few stray strands of blonde hair still clung to the

plastic clasp in back. She had become docile once the force in the mountain had been contained, but her mind had been blasted. Ngoc Huang had said that, sadly, she would never recover; those few people in his band who had contracted their leprosy from the mountain had no self will. They could follow instructions, like automata, but they were mute, their faces forever impassive. Nguyen reflected that it would probably be best if she remained with these people for good. But that was impossible.

The university would follow up on her, as would her friends. It would draw attention to Bach Ma. As soon as he could contact Delta Green, he'd have her picked up. He wondered what story Alphonse would use to cover her case. No doubt she would spend the rest of her life in a government hospital. And no doubt Delta Green would be watching her.

David Nguyen looked up to find himself surrounded by the people of Cau Hai: all speaking at once, asking a million questions he could never hope to answer. The villagers encircled him; he felt their warmth and vitality in waves. "Welcome back," a little girl cried out. "Welcome home!" shouted a young woman.

He smiled at them, sadly. He wasn't home, would never truly be at home, anywhere, not in a world where he had to pursue the work he did, not with what he knew. But he felt a fierce solidarity with the lepers. He would never have the luxury of pleasing his father, but he accepted that now. He looked at the clean faces about him, and then closed his eyes for a moment, trying to replace them with the scarred, mottled ones he'd so recently studied, to remember. That reminder would symbolize the truth he had chosen for himself. A hand was thrust his way. He shook it absently, and then glanced back to the brooding mists over the mountain. ▲

A professional computer game-reviewer and pundit, Martin has written regular columns for the field's top publications and has published fiction in Amazing Stories. Here he demonstrates both technological savvy and an unsettling familiarity with the minutiae of terrible occult magic, suggesting an Innsmouth-worthy hybridization between these two disparate fields. The unpleasant result, embodied in the character of Count Cyber, lends the following tale a disturbing modernity and credibility.

This tale reveals some of Alphonse's procedural secrets and presents a strong new female agent, who emerges through a years-long montage of horror, tragedy, and grief to the point of a terrible decision, where past sacrifices may decide the ultimate fate of Delta Green.

THE FAST TRACK

MARTIN E. CIRULIS

When people think of Washington, D.C., it's always in the summer: hot sun blazing down on emerald lawns, pure white marble, and the air filled with the smell of sweet magnolia blossoms. It's not impossible to find it like that—the Washington of postcards and CNN backdrops—but there is another side of the city. After the leaves have all fallen, when the sun sets early and storms rage out of the Atlantic, clawing the coastline with long fingers of icy rain: those nights when the homeless are either lucky or dead, and a cop would rather shoot himself than get out of his cruiser.

Rachael let off a long string of gutter Spanish and leaned more heavily on her cane. The pain came in long pulses now, spreading up her thigh muscles and into her hip as the wet and cold seeped into her joints. She shifted the weight of the duffel bag a bit farther forward as a flicker of motion from up the street caught her eye. There might not be anything stronger

than a rat up there, but she didn't want to take any chances. She would be able to drop the heavy bag and bring the 9mm Beretta under her coat to bear in a blink; not fast enough to keep her alive against a pro, but enough to ruin anyone else's day. There was nothing to be done now but hunker into the wind and try to keep the rain from blinding her completely. She had come too far, sold her soul too dear, to let nerves or rats turn her back now.

As she approached the alley, a single, sharp yowl, somewhere between human and stray cat, made her throw herself flat against the brick wall, cutting down any angle of fire. She waited for a long minute, not wanting to draw a pistol on a city street, but there was nothing more except a distant, fading beat.

She shouldered the bag again and edged her way along the wall until she could peer into the alley. It was empty, nothing but dumpsters and rotting relics of civilization. The beating had stopped. A chopper on the other side of town, maybe—the storm muffling the sound into a dull thud. Or some bird grown huge eating trash. She shuddered.

She had picked a storm like this for more than just the cover. She thought it would ground anything with wings that could spot her. She didn't think she could stand to see a bird, not tonight of all nights. She had come to truly hate them in the years since Grenada.

With nothing stronger than a vague sense of being watched, she had no excuse not to make her way towards the main concourse. Before long she was looking at a steep flight of stairs behind the Interior Building, stairs that led down to the network of access tunnels beneath the capital. Again, from above came a deep beat. Rachael looked up into the storm one more time before she started to make her way painfully down the cement steps.

"Fucking birds," she muttered.

No matter how hard she tried, she could never remember anything except their eyes. Hundreds of tiny white eyes screaming up at her out of the jungle. But she knew that most of the Huey's cockpit view must have been feathers. They had bodies; she could feel them slamming against the chopper like 20mm slugs; the choking must have been from their bodies exploding against the blades so thickly that her RPM warning buzzer screamed louder than anyone on board. For the canopy to crack and then shatter, the bodies must have been smeared across it again and again; in seconds there must have been nothing to see but blood, and feathers of every conceivable color.

But all she could ever remember were their tiny, unblinking eyes coming at her, and the profound, instantaneous sense that a single mind stared through all of them.

And then there was the bang and roar of the left Pratt flaming out, followed a second later by the right, and the chopper simply fell out of the air.

The next thing she remembered, she was staring down at the dark

floor of the jungle, held up by one seat strap, blood pouring from her broken nose, spitting out feathers. She painfully looked around, but her co-pilot wasn't there anymore; the splintered stump of a massive branch speared through the deck where his seat had been. She tried to twist carefully around to see if either of the two medics had survived, but the back of the chopper had torn away on impact.

"Hey, Lieutenant! Rache! Down here! We're all okay!"

She shook her head trying to stop the ringing. When her vision cleared again, she was relieved to see that Torq and the medics had somehow survived the crash and had made it to the ground safely. She was just about to cry her relief and start looking for a way down, when a woman's screams coming through the treetops brought her up short.

"Don't! Don't go down there. Hang on! I'm coming along the trees for you! Just don't go to them!"

If she hadn't been hanging upside down after narrowly surviving a catastrophic crash, she might have laughed at how bizarre this was, but the note of terror in that voice made her afraid of something more profound than falling.

"Ignore her!" her crew called up from below. "Everything's fine. Just undo your belt, hang down, and we'll catch you." They smiled and raised their arms as if supplicating.

She shook her head, trying to clear the roar of blood long enough to let her think. They were making sense; it was only twenty or so feet down and she did want to get out of there before that crazy woman could reach her. Straining to see off to the side, she spotted the branches shuddering as something climbed across towards her. She reached for the belt release but couldn't make her hands work properly. There was something wrong.

"C'mon, Rache! We don't have all day," they chanted. All smiles and gleaming eyes.

It was too much. She fumbled clumsily with the belt clasp with one hand while holding on tightly with the other. Suddenly something burst through the branches and scrambled towards her. A mass of hair, torn skin, and bloody clothes—like a madwoman descended from a chimpanzee. Rachael prepared to drop, death preferable to facing this nightmare.

"Jump!" her crew cried.

The madwoman looked down at the callers and froze, terror obvious even through the dirt smeared across her face. She looked up again at Rachael hanging there upside down and then back again at the ground.

Rachael continued to work the seatbelt without taking her eyes from the other woman. "Just don't come any closer! I've got a gun here . . . somewhere . . ."

The mention of a gun brought the madwoman up short; she stopped

shimmying across the limb and just stared at Rachael, who could now make out the remains of a UCLA T-shirt and a rope coiled over the madwoman's shoulder.

"Oh God," she whispered in a voice hoarse from screaming. "You're not here for me? You're not Section Green?"

"Section Green? What the fuck are you talkin' about? I'm medivac . . . off the Tarawa."

"Shoot her! Shoot her!" cheered Torq and the medics.

The madwoman seemed not to notice them. "Shit! Shit! Bloody hell! . . . You have no idea why we're here, do you?" she asked in a voice that degenerated into a crazed laugh.

"Jump, Rache! Jump!" The chorus was angry now.

"Listen . . . Rache?" The madwoman started inching closer again. "Rachael?" She squinted at the uniform. "Lieutenant? Listen to me. I can't explain here, but you have to trust me." She leaned out as far as she could, dangling the nylon rope. "You don't even have to believe me . . . Just look down . . . look at the ground . . . look what it's done to your crew."

Rachael shook her head one last time to force the surreality back into the concussion it was obviously springing from. She looked down and concentrated hard. At first there was nothing except the dark jungle floor that she'd expected, but then she began to realize it wasn't just dark; it was absolutely black in the spaces between tree trunks. Only where the odd beam of light made it through the green canopy did the darkness glint with silvery points like the night sky on a moonless night. At first Rachael thought she had somehow been out longer than she'd imagined and had gotten turned around, that she was staring up past the trees into the night.

But then she saw him, Torq, Corporal McGonigle, her friend and copilot for going on two years, standing there surrounded by the darkness, his arms raised up to catch her, his mouth half opened in the same hick half-grin she had come to know so well . . . but where there should have been those gleaming Midwest teeth, those same shining-blue Irish eyes, there was only black, starry darkness. . . .

And suddenly she knew why a division of Marines had descended on a tiny paradise island.

She screamed, even as the black ichor flowed out of their eyes and mouths and coiled up to take her.

Water poured down the stained white stone and splattered off the top of the card reader. The red light kept blinking long enough to make her twitch with impatience and start casting wary glances up into the rain. She had been working electrical maintenance for the fed buildings for two years now. Her trivial security rating, enough for her to pull dead rats out of

wiring tunnels without a secret service man standing guard, should still have been enough to grant access even without the embedded Delta Green override. Just as she was resigned to figuring out how to take the thing apart without the rain shorting it, the green light began to flicker and the maintenance door clicked open.

She bit down on a whoop of relief and pushed through the doorway and then slammed it shut behind her. There was barely room in the tiny five-by-five holding hall for her and her duffel bag, but she had managed it when the speaker came on.

"Uh, ma'am? State your business and hold your ID up to the camera please." The man's voice sounded young and rocky; she must have woken him up in his warm and cozy security room a mile away under the Pentagon.

She went for her wallet instead of her gun, but not by much. "Rachael Logan. Electrical fault in tunnel j6."

There was silence for a moment as he examined her picture and she forced herself to calm down with the breathing exercises Cassandra had taught her.

"Okay, ma'am. Go on through and sign in at the first checkpoint you come to." The far door buzzed open.

"I know the drill."

As she hauled herself through the doorway, she couldn't help laughing at what a little Green Beret she had become over the years. When she had been a chopper jock, before Grenada, she hadn't even been sure she could shoot somebody close up with a pistol. Now she was ready to blaze away at anything that looked at her the wrong way.

"You gotta fuckin' love those job-acquired survival skills," she muttered as she made her way down the white cinderblock corridor, shedding water with every step.

It was coming down by the numbers but she still couldn't shake the sick feeling inside. The rural New York farmhouse was painted in shades of leprous green by the phosphorous eye of her night goggles. None of the windows showed light, but the air behind the house twinkled with pale green sparks soaring into the air. The cultists had one hell of a bonfire going; the goggles would be useless once she and her team broke around the shadow of the house.

Rachael sighed as she took off the clumsy headgear and tossed it into her open assault pack on the ground. A hand rested lightly on her shoulder.

"Getting jumpy, hon?" the other woman asked.

Rachael shrugged off the hand. "No more than usual when I'm spending the weekend stomping yuppies with delusions of grandeur. The Order of Crystal Essence, my ass!" She appreciated Cassandra's presence, especially when they had been briefed to expect some kind of ceremony, but even

after three years together, the woman just had no military sense. Even though Rachael was no more regular Army than her cell mates were now, she still tried to maintain the illusion when they were performing a raid.

Rachael glanced over at the four-man team huddled up behind them. Just an hour ago she had briefed the Immigration men with her best hell-brimstones-and-Wetbacks speech, convincing them that this was nothing more than a bust of some Caribbean sangria festival filled with coke-crazed, shifty-eyed foreigners without papers. Her Delta Green cell was just here to make sure no more hitchhikers came to bad ends, and that a couple of talented individuals went down in the short but brutal gunfight that was going to erupt.

"With any luck we'll be long gone with anything actually dangerous before they realize they have the governor's son in custody." Cassandra chuckled in the darkness, trying to lighten the obvious tension.

"Maybe." Rachael checked her watch again, cupping her hand against any light escaping from the readout. "C'mon, Wilson . . . check in . . ." she muttered.

"Look, Rachael. I'm not so far gone that I can take this bunch any lighter than they deserve, but there's nothing for you to be jumpy about. Paul has been at this longer than either of us and he'll check in at T-minus-four like he always does. Sheesh! Romance blooms and suddenly you're the nagging grandmother of the cell. Remember, that's still my post, you Marine Corps reject."

Rachael snickered quietly in the darkness. "Listen, college girl, the second I need your artsy-fartsy comments on my social life, you'll be the second to know. Like I need all this urban-commando ghostbuster shit anyway. Ask me again how thrilled I am that it was my chopper that caught your candy-ass distress call." She picked up her HK for the fiftieth time in the past hour and checked the thermal sight against the night sky until the other woman stopped chuckling. "Look, Cass, I know I'm being paranoid but it's not just because of what's started with Wilson and me. I've got a bad feeling about this raid. I mean, after Alphonse insisted you come . . ." They both knew Cassandra wouldn't be there at all that night if their leader hadn't expected some mojo.

Cassandra sighed. "You're right, hon, but I'm just trying to tell you to step back into yourself a bit. Don't forget who any of us are."

Rachael sighed and grudgingly admitted the point to herself. This wasn't the time to get edgy. Paul and half a dozen of his best DEA buddies were hunkered down out there with enough firepower to grind the chanters hamburger-fine if they got uppity.

"Besides," added Cassandra, "Junior here's sleeping like . . . well, a baby, I suppose." She roughly patted the small mound of her belly hidden by her bulky camo jacket.

Right, Rachael thought with revulsion. It would be kicking if they'd summoned anything. While the darkness hid the blanching of her face, Rachael did nothing to disguise the shudder in her voice. "Oh fuck, Cass, how can you do that?"

"What?"

"That! Act like it was normal to have it inside you. How can you be so casual about that . . . that thing!"

"Look, hon, I'm sorry, but what's the alternative? Go after myself with a butcher knife?" Cassandra gave a sound somewhere between a bitter laugh and a desperate cough. "What one crazy bitch gave birth to another crazy bitch can suck back up."

She felt ashamed, reminded full-force of the sacrifice Cassandra had made. The alternative would have been to nuke the island and every life, guilty and innocent, on it. "Shit, Cass, I didn't mean— Look, I . . . Shit, I didn't mean anything except . . ."

"Except I'm getting to be a spooky crazy bitch?"

Rachael sighed. "Pretty much."

"I'm sorry, hon, but it's either morbidly amused or bug-fuck crazy. It's not like I was going to settle down with a nice boy and have pups, anyway. And if having this thing in my womb keeps it contained and gives us an edge on these freaks, I'm just going to have to go with the odd, tasteless—"

"Reggie calling Veronica. Archie and friends are still partying hard. We are ready to crash here in T-minus-four. No sign of any Weatherbees. Over."

Rachael jumped and adjusted her headpiece quickly to answer. "Veronica here. Read you on that T, and Grundy confirms your negative on the Weatherbee situation. We have all the detentions ready here. Just make sure there are enough kids left to use them on. Over."

"Roger that, Veronica; we'll try not to hurt anybody who can sue. Just save a dance for me afterwards. Over."

"Don't I always? Wait for my go signal and be careful. Veronica out."

"You're cute when you nag. Waiting on your go. Reggie out."

Rachael snapped down her night goggles and expected to find her cell mate wearing her best "told-you-so" look, but instead she found her friend slowly stroking her belly with perplexity on her face. "What is it, Cass? Is it awake? Are they bringing something across?"

Cassandra continued to run her hands over the abomination inside her. "No, no, Junior's fine . . . No boiling around, nothing, not even that background moan."

Rachael shuddered and picked up her weapon for yet another final check. "Well, no news is good news. Just give me a shout if it perks up." After a quick look over the rest of her equipment, she signaled over the Immigration officers and ran through their final briefing, warned them to

give the DEA boys room to gather up any drug evidence; but when she ordered their watch synch with hers, she was appalled to discover it was still five minutes until jump-off.

With rising panic, she triggered her headset. "Reggie! This is Veronica; come in please! Reggie, come in!"

The quiet hiss of static.

"Dammit, Reggie! This is Veronica; I am still at T-minus-five . . . We are not synched! Do not jump off!"

Cassandra now had a hand under her jacket and talked with difficulty as she concentrated. "What's wrong?"

"Look at your watch, Cass! Wilson called in way too early. He—"

Suddenly the other woman gave a cry of shock and would have fallen had not a confused agent grabbed her arm. Rachael was there a second later and brushed him angrily aside. "Cass, what now?" she hissed.

Cassandra clutched her arm hard enough to hurt. "It's not sleeping . . . It's happy!"

"Huh?"

"Jesus Christ, Rachael! It's feeling safe! They've already brought something through, and it's strong enough to make Junior feel bloody safe!"

Just then Rachael's headset clicked to life. "Roger that, Veronica. We have your jump confirmation and we're going in! We'll try and save some yuppies for you. Reggie out."

"Oh god, oh god, oh god." Rachael opened the channel and shouted into her headset. "Reggie, abort! Abort! I confirmed no launch! This channel is compromised. Possible Weatherbee in strike zone! Abort!"

Nothing. Dead air.

"Paul! We've been set up! Get your men out! GET FUCKING OUT!"

More silence.

Suddenly Cassandra was pulling Rachael to her feet. "Come on, hon! Don't lose it now; we can still reach him." She turned to the Immigration agents. "It's gone bad. Follow us in, safeties off, and shoot anything without a badge that isn't lying facedown!"

The men looked appalled but to their credit not a single one stayed back. They stumbled across the broken ground trying to keep up.

They were still three hundred yards from the farmhouse when the sound of the bullhorn reached them. Rachael yelled into her radio one last time and swore as if each word would make her faster.

There was less than two hundred yards to go when the screaming started, the guns roared, and something obscene howled its joy in the night.

"Come on, Logan; you know I need to see that work order before I can let you through the gate." The Secret Service man sighed, trying to keep one

eye on the maintenance woman and the other on his portable TV. The gate he referred to was a slab of battleship steel that sealed the hallway a meter behind his booth.

"Yeah, yeah. Give me a fuckin' break. In case you haven't noticed, suit-boy, it's pissing out there. You want me to keep my paperwork handy, or dry? You can't have both on a night like tonight." Rachael had thrown her duffel bag up onto the edge of the X-ray machine conveyor and was rummaging through it.

"Could you kind of hurry it up, Logan? Drew Barrymore is on Letterman again tonight." His eagerness was clear, even over the tinny speaker that carried his voice through the armored glass walls of his security booth.

"Oh fuck, don't let this old broad keep you from your little titty show." She took her time burrowing through tools and spare wiring for a few more moments and then triumphantly came up with a crumpled piece of pink paper. She walked over to where a small drawer had slid open on the security booth and placed her ID and the work order in it. It slid back in, delivering the contents to the impatient security man, who barely glanced at the ID while he studied the work order number before entering it into his workstation. When the drawer slid back out, it contained a portable eye scanner that Rachael casually held up to her face after brushing her wet hair out of her eyes.

"More power dropouts in Sector 4? What's going on with that?" He asked as the filed priority maintenance request scrolled up his screen.

"Don't look at me, Jefferson. I keep telling them we're getting leak-over from a storm drain, but do they fucking listen? Noooooooo. They just drag my sorry ass out of my comfy chair on every shitty night of the year."

He snorted his own opinion of the civil service. "Well everything checks out. Send your bag on through."

She smiled as she sent her duffel bag on through the X-ray machine and then into the small airlock. While Delta Green's covert status made life difficult most of the time, it was perfect for getting friendlies to do things like make maintenance requests without asking any awkward questions.

She casually watched the Secret Service man go through her things. Logically she shouldn't be overly concerned—everything she needed was either disguised as normal electrical equipment or ditched inside the hollow handles of her tools—but she was so tight inside that seconds seemed like minutes. "Now who's the one slowing things down, suit-boy? I'd like to be in bed by the time the sun comes up, y'know," she said with forced casualness. "I promise not to blow up the White House on your shift!"

"Hey! That shit's not funny, Logan. My career would be shit." He looked up at her. "Four rolls of duct tape?"

"What do you think holds this whole fuckin' place together?" she laughed a little too loudly. She cocked her head. "Hey, isn't that a girlish giggle I hear?"

Jefferson frantically looked back at the portable on his desk. "Oh shit, I'm missing it!" He zipped her duffel back up in a hurry and shoved it out of the airlock as he buzzed her in and stepped back into his booth.

"See you in a few hours, Jefferson."

"Yeah, Logan, whatever." He already had his face up close to the small screen.

The steel door swung open.

"I am sorry about your . . . friend."

Rachael looked from the sidewalk with a start, hand darting under her coat. She stumbled just enough to send a streak of fire through her right knee, the skin still raw from where the doctor had taken the bandages off the day before. "Who the fuck are you?" she growled at the distinguished black man who had stepped in front of her.

He gave her a tight-lipped smile and casually left his hands open at his sides to show he was unarmed. "Someone who knows what happened and . . . shares your grief."

There was something deeply dangerous about this casual reference to Delta Green business out here on the street. In public.

"I appreciate that, but skiing accidents are hardly something to grieve over." She nearly bit through her tongue keeping her face passive, her voice level and bored.

The dark man's smile twitched. Annoyance? Amusement? She couldn't tell, but even after all she had seen and survived, that single twitch made her muscles tense.

"Come now, Agent Veronica," he growled in a rich baritone. "I am on your side. I merely wanted to console you on Agent Reggie's death, and congratulate you on finishing the raid yourself in the face of much . . . shall we say . . . adversity?" His gaze slowly covered the townhouse windows that overlooked them, as if to indicate there was a line of public indiscretion that even he was unwilling to cross.

Rachael didn't take her eyes off his as she pulled the gun from her holster and leveled it under her coat. "Okay, 'friend.' I don't have a fucking clue who you are, but you have one sentence to explain it to me before another brave Washington citizen defends herself from a mugger with lethal force."

He smiled, showing white, perfect teeth. A laughing tiger. "Very good, Agent Veronica. The command tier was concerned your recent trauma might have left you . . . vulnerable. I will inform them otherwise. I am Agent Black, Delta Green for twenty years. I command a second-tier cell and report directly to Alphonse. I have no other proof than the things I have said. Shoot if you feel the need." The smile didn't waver.

The pain from her knee was nearly blinding now. The doctors said it

was almost completely healed, but it burned now like her kneecap was glowing charcoal instead of medical ceramic. If this man was an infiltrator, he already knew as much as she did; it wouldn't hurt to humor him and figure out what was going on. She lowered the gun into her inside pocket. Somewhere high in the dark, a seagull beat its wings against the heavy summer air. "All right. Suppose I'm feeling gullible tonight. Since when does Command offer regrets in person? The usual lines of communication would do for this. Green isn't exactly the touchy-feely kind of service."

His smile ground down. "You weren't listening, Rachael Logan." Her real name came like a slap. His annoyance disturbed her deeply, but confirmed his story. He must be command staff of something with that attitude. "I said . . . I am on your side, and I am sorry about the death of your friend and fellow agent. Do you understand this?" Each word hammered into her like a fall of stone. His eyes were completely black, yet she couldn't bring herself to think how wrong that was.

"Y-Yes . . . I understand you."

"Good. Now I want you to know that some of us think a great disservice was done to your cell. An unnecessary one."

She shook her head to break contact with those eyes and concentrated on the reality of the cracked cement under her feet. "What? What do you mean?"

"Paul Wilson did not have to die."

Her anger, dulled by weeks of painkillers, suddenly flared back into life. "You people finally moved on my report, didn't you? We were set up!" she spat. "Who! Tell me who!" She looked up, ready to grab his trenchcoat and throw him up against the tree behind him, but those eyes held her, warned her away. She would no more touch the dark man than she would reach through the bars of a cage to manhandle a leopard.

"Please . . . tell me who," she whispered.

The sounds of the city fled from them. He could have whispered the name with his dying breath from a block away, and Rachael would have heard it like a pronouncement from God.

"Alphonse."

She gave a short, painful bark of laughter. "What?!"

The man regarded her as if she were an especially slow circus animal. "A Cell knew of the existence of the creature you encountered and its . . . unique nature. Alphonse sacrificed the DEA team in order to make the creature vulnerable while feeding. Paul Wilson was sent to his death deliberately."

"I . . ." She breathed deeply and tried again. "I can't—don't believe you! Why are you telling me this?"

The smile returned. "I cannot influence Alphonse anymore, or even reach him, but I can follow my conscience. I thought you needed to know. It is up to you now."

"Me? What am I supposed to do with this? Find Alphonse and wring the story out of him?"

"That was my thought, actually. And I wish to help end this madness at the top of Delta Green before any other agents die needlessly. I cannot take a hand directly, but I will offer my services to you. Whatever it takes to convince you and help you to act, I will try to provide it with my . . . meager resources."

She opened the circuit panel and flipped a few breakers at random. The hard snaps echoed down the narrow service tunnel that extended hundreds of meters in either direction. Something clicked along the cement, and she looked frantically to either side. Rats always found a way in when it rained hard up on the surface, and she was counting on them to add another layer of distraction on the security system, but she was somehow terrified of seeing one tonight.

She sat dead still, willing her heart to slow down so the rush of blood wasn't a roar of white noise in her ears, but nothing else could be heard. The service tunnel had once more gone as quiet as any medieval catacomb.

"Don't lose it now, lady," she warned herself, even her own voice a welcome sign of life. "We're too fuckin' close now." She steeled herself for a few more moments and then walked a few feet farther down the tunnel to an intercom unit.

"Hey, Jefferson! You there? It's Logan here."

After a few moments, an annoyed voice boomed out of the speaker and she winced. "Yeah, Logan, I know it's you. Ain't nobody else poking around down here at this hour. What's up?" Frankenstein could sneak up on her while the Secret Service man was talking and she'd never hear a thing.

"Sorry to interrupt your late-night viewing pleasure. I just wanted you to warn the kids at monitoring that I was going to be shutting down conduits while I work on them. It's a real mess down here. So if sections of tunnel go off the grid, tell them not to get their panties in a knot and hit the panic button. I don't need a strike squad threatening to smear my brains on the wall while I'm hip deep in high-tension wires. Okay?"

"You're going to be screwing up the whole security system while you rack up killer overtime. Gotcha."

She held down the button and spat loudly—they was fighting words to the union electrician she had pretended to be for the past two years. "Y'know, suit-boy, for a little fuck who gets paid to sit on his pretty ass all night and watch TV, you sure are awfully bitchy. What's the matter, blonde keep her shirt on tonight?"

"Ah, fuck you too, Logan." The speaker crackled with his laugh. "Is that everything?"

"As far as I care, yeah. Just make sure Big Brother knows what's up."

"Sure, sure. See you later."

The speaker went dead.

She looked around warily as silence returned, afraid that something had snuck close during the brief conversation, but the tunnel was clear. She went back to the breaker panel and began carefully making sure the only ones that were open could be closed remotely farther down the line. With security forewarned that they were going to lose random chunks of surveillance throughout the night, she could make her way virtually unseen to her real destination. In another hour, she would be at the point of no return.

Torn between anticipation and despair, she picked up her bag and limped painfully through the labyrinth.

Two women huddled at the top of the half-ruined stairwell. One pulled a worn machine pistol from under her coat and flicked on the laser sights. The other, visibly pregnant, lay huddled on the floor, clutching her distended belly, rocking slowly back and forth. She may have been moaning softly, but the sound was drummed out by the thuds of dozens of feet stamping in rhythm on the floor above them. Bits of ancient plaster fell like hail around them and tumbled down stairs carpeted in trash, dirt, and shit. Spears of flickering orange light came through the gaping holes in the roof. The twisted, guttural chant reverberated through the gutted tenement building like the retching of a wounded god.

Rachael whipped around the doorjamb and covered the short flight of stairs to the roof. The tracks through the pigeon crap and old newspapers showed dozens had come this way but none had been left behind to guard. She supposed they thought the two corpses downstairs were enough to keep the neighborhood types away, and it wasn't like a cop was going to come into this part of town on a noise complaint. Satisfied there wouldn't be any mayhem until she kicked open the upper door, she crossed over to the other woman.

"Cass? Cass, c'mon, college girl." She shook her friend gently. "I need you here now. All of you. Just one more time." Cassandra's wild eyes focused slowly. "That's it, Cass. Don't let that party get to you. Remember who you are, Cassandra; remember what we're doing here."

"G-going hunting, hon? As usual?" The older woman trembled with the effort of a smile. "Two gals as pretty as us should really be doing something better with our week—" A series of brutal coughs rattled through her, forcing her to clutch her distended belly for strength. The last few coughs seemed to be merging with the chants above. "Sorry." She straightened up slowly.

"There we go. That's okay, Cass. This is the last bunch. I'm sure of it. Let's get this done and then you can rest." At the word "rest," Cassandra

seemed to draw strength and focus. Rachael ran her hand over her friend's dirty, matted hair and brushed it from her eyes. "We'll get you fixed right up. This Grenada hairstyle is so yesterday for you."

Cass just stared at her. "You swear this is the last of these Crystal Essence freaks? Swear that you'll be satisfied when this last bunch is dead, that we just mourn Paul like normal people and all this blood will end. We . . . we could go away somewhere."

Rachael helped her to her feet. "I swear. After this, your part of it's over."

"Oh, hon, just let it go. You already know more than anyone ever needs to." Cassandra tried to reach out a trembling hand to touch her face, but Rachael turned away.

"Soon . . . Now, can you sense one of those transparent blenders up there?" She began to carefully guide the other woman up the stairs, gun held ready with her other hand. There was too much noise for anybody to hear them walking or even talking, but she was taking no chances with surprise entrances or exits from the festivities.

At the upper landing, Cassandra began muttering singsong nonsense to herself and stroking her belly, unconcerned that the dirty shirt she wore had lost its lower buttons. In the flickering light, the graying, taut skin was clearly visible under her sliding hands. Where stretch marks would be forming from regular pregnancy, the skin was crinkling into hard, dark ridges, as if scales were slowly building themselves up. Something obscene writhed and twisted just under the skin.

"Come, little one; that's my boy. Reach out; I know it's so exciting. So many hearts . . . so much hunger. That's it . . . Let mommy see the bright shinies. There's a good baby."

Rachael felt the bile rise in her throat but refused to look away. She just forced herself to remember the price Paul had paid for not knowing how these monsters could slide between photons. His body flayed alive, so that Rachael could see his blood inside the beast and take aim while she screamed.

"Oh, Rache, it's bad, honey!" Cass's choked cry tore her from the dark terror of memory. "There's two of them hovering up there. Two! And they're helping to call down more from the stars. Oh God! They're going to grind up half of the belt before you can catch up with them. This is our fault! Everybody is going to die and it's our f—"

The slap caught Cassandra as she was trying to drag the both of them down the stairs. It fetched her up against the wall, and her head left a depression in the soft, moldy plaster. Cassandra spastically brought her hands up to ward off another blow, but Rachael gripped her wrists and pulled her face down so that their lips were almost touching. Rachael tried to hold Cassandra's gaze with her own.

"Cass! Stop it!" she spat. "Listen to me. We don't cause this shit. They

do! And we stop them. That's what we fucking do! That's what Paul died for. We stop them, or this ghetto dies. Us! No one else. Now do you remember the scroll I brought you? The one that's supposed to control these fucking invisible killing machines. Do you?" She shook Cass hard.

"Yes . . . yes I do, but they"—she yanked a hand free and pointed to the door—"are using the same bloody one, and I'm pretty sure there's a few more of them than me!" Her voice climbed towards hysteria again.

"Cass! I know, I know, but you've got our little equalizer here." Despite her attempt at a light tone, she couldn't quite bring herself to touch that mounded belly. "Just get it to help you seize control of those two . . . things, and turn them on their little friends before you send them on their way."

"No! Don't make me do this again, Rache! Overhearing this thing inside is one thing—I'm in control! But when I draw power from . . . It . . . I—I have to let it all the way in, and I'm not strong enough to push it all out again. Parts stay behind and whisper to me in my sleep. God, Rachael, can't you see how it grows every time?!"

"Shh, shhh! It's okay. You're just imagining it. It's the same size it's always been . . . It's like a cyst of some kind, and we'll get it taken out like one as soon as this is over."

"Liar."

She let go of Cassandra's wrist. "I know," she said, barely audible over the rising fervor beyond the door. "But please, do it? For Paul?"

Cassandra simply stared at her until the younger woman had to look away. "No, honey, not for Paul—for you. All of this. Always. For you." And with that, she slid slowly down the wall and began to mimic the chant all around them.

Rachael shook her head to clear it, and then glanced nervously at the cameras in the upper corners of the junction. They should still have been inert, but she watched them for any sign of movement, just to be sure.

From here on in, only her Delta Green status could get her out without jail time if things were to go sour. She had risen far enough up the covert ladder on the strength of her success that she had pull with a number of cells she had carefully brought in on raids. She had already alerted Agent Carter, whose day job placed him near the top of the Secret Service command chain, that she had a security op going on tonight and if anything red-lighted she would need him to bury it until she was clear.

In an organization of ghosts, she had become almost as known and trusted as Alphonse himself. In the two years since she had exterminated the Crystal Essence cult, Agent Veronica had broken up another half-dozen occult groups and delivered crucial information that had saved the lives of at least a dozen agents and friendlies. She was loosely affiliated with a second-

tier cell at the moment, and it was quite clear that a position in A Cell was only a matter of time. A decade spent building trust and respect.

And tonight it would pay off in justice.

She entered the tunnel junction and ran her ID through the card reader. While the amber light still shone, she quickly entered a six-digit code on the inset keypad. There was a tense few moments while she wondered if Agent Carter was more suspicious than she had thought, but then the little green light winked into existence and she knew the tunnel she wanted to enter had disengaged its floor sensors.

Justice.

As she continued down her path, she wondered if anybody would ever see it that way, or whether she would just be the Judas who had sold them all out for thirty pieces of emotional silver.

"Heh! When Mr. Black said I needed to do a favor for a friend, I never thought I'd be so happy to do it." The childish leer was all the more laughable as its owner was obviously convinced that no woman could resist it.

Rachael only held back from outright laughter by concentrating on the amazing number of blackheads the teenager had collected on his drawn, greasy face. Long, dyed-black hair hung in strips past his skinny shoulders. The dark man could not possibly have thought of someone more humiliating to ask help from.

"Look . . . Zippy, is it?" She rested a bit more weight on the cane—perhaps looking a bit more like the butch cripple would put off this little hacker prince. "Your . . . our friend, Mr. Black, says you can help me track down an anonymous mail server, get me access to the file system attached to it?"

The teenager leaned back in his old padded office chair and spread his knees wider, on the evident assumption that she would be unable to resist eyeing his crotch. "First of all, baby," he sneered as he pointed a finger towards her chest, "only Mr. Black calls me Zippy. To everyone else in the 'community,' including you club folks, I am Captain PK, King of the Hackers." He eyed her warily, as if she might dispute his claim; satisfied she was suitably impressed, he continued: "Now, have you got an initial site I can hack, baby?"

Her knuckles whitened around the head of the cane. "Sure, Zippy." She smiled coldly while her left hand fished through her pocket for a crumpled matchbook with an arcane IP address scribbled across the inside. She tossed it into his lap. "This was as far as I could go myself."

Zippy sneered and retrieved the matchbook. "Well, if this was as far as you could get, this should take, oh, maybe two or three minutes to get to the bottom of."

"Just do it, geekwad. Or can you type with stumps?"

He licked his thin lips. "Ohh, baby, whip me, beat me, set me on f—" She pulled up on the head of the cane just far enough for him to catch the glint of sharp blue steel. "Okay! Okay! Relax! I'm getting it done!" He spun in his chair and began flipping through screens and typing away on a set of keys that just hung loose from a circuit board.

Rachael looked over his computer setup. Apparently there was something about hacking that required all electronics be torn from their casings before use and spaghetti cables be strewn around like Christmas garlands. The only sign of original equipment was a dull-gray cylinder beside the terminal. While all manner of leads ran from the back, the cylinder maintained a factory finish and was amazingly free of the fine black film that coated just about every other smooth surface in the room. Looking at it more closely, she could see a wide seam that indicated the front was merely a hinged cover. Curious, she slipped closer and reached out a hand, but Zippy gave a little squeal of outrage and slapped at her arm.

"Hey, bitch! Don't touch the fucking equipment! Okay?"

"Bitch?" she repeated with quiet menace.

"Look, do you want the job done or not? I don't have to take this shit. You need me. In fact"—he stood up quickly, riding the wave of his indignation—"I don't have to put up with this shit at all! I—"

Rachael's hand shot out and gripped his throat. "Actually, Zippy, you do have to put up with this shit," she explained slowly and carefully. "Because I happen to know quite a bit about your Mr. Black, enough to have a sweet idea what will happen if I have to go back and renege on an arrangement with him simply because you got miffed." She looked around the room. "Hmmm, can we imagine what parts of you will be on which wall, after one of his 'friends' has been here to get your side of the story?"

Zippy's eyes bugged with terror, and the effort to shake his head from side to side quickly enough was causing his entire body to twist. She had to grip his throat tighter to keep from dropping him.

"Now the truth is, Zippy, that I do need your help, because I've just gone too far for too long not to get an answer. I need you to find and crack that Delta Green server and get at whatever files are stored there. So I promise not to touch your toys if you promise to hurry the fuck up. Get me what I need and then I'll go and tell Mr. Black what a clever little geek you are. All right?" She waited for a moment, and then nodded his head for him before dropping him back in his chair.

Zippy choked for a few seconds but turned back to his computer with only a few dark mutterings. Rachael ignored him, and the job at hand finally drew his complete attention.

As she looked over the rest of the chaotic studio, she couldn't help but be amazed and disgusted by the incredible amount and diversity of por-

nography stapled to the walls. Literally, there wasn't a single square inch of paint above knee level that wasn't covered in pictures of women engaged in all manner of sexual display and activity, from all-American centerfolds to carnal writhings so bizarre that it would have taken a magnifying glass and a zoologist to correctly identify all the players. Many of the older pictures, if you could date objects on this wall by how much of them were covered by other pin-ups, were obviously torn from magazines, but on the upper layers there were a disturbing number of obvious amateur shots of relatively mundane-looking women engaged in activities that would put a Roman off. Rachael wasn't sure if she was bothered more by the level of depravity involved, or the fact that this scrawny boy could get grown women to undress for him.

"Like 'em, huh?" Zippy was now leering at her over his shoulder.

"No, not really," she replied coldly. "I like my sex a little less . . . cartoonish, but I suppose it's exciting for someone like you."

He looked crestfallen, as if she had just turned her nose up at something he had painted. "Most of the freaky shit is my roomie's anyway," he finally said, and went back to the keyboard.

"Roomie?" She stared down at the single old futon mattress wedged along the far wall amidst a wasteland of empty chip bags and dip tins. She shuddered at the thought of sleeping arrangements.

Zippy didn't seem to notice her tone and continued to type away. "Yeah, my roomie—calls himself Count Cyber. Lamé, I know, but he likes it." Zippy looked over his shoulder to notice her looking at what passed for bedding in this room. "But, uh, he's not here much . . . He works! Swing shift!"

"And he knows about the jobs you do for Mr. Black?"

Zippy's laugh grated through the air. "Hey, who do you think introduced me? Mr. Black and Count C. go way back."

"I see."

Suddenly the young hacker slammed his palm on the desk, scattering a stack of circuit boards like so many old bones. "Shit!"

She jumped and raised her walking stick in front of her. "What?!"

He didn't turn her way, but just kept gesturing at the screen, as if trying to conjure an answer from the flickering beam of electrons. "This . . . this . . . fucked up shit! What the hell kind of fucked up anon server is this? This address you gave me doesn't go fucking anywhere. I can't even find the real server from this, never mind fucking crack it!"

As much as she liked to see this little cretin on the verge of tears, the thought of hitting a wall after all this was maddening. "Can't you track it or something?"

"Yeah, yeah-fuckin'-yeah. Easy to say, baby; harder to type. This fucking

thing hops nodes like a horny fuckin' bunny. Give me a second to think." He got up and began working with the connectors between the cylinder and the motherboard. "Looks like I gotta call in the Count on this one after all . . . Fuck!"

Rachael looked at her watch. "I thought you said this Count Cyber guy was at work." She didn't relish spending hours in this dump waiting on another geek, but there was no way she was going to leave without concluding this whole scavenger hunt.

"He, uh, is. I can just patch this shit over to him and . . . and he can give me a hand tracking one of your e-mails. Let me just hook up this, uh, deck here and then you sit your hard ass on down and send a communiqué to your mysterious boss, and that should be that." He continued to work with the hardware for another minute and then gestured for her to take his place at the keyboard. "There, it's all ready. Just telnet to your own ISP and then open that e-mail program. You send it, and the Count will follow it down the ol' light pipe."

"Whatever, just don't screw this up. I only have one field report to send this week, and I don't want to make anybody suspicious." She spent a few minutes rapidly typing out a message, and then sat back, prepared to send.

Zippy looked over her shoulder to make sure that all the rider programs were in place, and then he gave the cylinder a couple of taps. "For luck," he replied at her questioning look.

Something flickered across the screen faster than her eyes could track. "Okay," said Zippy, "we're ready. Attach this file here . . . and send the message . . . now!"

And with one anticlimactic click of the mouse, she let the wolves in through the back door of Delta Green. "There," she whispered. "It's d—"

Zippy grabbed her by the shoulders and tried to hoist her from the chair. "Yeah, yeah. Great. Now get out of my way and let the maestros work!"

She numbly let herself be pushed aside, suddenly terrified by what she might find out and what she would have to do if the dark man had told her the truth. Zippy was typing furiously and swearing to himself in a constant stream, some of it elated self-congratulation, some bitter frustration, as he ran into firewall after firewall trying to keep tabs on the Trojan message. While Rachael was far from being computer illiterate, she could no more keep up with what was going past the screen than she could assist in a brain surgery.

She had just about come to the conclusion that there was going to be no way through, when Zippy let out a shrill cry of triumph.

"That's it!" He slapped one hand on the hacking deck, pounding it like a tin drum. "Yes, we bad! Nobody stops the Cap'n and the Count!" Suddenly, a series of high-pitched hisses came from the deck and a series of windows began popping up all over the monitor. "Shit! Gotcha!" He looked

over his shoulder briefly. "Okay, crazy agent lady, we're in, but we only have a few minutes before the server figures out we aren't who we say we are. The Count can only change his clothes so many times. So what do you want?" He called up a directory of files.

She leaned forward and tried to catch a vital name from the list that was quickly scrolling away. "Fuck it," she snapped. "Get them all!"

"All of 'em?! I don't know if we got t—"

"Then just grab what you can!"

"Your wish, baby, is our command." A few more seconds of furious keystrokes. "Yes! And we are out inches ahead of the closing jaws of doom! Or in this case, out before the server caught on."

"Now what?"

He spun around merrily in his chair. "Now I just fire the gig of files I so cleverly stole over to the ol' Jaz drive and you get to spend the next week reading and thinking of ways to repay me."

"Not in your wildest dreams, Zippy. Maybe your boss will give you a cookie."

He rolled to the side of the desk and waited on the burner unit. "Oh, c'mon, secret agent lady, not even a single digital pic for me to worship from afar?"

"We'll see. Now did your friend get a copy of those files at his end?"

"No way, baby. It was me doing all the work; he was just tagging along on your e-mail."

"Good."

"And now the cookies are done, baby." He pulled the Jaz disk out and slipped it into a dirty case. "Here ya g—" He stopped dead with the Beretta just touching the tip of his nose.

Rachael reached out and plucked the case from his hands and slipped it into her coat pocket. "Thank you, Zippy. Now would you please get over to that wall very slowly?" She smiled sweetly and gave the gun a twitch in the direction she wanted him to go.

He obeyed with his mouth opening and closing silently, not a sound managing to make it past his shock and fear, until his back hit the wall—evidently imagining the bullet flying from the barrel. "Wh—why? I gave it all to you. Y—you don't need to do this!"

"Don't worry, Zippy. You'll survive this date if you're good, but I can't say the same for your little computer here." She raised her cane and the Hacker started to shriek. "I need to know what's inside Delta Green, but I don't have to let you or your boss in on it too." She brought the cane down hard on the desktop and electronics went flying. Two more blows spread open the guts of the machine while its owner slid down the wall. Keeping the gun and one eye on the sobbing Zippy, she sifted through the

wreckage for anything resembling a hard drive before turning her attention towards the cylindrical hacking deck.

Zippy caught her intent and screamed. "Nooo! You don't understand!" He staggered to his feet and tensed for a lunge. "There's no hard drive in there! You ca—"

Rachael shook her head and calmly shot him in the foot. Zippy fell back down clutching his leg and staring dumbly at the blood pouring out of the hole in his sneaker. Rachael tossed him a rag from the table. "Here, stuff this in the hole. You'll be fine if you get some disinfectant in it."

"Oh god o god o godogodo-fucking-GOD! You shot me?!"

"Yes, Zippy, and I'm almost sorry. Now sit still or the next shot will be through the shoulder." She swung backhanded and the heavy brass head of the cane smashed against the cylinder, flinging it against the far wall, cracking the case and shattering the plastic façade.

"Oh god no, bitch, you'll kill him!"

Rachael ignored him as the nature of the cylinder lay revealed on the floor. Instead of the mass of circuit boards she was expecting, behind the front plate was an ornate metallic plaque. In almost Art Deco style it had two knobs, a strange readout panel, and a single speaker grill. A rust-colored, viscous liquid dripped slowly from the crack in the side of it. When the thin, tinny voice filled the apartment, she almost made herself believe it was an antique radio.

"Zip! Zip-man, are you there? What happened? Did she split? I'm feeling kind of weird, man. Did I get surged or something?"

Horried, she hit it again, trying to make it shut up, but all she did was widen the crack. Small flecks of gray matter flowed out with the liquid.

"Stop it, bitch; you're killing Barry!" Zippy screamed. He staggered to his feet and tried to leap at her. Almost distractedly, she shot him in the thigh.

"Oh fuck, Zip! What's going on? I can't hear anymore. I feel funny, man. Did you get her picture? Download it to me! I want to make her do shit for us. Zip?"

She brought the cane down hard again. Revulsion powered the blows that drove the heavy brass head deep into the strange pearlescent metal. The speaker began to hiss and pop.

"Zip! Where are you, man! Where am I? Fuck, I can't remember how I got here. Help me!"

Rachael backed away as a large chunk of something gray and convoluted slipped out of the hole she had made. She brought her gun to bear on the small horror and backed slowly away as Zippy collapsed in hysterical cries of pain and anguish.

"Zip! Answer me! I . . . I . . . it's dark, Zach. I can't see shit no more . . . Am I blind?! What . . . am . . . I? Who . . . a—?"

She kept firing at the cylinder and its contents long after she ran out of bullets, and the speaker went silent.

This was it.

Alphonse's back door.

To anybody else it was yet another dimly lit tunnel. If you had an incredible sense of direction or a good map, you'd know it led underneath the Library of Congress and out to a dead end somewhere under the Washington Monument. She knew there had to be a way in under the monument, but Alphonse was so paranoid that he hadn't trusted that info to the encrypted Delta Green files. She had to come in the long way.

The tunnels this far in were starting to show their age. Long streaks of rust from the steel conduits stained the curved wall like tears. Two unending black skid marks marked the floor, probably from the countless electric carts in the post-war days when all this was being built. There was nothing to distinguish it from all the other miles of slowly decaying tunnel beneath the capital.

Unless you knew its secret.

She quickly found the breaker box she was looking for and opened it. Inside was a conduit labeled with a long serial ID of numerals in faded and scratched paint. It was a disguised keypad.

Despite what she was here to do, she couldn't help the feeling of elation at discovering that it was all here, that she had figured Alphonse. She had just known there was no way an old war-horse like him could resist having a back way out. When she had come across the description of the hidden keypad and the access code, she had known exactly where to look. This tunnel gave him the ability to shift agents and material in and out of the center of the capital with not an ounce of paperwork or official notice. And no enemy looking down from above would see a thing.

She pressed on the faded numbers hard, feeling the slight give of plastic instead of hard steel, and entered the first fifteen digits of pi. For a moment nothing happened, and she imagined an old VCR somewhere behind the walls of Alphonse's office coming to life and feeding an image of empty halls to every camera in the sector. Then the lights in the long tunnel flickered and died, to be replaced by dim emergency lamps. The image of catacombs came back to her more strongly now. The shadowy bulges of the wall conduits looked like a long line of bodies arranged along the walls.

She steeled herself and limped down the tunnel, making the best time she could. She knew there was only a half-hour to find the shaft leading up to the lowest floors of the library—half an hour to get down there and then send herself back out into the main tunnels before Jackson or the monitor watchers started wondering where she had disappeared to.



Hospitals always smelled like failure to her. If things went right, you just had no reason to be in one. She made her way down the long hall towards the man behind the receptionist's desk. He was dressed in an orderly's uniform, but his hair and posture announced him as a Marine to anybody who had been near the Service. His presence and the secure nature of the whole base-ment wing was an open secret to the rest of the sanitarium staff.

"Hello again, ma'am." She could see the physical effort it took for him to subdue the salute response. "Here to check in on security again? Everything has been top rate since you went over the wiring."

She tried to smile cheerfully while she shook the New England rain from her coat. "No, just visiting a sick friend this time." Rachael took the log from him and signed in. "How has Agent Grundy been doing this week?" she asked with forced casualness.

The guard shook his head slightly as he traded the logbook for a compact palm scanner. "Not so good, ma'am. She started trying to hurt herself again a few nights ago. I had to use the anaesthetic on her and restraints until the docs figured out a new medication schedule. I'm sorry, ma'am, especially with her being pregnant and all."

A small green light appeared at the top of the scanner, and the guard tilted his head slightly as his earpiece confirmed her identity. "Not half as sorry as I am, Sergeant. But thanks for your concern. I sleep better knowing somebody inside here is looking out for her."

He rose from his bank of security monitors, each focused on a guest of the Delta Green recovery ward, and opened the steel mesh gate for her. "I do what I can, ma'am. These folks are all vets in their own way. I feel I owe them something." He waited at attention while Rachael slipped through the gate and then locked it behind her.

"We all do, Sergeant. Thank you for remembering what most everybody forgets."

She made her way down the long white hall as the guard returned to his carousel. Near the end of the passage, she stopped in front of a reinforced steel door and peered through wire-mesh glass. Cassandra was curled up in the corner, arms wrapped protectively around her swollen belly, her bare legs splayed underneath her.

Rachael shuddered.

"Okay, Sergeant, open Number 7 for me, please." She pulled her cell phone from her pocket and flipped it open.

"Yes, ma'am."

A moment passed and then the light above the door turned green. "Thank you." As she pulled open the door slowly, she hit 999 on her phone,

and within the wall a small digital playback unit clicked to life. As the guard returned to his monitor station, he would be unaware that the visit he watched had occurred a month earlier while he'd been on leave.

The door closed with a soft thump. Cassandra didn't look up until Rachael knelt awkwardly down in front of her and called her name, softly, twice. Even then it took her attention almost a full minute to swim up through the sea of sedatives and come to a focus. "Rache? Rachael?"

"Yes, Cass, it's me. Time for another visit."

Cassandra tried to reach out and touch the younger woman's face, as if to confirm that she were real, but halfway through, the gesture seemed to run out of steam, and her hand fell limply into her lap. "Oh, honey, you shouldn't have come now . . . There's so little of me left. I must look like a diseased sow." She pulled her hands back over the mound of her stomach, showing the ridges of dark, hard flesh that covered her entire middle torso. Her arms and legs had shriveled to a shadow of their former size, as if she were being drained inward to feed the obscene pregnancy. A Biafran Madonna.

Rachael tried to force a smile and failed; the best she could manage was a nod to break eye contact. "Well, you've looked better, college girl." She fished into her bag. "I've brought you something to clear your head for a bit, if you think you need it." The single red pill appeared on her open palm.

Cassandra made a single clumsy grab that would have pitched her over forward if her shape hadn't been distorted. "Oh, god yes! Give me that thing. I need to think a clear fucking thought so badly!" She giggled quietly. "Of course, if my thoughts were still my own, I guess I wouldn't be in here."

"Shhhh . . . it's okay. Just take it, Cass." She slipped the pill carefully into her mouth and then gave her a juice pack from her bag. "That's it." Cassandra shivered in her arms as the stim took effect; the gray skin of her belly rippled and flowed as if a shark was swimming restlessly just below the surface.

"Mmmm, yes! Oh, hon, if you ever quit the business, you have a future as a pusher. This is incredible."

Rache smiled sadly. "I'll keep that in mind."

Cass ran a hand lovingly over her stomach. "Oh and Junior thanks you too. He hasn't been this excited in days!" She tilted her head and closed her eyes for a moment. "Oh, yes, that's right, sweet one. I almost forgot." She opened her eyes again and stared hard into Rachael's. "I nearly forgot to tell you that Junior's father says hello."

"You've seen him? Here?"

"Here; there. I'm not sure. He comes to me in my sleep now. Or I go to him. He is very handsome, don't you think? He tells me things. I used to forget when I woke up, but now it's starting to stick in my head. He has such plans for our boy. He says he never intended for that woman in Grenada to give birth to his son. She was just holding him for her until I cou—"

The slap threw her back up against the matted wall.

"Stop it!" spat Rachael.

Cassandra whipped her head back with a strength that belied her condition. Eyes completely black, she flung out one hand towards her friend and began a guttural chant in a language forgotten before the Pyramids were raised.

"STOP IT!"

This time, the slap sent her to the floor.

Rachael didn't make a move towards her until she was sure what she heard was sobbing. Only then did she reach out and take her friend in her arms. "I'm sorry, Cass. So sorry," she whispered.

"No. No. You had to, honey," Cassandra choked out. "I'm okay for a bit. Just don't let go of me just yet. I know I have to be in here, but being alone makes it so hard to remember that I'm human and this isn't." She put some distance between them and leaned back against the wall but gripped Rachael's hands even tighter. "You know I can't last much longer."

Rachael looked away. "I know."

"Good." She waited for a few moments and then forced a rictus grin.

"So, what do you need from ol' Miss Grundy this time?"

"That's not funny, Cass, not now."

"But it's true, isn't it? You Marine Corps reject."

Rachael sighed and found the strength to force a smile of her own.

"Pretty much, college girl."

"Well, out with it. I tend to come and go a bit these days, hon. If you need something lucid from me, we'd better get to it."

"Okay . . . it's like this. I need to be in two places at once."

"Abhh, a minor miracle—is that all you're asking me for?" She laid back and closed her eyes for a moment as if she were trying to remember the words to an old song. Just when Rachael thought she had fallen asleep, Cassandra opened one bloodshot eye. "Do you know what a doppelganger is?"

"Sure."

"Well, I think I know a ritual that can create one."

"You think?"

She closed her eyes and placed a hand over her belly. "Yes . . . yes, I definitely know a ritual." She sat upright, fully alert now. "How much time do you have?"

Rachael looked at her watch. "We have privacy for exactly . . . thirty-seven more minutes."

"It'll be tight, so I won't be able to go through it more than once. Pay attention; I'll write it out for you phonetically. Do you have a knife? I'm going to have to mark you."

"Uuuuuuh . . . couldn't we just use a pen?"

Cass slapped her playfully across the shoulder. "Don't be a silly bitch!"

You want to start playing fast and loose with magic now? The book I read said carve these into your limbs, or else. I think that should be good enough for us. And I can't just trust you to mark it on yourself correctly at the last minute. It's far too important to leave it for you to screw up."

Rachael decided not to argue the point any further and handed a pen, a notepad, and her buckle knife over to the crazy woman. While she supposed it would have looked bizarre to the sergeant had he been able to see into the room, the ritual was quieter and less hysterical than she would have imagined. As long as she was calm enough to focus on the alien syllables and, as Cassandra warned her at least three times, didn't panic and lose control at the moment of looking herself in the eye, it should work as advertised.

Cassandra grabbed her watch wrist. "Ta-daa! A whole five minutes to spare! The crazy bitch can even make julienne fries! Whatever they are." She giggled and hugged her friend as close as she could without letting the creature within her get in the way. After a few moments, she put the younger woman back at arm's length. "You do know I can't last much longer, don't you?"

Rachael quickly stood and walked to the other side of the room, taking a precise look at the camera in the upper corner, and then turned back to face Cassandra. "Sorry, just wanted to be sure I was in the right spot when the monitor comes back to real-time."

"Rache!"

"Yes, fuck it! I know! I know you are hanging on by your fucking fingernails in here."

"And . . . ?"

"... and I've taken steps, okay? Fuck it, Cass; what am I supposed to say? 'Oh hey, thanks for the help, in an hour or so the—'"

"Stop it, honey! If you tell me, Junior will know the minute I slip, and he still thinks he's got a re-birthday coming very soon . . . Just tell me it's taken care of, that I can stop worrying about letting it loose. That I can finally relax."

Rachael let the tears run freely down her face. "Yes, Cass, you can let go. I've taken care of everything. When the stim wears off, just go with it and sleep. Junior won't be getting out again, I swear." She checked her watch again. "The guard's screen will go real-time in a few seconds, so let's keep it vague. And, Cassandra, I—I wish I could take over for you."

Cass stiffened. "No you don't."

"I'd give anything for this to have never happened to you." Rachael was so caught up in her despair, she failed to notice the anger twisting the other woman's face until it had become far advanced.

Cassandra snarled violently. "God, how can you be such an indulgent bitch after all this time!"

"What?!" All thoughts of surveillance vanished with such an unexpected attack.

"Don't you get it? I'm not thrilled that this happened to me, to be holding onto Junior here with all my strength for year after year. But if not me, then who? Someone less able? I suffer. Paul dies. Delta Green agents die in the dark for decades, and you're the one who gets to sacrifice to keep it all from happening? You are taking the responsibility? Don't! Don't be so fucking noble that you rob us of our own sacrifices. We made them so you and everybody else could live a while longer." Her energy sputtered out. "There are worse ways to live and die. We knew what we were getting into more or less. Just let it go . . . Let us go."

"I—I can't."

"Then just try to remember that we loved you."

Rachael opened and closed her mouth several times as the pained awareness in Cassandra's face slipped away and she curled up around the sickening gray mound of her belly. Biting her tongue hard to concentrate away the tears, she turned away. "Sergeant? I'm ready."

There was no sign she had been heard but the soft thump of the door unlocking. She didn't look back as she went through the padded exit. She was too busy making sure her trembling hand in her pocket punched out the precise four-digit code on her cell phone. In the ducts below Cassandra's cell, a timer began its hour countdown before triggering a half-dozen long strips of Thermite. The fire alarm would sound just two minutes before the floor of Cass's cell became superheated molten plastic and steel.

The sigils carved lightly into her wrists and ankles felt like they had burned down to the bone, fusing each limb to the floor. She continued the inhuman chant through its third and final repetition and managed not to choke at the wet, tearing feeling that ran through her body. As the last sound echoed away down the length of the tunnel, she slowly opened her eyes. Straining to hold onto Cassandra's warning, she did not panic as her own face stared back with a lazy smile. The other Rachael's stare was glassy, not so much neutral as robotic, but older, colder, more reptilian than she had imagined she could look. That there was a struggle going on, there was no doubt. Though Rachael was sure she had been the one to cast the spell, it was in no way decided who was the original and who the doppelganger. She gritted her teeth and concentrated on who and why she was, and all that had been lost on the path to this moment. And then, just as it was all beginning to lose its meaning, her life experience yellowing inside her like the pages of an ancient book, it was over. The other Rachael looked away.

"What do you wish?" came the empty echo of her own voice.

"Do . . . do you know what I am trying to do here?"

"Yes, I am your reflection."

Rachael shuddered. "Then take my belt tools, and this duffel bag."

She took a smaller black combat pack out of the larger bag. "Wait at the last intersection for ten minutes and then go sign out at the guard station. Make some small talk and then walk back to my apartment. Leave the door unlocked and wait. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said the other Rachael, without hesitation or emotion, a strange smile coming to her face. She reached over and took the tool belt, fastened it to her hips, and then took the proffered jacket. She stood there for a moment, smiled lifelessly, and then turned to make her way down the access tunnel. The almost ghostly footsteps faded while Rachael sat staring after her duplicate, wondering what would happen now. She could feel an emptiness inside, as if her bones had somehow gone hollow to provide the doppelganger with what it needed. Cassandra assured her that the feeling would pass once the duplicate faded in a few hours—but what if Rachael died here tonight? Would the other Rachael live on then? She couldn't decide if that were a good or bad thing, but she got up and continued down her path anyway.

This tunnel branch came to a seeming dead end, a metal hatch rusted and welded shut long ago. She ran a penlight along the top edge and could just make out, under the rust and mildew stains, where someone had scratched a misshapen star figure. "It's going to take a hell of a lot more than that to protect you now," she muttered as she ran a dark strip of induction tape around the edge of the hatch. If there was an alarm circuit on this door, it would stay unbroken.

After a few more moments of examining the hatch, she found a section of cracked seam that was unusually regular. She fished out her veteran's card with the small green triangle in the bottom corner, slipped it into the crack, and was rewarded with a soft click. She smiled as the hatch swung open to reveal a vertical access tube and a set of old iron rungs heading up into the darkness.

"This clandestine meeting shit is tired enough without you doing the fashionably late bit," she called softly into the dark. It was the same street she always met him on, since that first night, but time was taking its toll. Almost unnaturally so. The fashionable Washington street was starting to look more like the outer beltway now: fake marble façades cracking and falling away from the yuppie townhouses, garbage cans that never could be emptied fast enough to keep the dogs and crows from spreading their contents, and sidewalks that had buckled and cracked repeatedly even as the great sycamore trees dried and twisted season after season.

She didn't bother to jump at the deep laugh from behind her. No matter how many times she'd come here to meet him, she always had to turn around at the sound of his voice. He was there now, leaning against a dying sycamore, the long, gray trenchcoat now looked too good against

the backdrop of fallen townhouses. This time he had arrived with two great black dogs with abnormally long and pointed ears and noses. Like their master, their ebony perfection was broken only by the gleam of their eyes and the ivory of their teeth. They didn't appear to be leashed; they were just sitting there at attention on either side of the dark man.

"You are ready to make your move on Alphonse," he stated, with just the slightest note of anticipation in his deep voice.

"Maybe." A gust of wind blasted her with dead leaves and the smell of rot.

"Don't risk annoying me further, Agent Veronica, just in order to tell yourself you have some control over this situation. It is not worth it, I can assure you. I am still not amused by what you did to my computer intelligence unit. You have no idea how I hate asking favors from the surgeons who perform that operation. Not to mention that the Captain will now be the one who needs a friend to carry him around. And all because you don't trust me." The dogs yipped at her softly and showed their teeth, as if enjoying the joke.

Rachael tried hard to hide her shivering. There was no denying that the wind that buffeted her was steering respectfully around her benefactor and his pets. She put more weight on her cane to keep her false knee from twisting. "Look, you didn't say anything about playing nice with your toys. And you should have warned me about that . . . thing, anyway. I don't deal with surprises very well anymore."

"Yes, I would agree with that. You don't seem to be dealing with anything very well anymore. My sources tell me that they should be ready to press charges on that sanitarium fire by the end of the w—"

"Don't go there, you . . . you fuck!"

The dogs howled in response to her shout and slinked off into shadows between the trees and dumpsters.

"Excuse me?"

Rachael reached down into her pain and despair for strength. "Don't even think you are going to get your sick fucking jollies from that. Yeah, I fucking murdered my last friend on fucking earth. You think I am in the mood for your sick fucking parlor banter now? 'Agent' Black my fucking ass!" She was trembling with rage now and her right hand clenched rhythmically on the handle of her Beretta.

The dark man's laughter grew like a plague through the night. "Oh yes, I suppose that little façade fell by the wayside some time ago for you. As for what you are in the mood for, my ferocious little monkey, you cannot begin to imagine how little I care." His voice fell to a menacing wave, like the grumble of the sea undercutting ivory cliffs night after night. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

She was trembling violently from the pressure of his gaze now, the black pits where his eyes should be looked back at her through the broken mirrors of memory. "I don't read much," she coughed.

"More's the pity. Then let it lie. I am no more Delta Green than you are. Now I imagine you are ready to go after Alphonse?"

She struggled to throw off the sense of inevitability, that after all this she was doing exactly as she was supposed to. The best she could manage was a bitter repetition: "Maybe." From the shadows a set of gleaming dog's eyes reappeared.

"Good. While you are in his lair, I was wondering if you could do me a small favor."

His voice left no room to imagine this was a request. "What is it going to be?" she asked dourly. To her left and right, a pair of canine eyes blinked into existence.

"Alphonse has erected something in his inner sanctum which I find . . . personally offensive. An Egyptian eye symbol. I want you to destroy or at least deface it for me, and then read a few words I've prepared."

She feigned indifference. "I'm going in for my own reasons, not to run errands for you. Somebody as well-connected as you shouldn't have any trouble taking out some art deco."

With each syllable the dark man spoke, another set of hungry eyes gleamed from the darkness along the edge of the street.

"A small thing in return for all the help I have given you."

As the black, feral bodies began to slink from the shadows, and the soft, mocking yips and barks started, she realized that they weren't domesticated dogs at all.

"All the tips that have led to stunning coups against the darkness that assails your little world."

The jackals were all around her now, inching forward. Dozens of them. Jet-black with crimson eyes and perfect white, wet teeth in feral grins.

"Everything you needed to climb the rungs of Delta Green. To get the answers. To revenge the man you loved."

She couldn't look into their eyes. She squeezed her own shut tightly and stood there trembling. His voice coursed through her body like blood. The hot, carnal breath of predators seemed to wash over her. She couldn't move. Drawing her pistol would be worse than useless—they would be on her before the barrel could clear her coat.

"And all I ask in return is a simple gesture."

His voice began to fade into the cacophony around her. Black snouts feasted on the scent of her terror. Their tongues were dripping with anticipation, inches from her skin.

"Do not disappoint me."

The jackals howled as she screamed. Involuntarily her eyes snapped open. She was alone on the run-down street.

The ghosts of her terror were still echoing between the dark brown-stones as she reached a trembling hand down to pick up the roll of papyrus that lay at her feet.

The door at the top of the shaft gave easily and silently. Her knee was a hot sun of pain from the climb, but she tried desperately not to let it collapse underneath her as she climbed into the darkened room. After silently closing the access hatch, she allowed herself to lean back against the wall and take the pressure off her leg while she tried to get a handle on where she was.

The first thing that struck her was the smell. Despite the dry, perfectly air-conditioned atmosphere, there was a mustiness that bordered on the oppressive. Then there were the bookshelves, stretching off into the darkness, only given vague shape by the dim standby lighting. Each one was filled with books saved from the hungry maw of entropy, their rot slowed by science but not stopped. That was the smell all around her: decay, frustrated but not defeated.

She supposed that the Library of Congress had some plan to restore or record all of this for posterity, but like all things governmental, a plan of action had become a holding pattern. She leaned forward and carefully pulled a narrow booklet from the shelf in front of her. The title burned into the cracked leather was long faded, but a peek inside revealed some sort of detailed treatise on barrel design. For all she knew, it could have been the first book of the New World—and here it was in the dark, with only a rubber band keeping its pages from fluttering away to shatter into so much historical confetti. She slipped it back amongst the other tomes.

Thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of books too old and fragile to see the light of day again—and somewhere here was all that was important to Alphonse. A trove of knowledge, hidden within a sea of paper, and all she had to do was find it to remind him what loss was all about.

She reached around in her duffel bag and brought out the starlight goggles. Adjusting them for the lighting, such as it was, she put them on and brought the stacks around her into emerald focus. She leaned around the corner and looked down the aisle, expecting to see the twinkling rods of various alarm beams along the floor, but she found none, just the endless shelves fading with distance into the green haze of light amplification. She could wander here for a day and never come across what she was looking for, unless Alphonse was kind enough to store his precious hoard under "D."

With a weary sigh, she tilted her head up to take off the goggles, and then froze. The dark shadow that was the ceiling held a curving, flickering band about the width of her hand. Carefully she climbed up one of the bookcases, her bad leg hanging uselessly out into the aisle, and took in as

much ceiling as she could. There was definitely a pattern painted on the ceiling that covered almost all of this level. If she hadn't been told what to look out for, she might never have been able to draw a pattern out of it, but now she couldn't help seeing it as part of a vast Egyptian eye. She took off the goggles and reached an arm out towards the ceiling, rubbing her fingers where the markings should be and felt a slight depression in the concrete. Somebody had meticulously carved a shallow pattern into the ceiling. The band was invisible in this light but when she examined her fingertips closely she could see a handful of tiny golden flecks on her skin, as if the eye had been painted with just the barest dusting of gold long ago.

She never wanted to know enough about sorcery to understand the why and how of this, but she did know enough to use it to lead the way. If Mr. Black was uncomfortable with this giant eye, she couldn't think of anything better than to have it staring directly at whatever you wanted to keep away from him. She began to follow the broad swirls to their stylistic center.

As she made her way farther into the storage area, she came into a section where the books were so fragile that they were hermetically sealed away in locked glass cases to hold back time. In this section the newest-looking things she could see were drafts of Amendments with single digits on them. If there was ever a mausoleum for the written word, this was it.

She didn't know exactly what she was looking for: some kind of massive tome throbbing with power, perhaps, or a massive file cabinet covered with obscure symbols and filled with reports of obscene acts and dead agents. The reality was that the center of the Eye of Light and Darkness stared down at yet another case of old books. One looked particularly ancient and ornate, covered in Oriental writing that seemed to twist and writhe every time it caught the corner of her eye. It could have been a coffee-table book for a mad Chinese sorcerer. As she studied the case, she came to see that there was something subtly different about these books, some obscure aura of menace that made her glad they were locked up here like inmates. But still, if she had been in a hurry, she wouldn't have given them anything more than a glance, and the disappointment brought out a quiet bitter laugh that was quickly lost in the hum of air conditioners.

Rachael looked up at the ceiling, trying to make out the eye looking back down on her. She couldn't see it without her starlight goggles, but she could feel the weight of its stare. Ancient. Inhuman. Hostile. As if it could sense her intent—and for all she had seen of the mystical, perhaps it could. The scroll in her pocket seemed to weigh kilos. Mr. Black could have at least warned her of its size; she had been expecting to smash some kind of stone tablet, Chuck Heston-style, and here she was needing a wrecking ball. She looked around carefully but quickly, unable to shake the pressure of being watched, until she spotted a firebox against the far wall. She

limped over and carefully disengaged the fire alarm, then popped out the glass and took the huge axe from behind the old firehose. She hefted it with satisfaction. Its faded iron head would chip away cement almost as easily as it would shatter wood. She knew it wouldn't have to be much—all she had to do was gouge a stone eye out.

By the time she made it back to Alphonse's books, she was leaning on the axe like an ungainly version of her cane, her knee a flaming agony, as if that invisible claw had torn off her patella a moment ago, instead of nearly a decade. She eyed the top of the case. If she stood on the edges right, it would probably support her weight and let her get two or three good swings in before she lost her balance. Then she would just hit the floor and read the scroll she had been given. She dropped the axe and took the last two items out of her pack: a deadman's switch and ten kilos of C-4 disguised as rolls of duct tape. Her present to both sides.

That they would come as soon as the Eye was broken she had no doubt: maybe not Alphonse himself but somebody close to him, and perhaps not Mr. Black, but certainly some of his best pets. Neither one would fail to notice, and with any luck they would not be able to resist coming themselves to the scene of the crime. And then she would smile, tell them exactly what she was doing and why, tell them about what a fine man Paul Wilson had been, about the things he had loved and hated and been afraid of. And then when they were finally aware of the man they had exterminated in their pointless game, she would let go of the switch and blow all of them to atoms, along with herself.

The pawn would make the last move and screw them all.

A part of her felt bad about all the history she would be destroying along with her intendeds, but deep down she knew all these written words were an illusion, an attempt to impose logic and reason on a mad universe. All that humanity ever thought it knew was barely a fart in the face of what waited between the stars.

She held in the cry that was scratching at her throat for release while she put her goggles back on and then pulled herself up onto the case. Bracing her bad leg against the neighboring bookshelf, she pulled the axe up into a two-handed grip and looked up to get her bearings.

She looked into the Eye that blazed with emerald light, staring back down at her from a field of absolute darkness. Rachael flinched back, expecting some hideous flare of energy to fry her for challenging ancient sorcery with a fireaxe. But what did happen was more than she could bear. Worse than fire, worse than ice, what poured forth from the eye to its attacker was truth.

Rachael screamed like a lost soul and tore the goggles from her face, but it didn't matter: the pattern was in her mind now and that terrible clarity tore through her, ripping apart all she had clung to. Moments in

time rose up and tore free from the rot inside her. While the terrible Light forced her to see, the Darkness bound her in place with its terrifying indifference: this was its power. This is why the Dark Man abhorred it.

The Eye peeled everything away except the truth.

Standing over Cassandra's prone body, she fired round after round at the re-animated islanders and soldiers. The black sludge spilled out of the bullet holes, to join the flood running up the overgrown step pyramid, drawn by the singsong chant.

There had been no choice at all. Cassandra had found the would-be priestess and her notes, had a chance at reversing the birth. Rachael could only fly and fight.

No choice at all.

Shrieking as she and Cassandra tried idiotically to stuff Paul's intestines back into his body. The Immigration men still firing at the dying mass of tooth, claw, and tentacle that was only visible with the blood of Paul and his team running through it. Paul's eyes going glassy and cold as he reached out to her with a torn and spasming hand. "Did you kill it?"

Not "I love you." Or even a betrayed "Why?" Just a simple, bloody "Did you kill it?" In the end, even with his legs flayed to the bone, that was what had been important to him—destroying whatever horror the Crystal Essence had managed to call down.

The axe fell from her nerveless fingers and cracked the preservation case.

Cassandra's life turned into a waking nightmare; Paul's taken from him brutally. And she survived.

A cry like a wounded wolf's tore from her throat and she fell to her knees atop the case. Pain flared through her leg and forced her eyes open, onto a kaleidoscope of reflections in the shattered glass, a hundred images of her tortured face framed by the great golden eye. Each one a facet of what she had been, reflected through time: the cocky young pilot, trying to prove she was more than just measuring up; the terrified hero, pushing back at the things that lurked in the corners of reality; the hard crusader, erasing every last killer of her man from the face of the earth; the brutal sociopath, using up the last of her humanity to get what she wanted.

The empty woman, utterly alone in the world, who had come here to die.

It was over. It had been over for nearly two years now, since the night she and Cassandra had exterminated the last dregs of the Crystal Essence cult. Justice or vengeance had been served, but she had just kept shuffling blindly towards this point in time, refusing to see that she was dead inside to everything else. Telling herself there was one more villain to track down. One more nightmare to end.

Rachael Logan howled her self-loathing into the vault in a string of obscenities as the lie came crashing down around her. Two years of selling

her soul dearly to get to this point, telling herself it would be worth it just to hold Alphonse at the end of a gun and tell him what he had cost her. And now it was just the dream of an angry child. She wasn't here to tell anybody anything. She was here to ask what the point had been. Beg even. To have Alphonse explain why it had been necessary. She would have begged for the answer if she had to.

An answer she had already heard so long ago.

"Did you kill it?"

Did we push it back?

Did we keep them all safe one more time?

Did we hold the line?

Did our deaths have any meaning?

Rachael hugged her knees as if they were Paul's body and rocked back and forth as the cries tore through her, loosening years of corruption. "Oh, baby, yes . . . yes . . . yes. We got them. We got every last one of those fuckers." As the great, wracking sobs finally ran dry and their echoes were swallowed by the books, she found her voice again. "I miss you two so fucking much . . . Keep an eye on him for me, college girl." She looked upward, but there was only the dark gray silence of concrete. There was no sign of the great eye at all, and she had no desire to reach up and feel if she had imagined it in the first place.

She finally became aware of the reinforced glass creaking and popping dangerously underneath her and carefully slid off the case to the floor. Looking around at the mess she had made almost elicited a smile. Alphonse was going to be pissed when he saw this. She considered packing the parts of the bomb back up but changed her mind. Maybe the thought of what she could have done would convince the Old Man to stop playing so close. She reached into her pocket and tossed the scroll onto the case and then gathered up her cane. Her knee felt better than it had for years, but she didn't feel up to leaving all of herself behind.

Rachael took a few steps towards the distant access tunnel and then stopped to make sure her two "insurance" grenades were still in her pack along with her extra clips. The Dark Man or his pets would probably find her the moment she stepped onto the street, but she wouldn't go quietly. Let the papers try and explain a couple craters and a hell of a lot of doggie parts on the main thoroughfare.

She took a moment to say her last good-byes and then limped off into the darkness wondering how she was going to convince the Secret Service guy to let her out again.

Joseph Camp—Alphonse—let his hands drop from the shoulders of the two snipers, silently indicating that they could stand down. They both looked

at him questioningly for a moment but then slowly withdrew their rifles from the narrow spaces between the books. Alphonse put down the thermal imager but continued to watch Rachael in the dim light as she collected herself and then walked slowly away. When she stopped at the edge of the light and looked back, he flinched away for a moment, as if she were looking straight at him through his personal duck blind of shelves and books. When she turned back and walked away, he convinced himself that his reaction had been guilt and nerves; there was no way she could have seen him or the guards through the tiny gaps between books.

The two snipers stood silently watching for the intruder's return until a tone in their earpieces indicated their target had gone through the access hatch and exited the shaft. "Should I follow her, sir?" asked the taller of the two.

"That shouldn't be necessary, Agent Hammer. She won't do us any harm now."

Agent Hammer's already-imposing brow creased alarmingly, but he nodded slowly in spite of himself.

Alphonse sighed in irritation at the two neck-breakers who seemed to think that every order from an old man might spring from the fringes of senility. He looked at his watch. "Look, just go pick up the bomb parts the nice young lady left us and then call down to the agent on junction. Have him hold up Agent Veronica with some sort of downed computer excuse until 6:15." Daylight should give her a fighting chance. He would contact her by noon and offer her the use of a safe house until her former friends got over their disappointment. "I'll be up in my office after I lock up here, if anyone needs to reach me. And I want another security hatch in that shaft by tomorrow night! That was far too bloody easy for her."

"Yessir!" the two men chorused quietly as they saluted and then padded silently away through the stacks.

"Ahh, Adolf would have loved the two of you," he muttered sourly to himself, and he got slowly to his feet, his own ancient leg wound making its complaint with the dull ache through his left thigh. By the time he had made his round of the rare books vault, the security men had cleaned up most of the damage and gone. Alphonse reset the intricate web of alarm beams, kinetic sensors, and thermal scanners and then concentrated a moment to make sure the Eye of Light and Darkness was unscathed. Satisfied, he sealed the vault door and made his way back to the office, where he could shrug away Agent Alphonse for a moment and simply be Professor Camp, head bookworm of the Library of Congress.

He fell back into the cracked leather chair and ran a thumb along the pressure points under the ridge of his brows, willing away the tension. When that didn't work, he reached down and pulled out a bottle of gin and a plas-

tic cup from the bottom drawer of his desk. The scroll Rachael left behind had been put in his "IN" tray, and after taking a sour hit, he scooped it up with barely trembling hands and unrolled it. A moment's study cinched it. Miss Logan hadn't been a stalking-horse for Lepus. This spell was an original, and nobody on that side gave sorcery enough credence to even know where to get this sort of thing done. Not that he had ever seriously considered her "source" to be MJ-12; whoever it was had been deep on the occult side of the tracks, and his information had just been too good.

Agent Veronica had been through the fire. She had lost all she cared about, lost her humanity slaughtering her enemies. Sacrificed her best friend's sanity to get the job done. Sold her soul to the Devil. And bought it back again.

If she survived the next week, she might be perfect for his job.

Professor Camp wearily poured another cup of gin for himself, tossed the scroll back into his box, and brought the picture on his desk closer. "Time to retire when an old man can't even see across his desk without his glasses," he muttered.

Not that he needed even to see the picture to recall every last detail, and the image he carried in his head was in color. If he really concentrated, he could make the hot jungle breeze blow gently across the three grinning figures as they posed against the hull of the matte-black Mosquito bomber. World-beaters all of them, in their squeaky-clean jungle infiltration gear and parachutes leaning against their legs. And none over twenty-five. Barnaby to the left, towering over the other two, already scowling trouble that hadn't started yet. On the right was Susan, sweet smile belying the hellcat underneath, her red hair bundled under her cap. If he concentrated, he could still remember the sweet, sharp smell of her. And the grinning idiot in the middle was himself, brimming with the fruits of Western education and practically wetting himself to get the chance to put it to use.

And now there was only him, Barnaby and Sue gone before Rachael's parents even started dating. He wondered if he could find a picture of Agent Veronica's cell in his files somewhere. She would need it.

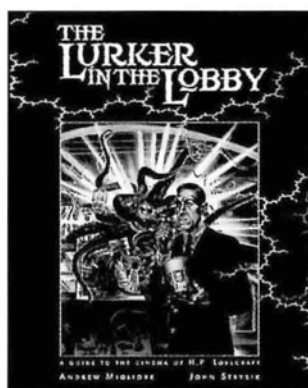
Dr. Joseph Camp lifted a glass to comrades and lovers lost and leaned back, breathing slowly and contemplating for the millionth time the schemes of those beings that moved through the dark places of the universe. And what was to be done about them.

He made a mental note to ask Agent Veronica if her yen for cross-training extended to librarianship.

Aliens and demons weren't the only ones that could play the long game. Though it might cost him or her dearly, a monkey could see a plan come together across the years as well as a god might.

Alphonse allowed himself a small smile and closed his eyes. ▲

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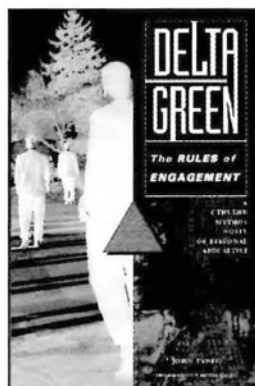


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