

Cronix

by James Hider

Prologue

“Okay, we better be quick.” The man was lean, with a horse face, and kept glancing at the entrance of the restaurant.

It was an ugly place, just rough cement walls painted the dark burgundy of a Victorian whorehouse. No ornaments or decorations adorned the pocked masonry. Despite the disregard for aesthetic appeal, the joint was heaving, the clamor of drunken voices and blaring music thickening the air of anticipation.

“Why?”

“Because in about fifteen minutes some guy strapped with TNT is gonna walk through that door there and blow himself and everyone else in here to shit. And if you’re not chipped, you don’t wanna be here. Hell, I’m chipped and even I don’t want to be here.”

Oriente glanced nervously over his shoulder. All around, at tables set with bowls of pretzels and nuts and frothing pots of beer, people were laughing and talking excitedly. “A suicide bomber? That’s pretty retro. It’s been a while since the Islamic wars.”

“It’s all the rage with the young crowd these days,” said horse-face.

“How will you know it’s him?”

“Well, first of all the music changes. Suicide Blonde, by INXS. Then the waiters disappear. Look at ‘em now, rushing round like crazy to make sure everyone has a drink before the bomb comes in.”

“Okay, so let’s talk,” Oriente said. “How do I get past the vetting without a chip?”

“There’s a doctor called Wilson. He does the screening. It’s not like he’s a real doctor or anything, but they get to call him one anyway. He doesn’t give a shit, but he doesn’t want to get caught either. So you have to take him to one side, tell him you’ve got an embarrassing condition you’d rather not discuss in public. Then, when he takes you into his room, you give him the dough. Thousand’s the asking price.”

“And that’s all I have to do?” The music faded out. Oriente anxiously listened to the opening chords of the next song. Shiny Happy People by REM. A raucous laugh from the drunken crowd.

“That’s all. No questions asked. He’ll give you a badge so you can come and go. Though it’s way dangerous for you, you know. Why d’you wanna work up there without a chip? Some of them leapers can drag a man over the edge, y’know. And it’s a loooooong way down to the street.”

“Why do I want to work there, or why don’t I want a chip?”

The man shrugged. “Whichever.”

Oriente took a swig of beer from his plastic cup. “It’s a good job. Easy, satisfying. Well paid. And I’d like to help the planet sweat off the virus of humanity.”

The man stared at him blankly. “But why not get a chip? It’d make life a hell of lot easier. After all, this is Chiptown. Technically speaking, it’s illegal to even be here without one.”

Oriente took another gulp. “Call me perverse. “

“Whatever floats your boat, man” said the horse-faced man. “Anything goes round here. Literally. You know, there’s a place round the corner where they have these orgies where they’ve got human sacrifices. You get naked and tied up in front of this stoned, boozed-up mob and some big-titted German *Fraulein* comes out in rubber thigh boots and teases your manhood for about five minutes. Then, just when you’re about to get off, another incredibly hot babe comes in stabs you in the heart.”

“And what’s this place called?”

“The Whores of Perception,” the man said.

Oriente smiled. “Sounds like a fun night out.”

“Down in the Village, they got all sorts of that shit. They got gladiator fights, and there’s this bear pit where they chuck people in and they get ripped to pieces. Course, they get pretty tanked up first. That’s where the real money is, not in seeing some schmuck get eaten.”

“A regular New World Babylon,” said Oriente. On the speaker system, a pounding guitar rhythm grabbed horse face's attention.

“Hey, man, that’s our song. Time to get outta here.” Oriente looked round. The front door was still closed, but the waiting staff had melted away. No one else seemed to have noticed. But then, they were all chipped and about to enter paradise. Pre-paid tickets only tonight.

His guide weaved quickly through the tables and out a thick metal door peppered with gouges, like some ferocious beast had tried to claw its way out of the room. Down a corridor and out into a piss-reeking alleyway. As the outer door clanged to behind them, an ear-splitting boom enveloped the two men, as though the entire building were about to come down on their heads. Oriente instinctively ducked, but horse face barely flinched. By the time they had emerged onto Fifth Avenue, a group of sozzled revelers had gathered in the acrid smoke drifting from the front door of the restaurant and were observing the scene of carnage within: the floor of the eatery was a lake of blood, concrete walls sprayed an even brighter red with fresh gore and gobbets of human flesh, scarcely distinguishable from the char-grilled buffalo wings.

Someone in the crowd whooped, but Oriente saw a young woman turn away and gag.

On the other side of the street, Oriente spotted a neat diner where several customers were slumped across tables set with little dishes of sushi and cups of sake. A neon sign flickered its shaky message to the smoky city night: *Cyanide Sue's Suicide Sushi*. Below it was a painted billboard that announced: *Last Supper, every nite at 8*.

A man holding a beer bottle giggled, pointed to the restaurant's alliterative moniker. "Try saying that when you're wasted," he slurred. His companions cackled.

Beyond them, the sheer cliff-face of the Empire State Building pierced the night sky. Oriente could see a giddy blur in the spotlights mounted on the uppers ramparts: two tiny figures arced out from the viewing gallery and hovered for a split second, before gravity hurled them in a voiceless plunge to the sealed-off section of street below.

A week later, he started work there.

Part I

In The Forest

For much of their evolutionary history, human beings failed to perceive that their personalities were mere byproducts created by the animal species Homo Sapiens, a socially and technically advanced primate, which allowed them to co-exist in the vast and complex societies that came to dominate the planet. Trapped in the bodies of these fleshy animals, the condemned souls lived brief and often violent lives, then perished when the organism that hosted them died. This system existed for millions of years until the period known as the Exodus.

There still exist on Earth small communities of mortals who cling to this drastically brief tenure of life.

Extracted from the introduction of ‘On the Origins of Post-Human Species’ by Liu Tran, 115th edition

And am I born to die? And lay this body down? And as my trembling spirits fly

Into a world unknown

Charles Wesley, Idumea

Most people are stupid, ugly and bored with their lives, and quite frankly would be happy to be someone else.

Miles Bradlee, head of DKarn's marketing board, in an interview with Forbes magazine

There were ghosts in the forest.

The hunter first saw them at dusk, flitting between spring ferns and empty-headed hollyhocks, and he sensed they meant bad days ahead.

The ghosts themselves weren't scary, just ethereal and indifferent. They seemed unaware they were even back in the mossy woods of Mother Earth. The phantoms were too intent on doing whatever they were doing to notice him: chatting among themselves or chasing each other, tapping out ghostly messages on unseen screens, or staring off into the distance, watching for something. They ran through the oaks' solid trunks and through the beeches' low boughs as though they were nothing more than thin air. They sometimes disappeared into the escarpment where Box Hill rose slowly from the leafy canopy below the hunter's hut, as though diving into some concealed tunnel in the dead grasses of last summer.

But the hunter recalled with a shudder the last time the ghosts had come, a long way from these green wooded hills of Surrey. *The Haitian Voodoo Head*, the newspapers had dubbed it. So he watched the ethereal figures as they played and cavorted, dreamed or laughed, and he scanned the sky at night to see what else might be on its way down.

Sometimes he would spot just one or two of the visitors, beautiful young children at play on a forest path. At other times, there would be scores of them, men at arms in scarlet uniforms, marching through the underbrush. He could probably walk right through their ranks and they wouldn't even notice. But he didn't.

"No sense in playing with fire," he muttered to his dogs, Arthur and Jess, who strained at their leashes and growled ominously. At nights, he chained the dogs to keep them from dashing after some luminous sprite floating through the trees. He'd lie in bed, listening to the groan of the chains and the throaty burr of the dogs, and wish he had the hill all to himself again.

He had been alone for years. Nobody came up here, and only occasionally would he venture down to the village to pick up supplies. His needs were simple, so his trips were few. Once every sixty years or so, when he felt his body stiffen and grow old, he'd saddle up his mule and make the long trek to Ma Gurfinkel's clinic to get himself a new set of bones, then return, young, handsome and vigorous again, to his home.

One day, after weeks of almost daily sightings, the ghosts vanished. Their abrupt absence made him even more nervous as he checked his snares, billy club in hand to dispatch a luckless hare or pheasant. He sensed the ghosts were not gone, only that a new phase had been begun. What it might be, he could not yet tell. He trod carefully in the morning mist, but allowed his dogs to run free in the woods again. Their howling

stopped, and he started to sleep more easily. But it was at night that things started to change.

Every night, he would have the same dreams. Or were they memories, floating through the distant canopy of sleep?

A young Korean man stares at the slow-moving figures on his computer screen. His mother comes in, yaps at him for the millionth time: 'You should get up, go out and get some exercise.' The boy grunts but does not remove his eyes from the screen. He has been playing this game for three days now, pissing in Coke bottles and nibbling delivery pizzas, and he is nearing the prize. His mother comes in hours later to find him slumped on the floor. The clock ticks on. 'Thrombosis,' the coroner says. The gentle tug of evolution.

An almost-young Englishman sits at a wooden bar, a glass of amber liquor in front of him. He stares at the magazine spread out on the counter. A review of his art installation, the first to capture a critic's attention. "They say that if an infinite number of chimpanzees were given an infinite number of typewriters and an infinite amount of time, they would eventually write the entire works of Shakespeare," he reads. "The idea for this self-styled open-air installation appears to have been dashed off by a lone bonobo during its lunch break, after one too many G&Ts." The scruffy Englishman orders another drink.

A fading blonde American woman walks into the kitchen of a house on a deserted prairie. "Okay, try this one," she says to the older man smoking a cigarette behind his newspaper. "Supposing there is a God, but he didn't create us. We spend centuries screaming supplications at him, trying to grab his attention. He doesn't respond. What does that make us? Stalkers, that's what!" Her shark-eyed companion glances up from the paper, blows blue smoke out of the corner of his mouth, but says nothing.

The barking of the dogs ripped the hunter from the slurry of his dreams, a caesarian din slicing the womb of sleep. The hunter threw back the quilt, scratched his stubbly chin and rose stiffly from his wooden cot. A threadbare dressing gown hung on a nail. As he pulled it free in the darkness, the fabric ripped loudly. He swore under his breath, wrapped the garment close to his chest, then reached for the twelve-bore before stepping into the cold, pre-dawn world outside.

"More frickin' ghosts?" he muttered.

The dogs were straining at their chains, tilting at something across the clearing, beyond the old man's vision. His breath steamed out into the starlight. It was early spring, and the last inky shades of night were laced with the smell of cold earth and leaf mulch. On the horizon, the approaching dawn traced a faint ridge of charcoal across the back of the South Downs.

"Calm down," he croaked to his dogs. The animals paid no heed. He squinted into the deeper black of the tree line. Half-stepping back into his cabin, he fumbled on the shelf for a lantern, lit the wick and held it out before him. The light transfused the forest glade with other-worldly whiteness, reflecting diamonds of dew on the bare branches. In the far coppice of skeletal oaks, two yellow eyes gleamed in the reflected light. The dogs snarled, less sure of themselves as the twin dots hovered, then moved towards the frozen spectators.

Into the hoary glade stepped an enormous wolf.

"Sweet shitting Jesus," whispered the hunter, marveling at the sheer size of the beast: shoulders broad as a stallion's, girth as generous as a late-summer grizzly. It was the creature's head that stole his attention: a vast boulder of skull, the snout unnaturally foreshortened by the sheer breadth of cranium swelling up behind it.

"What the hell *are* you?" the hunter whispered as he brought the shotgun to his shoulder, and stared down the barrels at the animal. A nervous tic trembled under his right eye, briefly blurring his aim. Arthur and Jess, sensing that the firearm had suddenly shored up the odds, leapt again at their chains. The wolf stepped into center of the lamp-lit grove, where it stopped and sat down, displaying a queer daintiness for a creature of such size.

The hunter's finger was frozen on the trigger, as though waiting for dawn to break and make the decision for him. To shoot or not to shoot. Being the only furless creature in the scene, he was suffering the cold

the most. Seeing the wolf make no further approach, he cautiously relaxed his aim.

"Scat," he hissed, waving the weapon in the animal's direction. "Gwan, get the hell out of here." But the wolf just sat and stared implacably at him. The barking of the dogs grated the hunter's nerves.

"Go on, get out of here, whatever you are, or I'm gonna have to shoot you, even if I don't want to."

The two creatures peered at each other for a moment. Then the wolf stood again. The man swiftly raised his gun again, the dogs too hoarse now to bark. To the hunter's astonishment, the giant beast opened its long mouth.

"Laura was right," it said.

Or at least it appeared to say. Its lips weren't crafted for speech, its lolling tongue had no ancestral familiarity with words. The hunter stood rooted to the ground, jaw collapsed almost to his chest. Before he could respond, the wolf turned and bounded off into the dark woods again, its white tail conjuring a last ghost of lantern light before blackness consumed it. The hunter came to life like a rusted automaton.

"Holy mother of God," he whispered into the dark. "Fitch?" He was shouting now. "Jesus Christ, is that you? *Fitch*?"

The shout clung to the frosty slopes of Box Hill before evaporating in the slow wash of dawn creeping through the chalky uplands.

The hunter waited until the sun was up before setting out. As he loaded his mule, he fretted over whether he was, after all these years alone, finally losing his mind. First of all the ghosts, now this: only Fitch would deliver a message like that, so terse and frustratingly obscure. And yet...

“And yet it was a goddam wolf,” he said out loud, reassuring himself that he hadn’t finally slipped into madness, the ever-lurking phantom of the recluse and hermit. “And Doug Fitch never was a wolf. Crazy bastard genius, father of the afterlife, for sure, everyone knows that much, but he didn’t have a goddam tail.” He tightened the girth. “That and he’s been dead for hundreds of years now,” he said, mounting the indifferent mule and trotting down the hill.

It was a two hour ride down to Dorking, the only village in the valley. A mile from the ancient settlement, the forest gave way to meadows, winter grass thick with lingering pools of mist. Two boys were herding a sleepy Jerseys outside the village walls. They waved as he trotted through the silver dew, then sniggered conspiratorially. The hunter knew he was regarded as a semi-mythical figure in the community – he had, after all, written himself into the village’s historical scrolls a century and a half before as the legendary Old Man of the Forest– but realized he cut

a comic figure jiggling on his mule's rump. He liked that these people didn't take their myths too seriously. He waved his stick, like a cavalry officer leading the charge, and the lads guffawed. At the village gate, the half-awake watchman stamped his feet to get the night frost out of his boots.

"Cold as a witch's tit, ain't it?" the sentry said.

The hunter nodded, reining in his mule. "Morning. Is Guld in town?"

"Just saw him heading back from temple," said the sentinel. His rifle, fitted with a night-vision scope, was propped against the wall behind him. "Should be having breakfast by now. I'd be gettin' me own if that fucker Mott would show up on time. Right dozy bastard, that one."

The hunter tapped his heels against the mule's side and rode on.

Dorking was a pretty village, rising on a gentle slope beyond the postern. He passed cottages made of stone and of washed-out red bricks, topped with sagging thatched roofs. Dotted among them were overgrown gardens where abandoned homes had rotted and let nature back in.

Like most places, the population had collapsed during the Exodus. But in Dorking it had slowly risen again, boosted by the settling of the Dianite leadership. They made a comfortable living off game hunting and animal husbandry, trading meat and furs for grain and barley from the farmers on the coastal plain, or throwing lavish hunters roasts for the few tourists who still came from London. Some farmed themselves,

though raising crops was largely frowned upon as a curse of the old civilizations. It did produce some welcome diversions, though, in the form of beer and spirits, as well as weed. A hundred families lived there, yet at any given time half of them were off hunting for days, even weeks, at a time. Old Carter had been known to vanish for years on end, then suddenly show up at the pub one bitter night at the start of winter, long after everyone had given him up for dead.

The hunter hitched his mule by the village hall. One of its doors was open, revealing an oak-paneled lobby whose walls were hung with stuffed game birds and stag heads. At the foot of the stairs, a mangy grizzly reared on hind legs: in the center of the hall was a vast reptile, jaws open to display impressive incisors. It looked like a prehistoric monster from one of the old city museums, but the hunter knew it had been shot in the nearby hills little more than two centuries before.

It was in this building that the tourists slept, in rickety rooms with four-poster beds teeming with dust mites, an ‘authentic’ experience they were willing to pay top dollar for.

The Dianite cult had originated with a small group of depressed Immortals who found themselves, after centuries in paradise, disillusioned and rather bored with eternity. They returned to Earth to find a community that actually reveled in the brevity of life. Their spiritual tracts, written haphazardly over generations by the occasional philosopher for whom hunting and fishing and drunkenly gazing on nature’s manifold beauties were not quite enough, celebrated the fact that mankind’s fleeting consciousness was meant to be the universe’s

way of appreciating its own beauty and complexity: it should not be allowed to become jaded by an infinity of diversions and distractions, up there in heaven.

And for many in those epic, hard times, when storms towered into the troposphere and monsters prowled the old-growth forests, life had proven all too short. They had to fight to survive in this wilderness, pitting themselves against a climate in chaos and beasts genetically resurrected to dissuade the crumbling planet's population from tarrying too long. As time passed, they adopted the Greek goddess of hunting as their patron and raised her statue on the village green. Now, with the monsters all but gone and The Age of Storms a heroic memory, Diana presided over cricket games on long, slanting summer evenings, looking on as old men sipped their pints and watched from the seats outside the pub on the green.

Guld's house was modest for a village elder, but warm and inviting. The smell of roasting meat enveloped him as soon as the hunter entered the low-beamed front room, rubbing his hands in front of the fire. On the wall hung a framed verse, embroidered on time-yellowed cotton: *If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which has been shown!*

"Hullo?" he called. "Anyone home?"

The village elder bustled out the kitchen, a blue apron round his waist and a meatloaf between his oven mitts. Like most of the Dorking

residents, he was lean and leathery, with chapped hands and a hunter's squint.

"Blimey," he beamed. He gingerly set down the roasting tray on the flagstones by the fire. "Luis Oriente! What the devil brings you down from the hill? Run out of hooch already? And it's barely spring yet."

The two men shook hands warmly. Guld was in his fifties, his silt-brown hair frosted with silver. Broken veins spidered his bulbous nose and stubbled cheeks, the result of a lifetime of exposure to the elements, beer and wood smoke. He took in his visitor with a long look.

"Still looking good, I see," he said with a sly grin. Although Oriente was infinitely older than Guld, he'd had Ma Gurfinkel build in all sorts of genetic advantages over the years to ensure he aged more slowly than these mortals. As a result, Oriente looked at least fifteen years younger than Guld. He simply flashed him a dashing smile full of white teeth.

Guld lifted a pot of steaming coffee off the range and offered his guest a chair by the stove. The hunter gratefully wrapped his hands around his mug.

"Out hunting, I see," Guld said, nodding at the hunter's shotgun.

"Wolf," the hunter said. "I think."

"What d'ye mean, you think? D'ye see a wolf or not?" Guld sounded keen, a hunter pricking up his ears at talk of the chase. Something in his curiosity made the old man cautious, however.

“Have you seen anything else up there?” Guld asked. The hunter sipped his coffee, avoiding his host’s eye. He did not want to share the strange visions: the hermit’s fear of hallucinations, of being left alone too long. He shook his head, unsure if Guld was convinced.

“You see,” the village elder said, blowing on his steaming cup,
“Wendell Merson was up on the Downs this past week, hunting boar, and saw something strange. Said it looked like Immortals, but dressed in strange costumes, all in black, with hats and thick beards, nothing he’d ever seen before. When he went closer, the whole group, more than twenty of them, just vanished. Pouf, into thin air.” He threw his hands up in imitation of a conjurer’s vanishing act.

The hunter shook his head. "What I saw was a wolf, alright. Not like anything I've laid eyes on before though. The size of it...it was more like a bear."

Guld frowned. "Could be then it's one of their abominations. They're forever crossin' and messin' with what our Lady ordained."

The hunter nodded. "Maybe, though why they'd still be wanting to create beasts that size and have them running around the woods, I don't know. It's been a long time since they needed such creatures to patrol the land."

"Our population's been rising these past few years. It's possible they're sending us a message. They have no fear of death, that's their problem. Their curse disguised as a blessing," Guld pronounced in his best village

elder tone. "Their perversions are all one of and the same to them, and every one a sin in Her eyes," he muttered.

"D'you not recall the pestilence they unleashed on the world?" Guld went on. "Terrible, truly terrible. And the monsters they set upon the land to 'encourage' the people to leave and abide with them up there." He pointed at the ceiling, though the hunter knew he was actually gesturing into space. "I'm not saying they're bad people, mind, just misguided. Thinkin' they're living out all eternity up there, when what they don't realize is, they're all actually dead."

His speech about the dead -- not an unfamiliar topic when one graced the dinner table of an elder in this Earth-loving sect -- reminded the hunter of the ghosts. He wiped his mouth. "I think the wolf was headed to London."

Guld raised his eyebrows and nodded. "Then for sure it's one of theirs," he said. "A soulless beast returning to his dearly departed masters."

The hunter smiled playfully. "And do those soulless masters still pay through the nose for their little holidays here in Dorking?"

Guld was about to look offended, but caught the teasing note in his voice. "Oh they do, Oriente, indeed they pay very nicely. And thank the Lady, otherwise I'd have none of this excellent coffee to share with you." The two men laughed. "In fact, we have some coming down this afternoon for a pig slaughterin,' if you'd care to hang around. We'll be organizing a feast, plenty of ale and good food to go round. The new

moon festival starts in two days, and some Eternals want to hang out with us poor doomed yokels.”

The hunter laughed, but also felt a twinge of guilt. Here he was mocking Guld for trading with the air-siders, yet he too had shied from the grave so many times. Of course, the people of the village knew it, whatever myths they dressed him up in: their last six generations had come and gone, and the hunter had always been out there in the woods, alone and mysterious.

"That's very kind, my friend, but I have to press on," the hunter said, though the idea of a boozy afternoon was always tempting after months of solitude up in the woods. "Tell me, can I get a tracker from the village? I'll be gone several days."

Guld crinkled his brows. "Timing's not good. Like I said, new moon festival falls in three days, no one's goin' to want to be away for that. But maybe in Little Dorking. There's a scold living down there at the moment, one of the rare ones you can work with, they say. Couple of Cronix down there too, so watch yourself. Too many around at the moment, to tell the truth. Don't know where they're all coming from these days. We may have to organize a cull soon, though I don't like to shoot a human, no matter how soulless. But take the scold, they say she's good, and you'll be helping us out as well as yerself. Be careful, mind, you never know with these creatures..."

The hunter patted his gun. "If I spot any Cronix, I'll take care of them for you. I don't have scruples on that count. What's this scold like?"

"Haven't seen her, but from what I hear she seems relatively compos mentis. What she lacks up here -- " he tapped his forehead -- "she makes up for on the trail. They say she can smell a deer a mile off. She'll track your wolf-bear monstrosity for you."

"Thanks. One more thing," he said, pulling on his coat. "I've not been to London in donkeys' years. Is the old path still there? Or is all overgrown now?"

A look of disdain came over his host's creased face. "It's still there, the Lady have mercy on us all. The path to perdition. It's only the young ones who take it though." A look of regret crept over Guld's face, either for the young ones lured off by the temptations of eternity, or for the fact that he had vowed long ago to spurn the route. The hunter could never tell with these people who chose to number their days and pass into oblivion. But if so many of their young folks weren't drawn to London, the village population would quickly swell beyond the carrying capacity of the game in the forest. It was another natural cycle they just had to live with.

The hunter stepped to the door. "Thank you, as ever, for your hospitality, my friend. I think my wolf took that route. I intend to follow it."

Guld chewed on a strand of his grey beard and nodded slowly. "Tis surely not one of our Lady's creatures, so there's no harm in killing it. If you need purification afterwards, come by the Temple. Our doors are always open to you, sir."

As the hunter ducked under the stone lintel, Guld called out after him. "And Oriente, be careful down there. Those Cronix can be mean to a man on his own."

The hunter lifted his shotgun in salute, then stepped out into the cold bright morning.

Unlike the neat lanes of the main village, Little Dorking was a warren of tiny shacks erupting out of the settlement's southern wall. In its ramshackle lanes and wicker stalls, the poorer folk kept their livestock in winter. The animals' eyes shone yellow as the hunter swung his torch through the dark openings of the crofts. Behind the animals, in some of the sagging structures, were darker openings that led to the jerry-built hovels where the fugitives hid.

The hunter pushed through a knot of goats and approached the entrance of one of these tiny extensions.

His torch raked the filthy interior, picking out a pale figure curled fetally in a far corner. It was a man, covered in grime. The blank stare and expressionless face -- once beautiful, now hollowed out by cold and hunger -- instantly told the hunter it was a Cronix. The unfeeling eyes stared, unblinking, into the bright beam of the torch. It made an incoherent noise, like the babble of a baby, only in a man's voice. "Bah bah-bah abbba," it said.

The hunter lurched back as the creature leapt to its haunches. He backed quickly out, banging his head on a beam. The creature remained within.

The next stable was larger, its walls cobbled together from heavy stones topped by wattle and daub. The hunter cautiously pushed the gate open and pointed his torch through the room, his dogs on a tight leash.

There were three people sitting inside, two of them men in various states of undress. What coverings they had were a mixture of clothes stolen from the villagers' washing lines and uncured animals skins, greasy and rotten. All three had the faded, hunted beauty of Cronixes. One of the men's faces looked familiar to the hunter: an actor from long ago whose name escaped him now. His mind momentarily wandered off after the missing name. Red Butler, was that it? Something like that, but was that the actor's name, or the character he played? Of course, this one didn't have the jug ears he remembered, but then the Immortals almost always removed imperfections before they returned to Earth.

"Durbble daa," the creature said, trying to articulate some ungraspable thought.

To the right sat a woman in dirty wool trousers and a fisherman's sweater. She was clutching a large knife. Her eyes darted around the place, from the male Cronixes -- one of whom was masturbating, while the other nursed an ugly gash on his upper arm -- to the hunter. She had thick brown hair, huge almond eyes and hard, muscular hands. The hunter was momentarily transfixed by her beauty: for years, his only female contact had been the worn faces of the village women.

The woman stared back defiantly, her eyes flitting to the slouching men around her.

"Scold?" the hunter.

She stared a long time without answering. Probably she had no idea what he was saying, or just didn't trust him. He should have come down here with someone who knew these creatures, but in his hurry had not bothered asking around.

"Outside?" The hunter pointed to the door. He stepped out and tethered the dogs to a birch. A minute later the woman slipped through the door, keeping an eye both on the Cronixes behind and the intruder waiting in the grass. She still held the knife, which he now noticed had a serrated edge for gutting. He thought of the deep slash on the Cronix's arm and guessed he had tried to mount her. Little surprise, then, that the other Cronix had restricted himself to auto-stimulation. They may be empty vessels, but they're not dumb. Despite the nervous flutter in his gut, the hunter smiled at her.

"Pretty handy with a knife, huh?"

The woman silently closed the stable door and walked to a clump of pine saplings. She pulled down her trousers and squatted to piss.

"You understand me?" the hunter asked, speaking slowly. She shrugged. Not much, but it was a start. He relaxed slightly.

"My name is Oriente," he said, without holding out his hand or approaching her in any way. "Do you have a name?" She pursed her wide mouth for a moment: she really was stunning, the hunter thought, marveling at the vanity of the air-siders. The woman shook her head, no. No name.

"Do you know who you were supposed to be?" he asked.

The hunter knew that these pathetic, dangerous creatures had all been intended, once upon a time, to be someone else, a beautiful vessel for some vain immortal returning to Earth, either to oversee the administration of the few remaining urban communities, or more rarely, to spawn. But occasionally the mind transfer went wrong, some glitch in transmission between those ships riding at anchor in the Earth's orbit, and the receivers down here, planet-side. The animation of the body went ahead as planned, but the mind never quite made it. The beautiful Cronix awoke as startled animals, possessed of a blind instinct to run for their lives: most were caught and penned. Very rarely, one would fight its way out and roam the woods until it died, with all the self-knowledge of a troglodyte. They were quick and wily creatures, and could look a man in the eye and seeing nothing but their next meal.

Rarer were the scolds: part of the client's mind actually implanted, but in a mangled, sub-standard state, leaving the bewildered creature with enough self-awareness to wonder what it was doing suddenly in a room full of white-coated technicians. Some were more conscious than others, and would scream and howl in the terror at their miscarried inception: hence the name, scold. They were taken away for observation by

psychologists, to see if the client had actually arrived in-body but was simply suffering from earth-side disorientation. Or as they called it, reincarnation sickness. If the client's personality emerged from that autistic scramble of howls within a day or two, all well and good: if not, they too were led off to the holding pens until a judge signed the euthanasia order.

The woman shook her head again: no idea who she was supposed to have been. Or maybe she wasn't even aware she had even been destined to be someone else, rich and carefree. She only knew the feral life of the woods, the dank huts at the edge of the stockade and the fear of men. Clearly expensive genes, though. Even after living in the dirt and the cold winter forest, her skin had a soft glow that made the hunter want to reach out and stroke her cheek. He wisely resisted the temptation.

"I'm hunting," he said. She had hitched up her trousers and was standing with a hip cocked towards him. "Wolf. Big one. I need your help to track him." Again, the withering silence as her big brown eyes scrutinized him. Probably sizing him up, he figured. He would present little threat: she would be faster and stronger than him. Whether she was actually safe to travel with on those quiet forest tracks, was another matter.

"Will you do it?" he asked. "I will give you food and clothes. You can shelter in my tent."

"Boots," she said, her voice slurry.

He looked at her feet. He had not noticed until now they were bare, almost blue in the morning chill.

"Okay," he said, smiling: at least she could speak a little. "No problem. I'll get you a coat too. You wait here, I'll get you kitted out at the exchange. Anything else you need?"

No answer.

He walked back into Dorking and bought a pair of boots, three pairs of thick socks, a winter coat and another sweater. When he returned, the scold was waiting, petting his dogs. She quickly pulled two pairs of socks over her frozen feet, one over the other, then shoved her feet into the boots. He smiled as she stood in front of him. She did not smile back. He untied the dogs, handed her the leashes and mounted his mule.

"Okay, let's go," he said. She turned and jogged off, the dogs loping easily at her side. It was always the same with scolds, especially the females – they understood hunting dogs. As he spurred his mule, the hunter reflected that right here was a real life Diana, huddled in the dirty shacks of the poorest Dianite farmers. They were simply too blind to recognize the goddess in her.

"Humans," he muttered. "Always were dumb, always will be."

The forest hung thick across the path. The first buds dusted the bare branches with the chlorophyll urgency of spring. From time to time they passed a steel skeleton of a high-rise, entwined in ivy and creepers. Business parks, light industrial zones, red brick housing estates, all had retreated beneath centuries of moist forest floor.

The scold walked ahead, the dogs pulling her along with a sense of purpose. Oriente peered through the trees, ever the hunter, but more often than not he found his gaze returning to the woman. Her figure was almost lost in the thick baggy clothes, like a refugee fleeing a bombed-out city of old. But occasionally the twill molded itself to the curve of a calf or buttock, and the hunter would feel the stir of vestigial longing.

It was getting late. The sun lolled on the horizon as they emerged from the trees onto open, rolling hills dotted with oaks. This was the fat lip of downs.

“We’ll stop there, by that split oak,” he said.

He pulled out his blankets and the canvas tent he'd bought years ago in Dorking. The scold lay down as he hopped about, picking up kindling for a fire. She slipped off her boots and socks and massaged her feet, contorting as easily as a grooming cat. She caught his gaze and stared back. He dropped his eyes like a guilty schoolboy.

As night fell, they sat by the fire, huddled in blankets and coats. To the west, Oriente saw a hint of light, possibly the hamlet of Kingston: a warm glow from the aquamarine depths of the valley. He prodded the

fire, gave some beef jerky to the woman and threw a few chunks to the dogs. He noted, jealously, that they had chosen to sleep next to her.

“You have a way with the dogs,” he said. “Traitors,” he said, with a fake snarl at Arthur, who snored on. Jess pinned her ears guiltily to her head.

The scold seemed at first not to understand, but then reached over and ruffled Jess’ fur.

Aside from his talk that morning with Guld, Oriente hadn’t had what might be termed as a real conversation in months. Not since a government technician had stayed with him in his woodland retreat while repairing the transmitters used to capture the minds of the newly departed and beam them to the off-world Orbiters. For their life-saving and often lonely work, the technicians were known as ‘priests’: the sturdy transmitters they maintained on hilltops across the land were known as ‘soul poles.’ The priest had stayed with Oriente a few days, chatting about his life in London and enjoying the nature. Since then, Oriente had lived only with his dogs. He wondered whether such a recluse could have anything meaningful to say to a woman with a will-o’-the-wisp mind. He cast around for something to break the ice, and pointed up to the sky where constellations wheeled slowly across the heavens.

“See that cluster of stars?” he said. “That’s Andromeda, the chained lady. And that over there, that’s...er...” he racked his brain to dredge up the name. “Ursa Major! That’s it, the Great Bear.” The woman glanced up: not seeing anything worth looking at, she reverted to the hypnotic flicker of the fire.

Oriente looked for another constellation. Occasionally, a bright speck of yellow light would trace a luminous trail across the night sky: the souls of billions of people floating in space.

He pointed to the bright dot. “And *that* is where you come from,” he said. She looked up at him. “Yes, you. From up there.” This time she peered up for longer, squinting into space.

“Those are the Orbiters,” he said. “Look, there’s another.” He pointed at another quadrant of the open sky. Her eyes followed his finger. “*Forever beyond the reach of the cold woods, the bears and wolves, all these antediluvian fears of man,*” he quoted, though he could not recall who he was quoting. “Until they come back, which they don’t do very often. I wonder why you were coming back?”

She looked at him, pointed at her chest, as if to say 'Me?' She hadn't uttered a word since her monosyllabic demand for footwear that morning. She certainly didn't talk much, but for a scold it was plenty.

“Yes, you. You see, a long time ago, all this was full of people.” He swept his arm across the horizon. “You couldn’t even see the stars at night because of all the light from the city.”

All those generations who had slept in the valley below, who could never have imagined that one day their descendants would glide silently across the night skies above, abandoned to whatever dreams they cared to indulge in. Not even Fitch had quite grasped what would happen when he unleashed his invention on the world.

The thought of Fitch made him restless again.

“They lived here, and they died here, for a very long time,” he said.

“Until someone came up with an idea, a sort of machine, that allowed them to live on, but just their minds,” said touching his own head, aware she would have trouble grasping even a fraction of what he was saying. He kept talking anyway, because he was starting to find he liked it. “To keep them safe, they put them in these big containers up there. And sometimes they come back here for a few years, to work or have children, or...”

He stopped. She was frowning, trying to follow what he was saying.

“Yes,” he said gently. “Your mind, all that you think, or remember...”

Except he knew it wasn't her. What she was, in fact, was just a fragment of what she might have been. And yet she was still, irrevocably, her.

“But now you are here. With me.” He smiled. She gazed at him and slowly the crease on her brows smoothed. She cocked her head and stared into the fire, then back up at the sky.

“Okay,” he said. “Sleep now. Tent.” He opened the flap of the tent.

“You take the sleeping bag, I'll take the blanket.” She looked warily at the tent, so he put his hands to the side of his face in a gesture of sleep.

“Warm in there. Cold out here.”

He stepped inside, stripped down and wrapped himself in his insulating blanket. Through the wall of the tent he saw her silhouette move against

the firelight, perhaps scouting for any lurking predator, Cronix or wolf. Or Fitch. Then she came in and lay on the sleeping bag.

“No,” he said, reaching across, “You get inside...”

The woman reached reflexively for where he knew her knife was hidden. He pulled back quickly as she squatted on her haunches, ready to defend herself.

“That’s okay, that’s okay,” he cooed. “I’m not going to touch you.” He opened the neck of the bag. “You go in here. Warm.” He turned his back on her and made as if to sleep, listening as she slipped into the sleeping bag, fully clothed. He turned and snuffed the lantern. A little while later, he could hear her awkwardly pulling off her sweater in the dark, clearly too hot. Then he drifted off to sleep.

He thought he was dreaming at first, an adolescent fancy of fumbled arousal. A soft hand infiltrating his blanket and creeping like an erotic spider, warm and menacing, across his belly. He smiled in his sleep and the spider pressed southwards on its padded feet. He felt himself stiffen. In his mind, he sighed at the sweet adolescent association of camping and sex. But there was something else, something tickling at his mind like a teasing feather: he had never been an adolescent.

He opened his eyes a crack, just as the scold was pulling back his blanket. She did not notice at first that he was awake. She was naked too. He lay still in the darkness to avoid scaring her off. Because this was too pleasant, he thought, being groped by this woman who was no

doubt responding to some inner animal call. She pushed herself down on him roughly and he let out a gasp, almost of pain. Clearly this was her first sexual experience, or at least her first voluntary one. She straddled him, one knee propping her upright, the other crooked into a crouch so she could work herself against him. She started gently rocking backwards and forth, letting out a little gasp every now and then. He lifted his hands slowly to stroke her arms, which were smooth and marbled with muscle. She didn't seem to care whether he was awake now, so he slid his hands over her shoulders and breasts. She let out a long breath and moved her hands down on his chest. She pressed down so hard he started to worry she might suffocate him, but the sensation pleased him nonetheless.

She was perched on the balls of both feet by now, grinding frantically. The aggression of her mating tantalized him, igniting forgotten fantasies he had imagined long since laid to rest. The disturbing thought again occurred to him that perhaps they weren't fantasies, but memories of long ago, things buried deep under the hill of time. No thought could trouble him for more than a second now, though, as she writhed atop him. He let out a strangled howl as his back arched and collapsed, his mind and body spent. One of the dogs outside got to its feet and started sniffing at the flap of the tent. But she kept moving on top of him, perhaps unaware that he had finished. The pleasure started to turn to discomfort, then pain, so he put his hands up to her shoulders and pushed her gently back.

“Okay, that’s enough now. It’s finished.”

He realized how selfish the words would sound to any other woman, but she simply retreated to her side of the tent, apparently satisfied. He decided to take his life in his hands, and lent across the canvas floor to where he could just make out her head in the dark. He tried to kiss her on the cheek but missed and ended up planting his lips on her ear. She didn't try to stab him, which he took as a good sign. Ten minutes later he was asleep again, as contented as he been in a long, long time.

The woman was already up and dressed when he awoke. She had resurrected the fire and was stirring cornmeal in a metal pot. The dogs lay next to her, soaking up the weak sun. He smiled, squinting in the bright morning light. She stared back at him blankly.

"I was that good, huh?" he said. She ignored him.

"Do you have a name?" he asked. She spooned slop into her mouth, but did not look up. "Not even a name? Well, we'll have to get you a name then. Let me think about it."

After breakfast, they set off again. Occasionally the old man would shout out a possible moniker. "Cathy?" "Lorna?" Each time she would glance over her shoulder and walk on.

"Well listen, Miss No-Name, I don't know what you were doing in Dorking, but when we are finished with this hunt, I'd advise you not to stay in the southern woods. Too many Rangers and hunters. Go north.

They say there's a place up there where scolds live in peace with mortals, and there's no police. You could build yourself a life there."

This time, she seemed to be listening. "North," he repeated. "Follow the birds in spring. I hear it's a place on a hill, name of Edinburgh."

She frowned at the name, apparently trying to make sense of it. He repeated it. "Edinburgh."

"Adum-brae?" she managed.

"Close." He chopped the name up into palatable syllables. "Ed-in-burrow."

"Ad-um-brae," she said again. He shrugged, pleased at least she had expressed fleeting interest in something he had said. "That'll probably do. Adum-brae it is."

They saw the stone monument rising on the crest of the downs long before they spotted the multitude of figures that were ranged around its base. The hunter already knew what was there, and was ready for the inevitable shock, but the scold halted when she saw the throng of dead people positioned around the towering shrine, unmoving and devoid of any discernible human scent.

He waved her on as his mule caught up. "Nothing to be afraid of. They're not alive."

The scold stood stock still, and he trotted on through the thistles to where the first of the bodies stood rooted to the ground. Despite his reassurances, the place always instilled a sense of ill ease in him. The sloughed-off bodies of thousands of people who had gone air-side were perfectly preserved in a variety of poses around the vast marble statue. Some were running, some sitting cross-legged or kneeling in circles, others lying on the ground, wrapped in each other's arms. Many just stood there, looking up at the skies to which their one-time occupants had ascended, leaving their skins – treated with chemicals against decay and the elements – here on Earth, a memorial to all those who lived and died before the promise of deliverance. Beneath them, Oriente knew, was a great burial pit, where the tens of thousands of bodies from London had been interred during the frenzied final years of the Exodus.

The chemical treatment had prevented the bodies from rotting, but not from being annexed by nature. Some were almost entirely entwined in ivy, while others had faces blackened by moss and mildew, birds' nest peeking from mouths that gaped open in joy. A half-hearted caretaker, underpaid and dispatched every few months from London, had scythed back the weeds from the figures closest to the statue, and even scrubbed one of two back to their original polish. The overall impression was nevertheless of a horde of vegetal zombies shambling toward the giant stone figure rising in their midst. As the mule weaved its way through the frozen crowd, Oriente glanced over his shoulder. The scold was skirting around the edge of the display, unsure what to make of the macabre assembly.

He passed smiling, elderly grandparents now young and coltish in their off-world paradise: eternally sulking teenagers, happy families chasing a stuffed pet dog. There were at least three people mounted on embalmed horses. Some of the clothes had been improperly treated and had rotted, revealing glimpses of bare flesh beneath. In places, a figure had toppled and lay face-down in the long grass.

Oriente reined in his mule at the foot of the stone plinth. It was bracketed by two giant feet belonging to the figure that soared above him. He craned his head, squinting in the light reflected by the off-white marble. Far above, the craggy stone face stared into infinity.

“Hey Fitch,” Oriente said to the statue.

The plinth, rising twenty feet above him, was scored with writing in dozens of languages, all bearing the same message:

In memoriam

To those who died.

A less-than-heartfelt memorial from those already half-out of the door, but anyone reading it knew what they had died of, and why. They died simply because they had been born too early to be saved.

Beneath the moss-rimed engraving, a larger, less polished lettering had been chiseled by some later commentator, clearly not an Eternal:

“Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they are.”

In fact, on closer inspection the hunter saw the huge pedestal was covered in a fungus of graffiti left by countless visitors, people either on their way out or returning to Earth for whatever reason. Some of it was just names and dates – *Philippe et Claudine 23/7/2377, Drax Megalouki, March 2553*– while others had left misspelled messages of gratitude to the man whose statue now dominated the hilltop, just as his name dominated the history of human evolution.

Tusen tak Dug Fitsch, Agneta Arnborg, Uppsala.

One slogan, freshly painted on the plinth, caught the hunter’s eye.

And they shall know that they are dead.

He stared at the message a while, then tethered the mule to the wrist of a young woman making the V-for-Victory sign.

By the heel of the statue’s right foot, a metal door opened into the cool interior of structure. It was supposed to be locked, but the chain was rusted and broken. The place had a pleasantly dilapidated air, and Oriente trudged up endless flights of steps to emerge at a doorway half-open to the powder blue sky. Puffing slightly, he stepped out on to a platform atop the giant’s head.

He couldn't help but smile. As far as he could see, England was covered by rolling woods broken only occasionally by a grassy glade. Birdsong drifted up and the high breeze cooled his moist forehead. Gazing down over the stone waves of the giant's thick hair, speckled with the nests of swifts, he could make out the tip of the nose protruding out over the throng of celebratory corpses below.

"Ah Fitch," he said, slapping the statue's head. "What the hell are you doing to me?"

The silence was tempered only by a whisper of a breeze and a wood pigeon cooing. Peering down, Oriente felt like a monarch of old addressing his people. Unnervingly, a number of them had been positioned to stare up at the man who saved them, and he could almost feel the blind stare of their eyes.

"C'mon, Doug, where are you?" He scanned the legions of the dead fanning out towards the edge of the forest, hoping for a glimpse of the hulking wolf. Nothing. For the hundredth time, he asked himself what the beast had meant with its cryptic message: *Laura was right*.

Right about what? He had spent so long trying to forget her, and Fitch, that now the memories only trickled back. Laura's obsessions, her many strange ideas. One thing sprang to mind, something she had always gnawed away at, could never quite let lie: her religious upbringing. As a scientist, she had tinkered with the fabric of life, always trying to lift the curtain and peek at the wizard behind. Even after the centuries of forgetting, Oriente suddenly recalled her badgering Fitch at the dinner

table the old house, theorizing about the nature of God. *"Maybe there was deity once, who created all this, but then he died. Or got bored and left. Or maybe he's on a break, and his lunch hour is like five thousand years of our time..."*

Could that be what the wolf had meant?

Oriente shook his head. No, she couldn't be right about that. There was no deity. Science had long since stripped nature down to its barest essentials and found nothing, no feral god hiding behind the skirting boards of the universe. It had to be something else.

On the far edge of the crowd of stuffed humans, a figure was running, jumping around. He pulled his field glasses out of his back pack. It was the scold, waving her arms in the air. *The wolf!* She must have spotted the wolf. The hunt was on.

He dashed down the winding steps. Outside, the sunlight dazzled him and he fumbled as he tried to unhitch the mule from the smiling girl's arm. As he grabbed the saddle, something caught the edge of his vision. He froze, slowly lowered his leg from the stirrup, and turned around.

He couldn't tell exactly what had raised his hackles. His eyes scanned the silent figures.

And there it was. The hunter's heart lurched, the breath leaked out of him. For there, standing absolutely motionless between a Sikh family in turbans and saris and a paunchy middle-aged man throwing a Frisbee, stood a powerfully built blond male, a good six feet four. Stock still and

staring straight at him between the posed corpses. Not moving a muscle, not blinking.

Cronix.

“Oh shit,” he croaked.

The creature was naked except for a rope belt hung with two human heads, fixed in place by twine running through empty eye sockets. *This* was what the scold had been warning him about, not the wolf. She wasn't about to tackle such a monster by herself.

As slowly as he could, the hunter reached the gun in the saddle sheath. The Cronix was a good fifteen feet away, but would move with terrible speed once he made his move. His head could be hanging from its belt in minutes.

His arm crept to the stock of the gun. Not for the first time, he cursed himself for never having had a chip implanted. What was now a moment of life-or-death hazard would then be no more than a minor, if briefly painful, inconvenience for an Eternal. Too late now. Too late for anything except that rapid grab for the shotgun, if he could make it.

He went for the draw. A movement behind the Cronix, shapes hurtling between the dead, registered in his peripheral vision. The Cronix spotted them too. Arthur and Jess, pelting at full speed to their master's aid. In a split second, the creature weighed its options, then bolted.

Hablaw, it screeched in its insane babble as it ran.

Oriente yanked the gun out and wheeled on the giant as it dashed off between the embalmed figures.

“Take that, motherfucker,” he screamed, blasting off a round. The arm flew off a Chinese woman. He fired again and the head of the Sikh pater familias exploded in a shower of chipped bone splinter and insulator foam. But the Cronix was gone. The hunter fell to his knees and heaved up his breakfast on the wet grass. Jess ran up and licked his sweating face. He clasped the dog and buried his face in her fur.

“Thank you, girl, thank you.”

The scold padded up noiselessly and stood staring he crouched on the ground.

“Thank you,” he said. “For releasing the dogs. You saved my life.”

She stared at him a second, then turned and led the way onwards, away from the statue and its unmoving entourage, on towards London.

Hours later, they glimpsed the city. To the east were the old Thames flood barriers, rusting hulks basking like washed-up whales on the tidal mudflats. The floodplains had long since receded when the ice caps were artificially re-frozen, leaving the dykes and dams rising like sentinels over swamps of genetically enhanced mangroves that had once helped limit the tides. In season, the Thames valley blossomed a startling tropical red and white.

To the south, directly below where they stood, the Great London Wood swept up to the heart of the city. The historic center lay in the shade of the endless forest, dominated by a gaunt stone edifice: the Temple of the Apex of Human Evolution. Vast stone pillars carved in the shape of trees burst through the temple's sloping roof, a tribute to the restorative power of nature over civilizations that had brought humanity to the brink of catastrophe. Oriente had always dreamed of going inside, but fear kept him away: London had only a marginal police presence, but long experience made him mistrustful of any large gathering of human beings. He had heard from the few Dorkingites who visited the temple that inside was a large statue of Charles Darwin, surrounded by stone-carved ape-men.

"There it is," the hunter said, half expecting the scold to share his wonder. But she was squatting on her haunches, chewing a stalk of grass. The fact that he couldn't share this moment irked him for a second. He shook himself out of it: he was already losing the habit of being alone.

"London," he said. "You came through here."

She pointed lazily down the hill, to where the woods broke like surf on the swell of the hills. The trail of the wolf.

"Well, let's go get him then."

They descended the escarpment slowly, Oriente still gazing at the scaffold-crusted dome of Saint Paul's and rooftops of the much

diminished city. Eventually, the great wood enveloped the travelers and the magical vision faded once more into narrow forest track. The scold stopped and looked back.

“I know,” he said. “We’re getting close to London. I don’t like it either.” He could understand her apprehension – she must have fled for her life through these same woods. How long ago? Weeks, maybe months. She had no desire to return.

“Watch out for Rangers,” he said. “They can come down on you in seconds.”

They walked on, slowly. The scold held Arthur and Jess on a tight leash, occasionally halting to inspect a broken fern or crushed grasses for signs. The wolf, or whatever it was, appeared to be heading north, skirting the city. They walked for hours, eyes fixed on the forest. They would be at the river soon: Oriente could almost smell the muddy water.

The scold halted. The dogs stood alert, ears cocked, then started barking. The scold leaned back in an effort to restrain them.

“What is it?” Oriente yelled, fumbling his gun strap.

Arthur broke from the scold's grip and vanished into the ferns. The air exploded in an otherworldly howl as the barrel body of the wolf arced out of the brush. Oriente was too stunned to react. In daylight, the size of the creature was simply staggering, its snarl a brutal assault on his ears. It fell on Arthur, who buckled and seemed to snap in two. Without breaking its stride, the beast plunged straight at the scold and Jess. The

woman released the dog, which threw itself at the terrifying beast in a gesture of desperate courage. Oriente finally snapped to his senses, leveled his gun and fired at the explosion of fur. He saw the scold sprinting off into the woods. Then the monster looked up from Jess's broken body and stared straight at him. He raised his shotgun again but the mule reared in terror and dumped him in the ferns before bolting.

Oriente lay winded a moment, his spine jarred and nausea churning his guts. He pulled himself stiffly to his elbows but almost collapsed back in horror: the beast was already upon him, standing between his crooked legs, head down and eyes locked on his.

“Fitch?”

But there was no sign of humanity in the yellow eyes. For the second time that day, the hunter felt something he had thought forgotten: the fear of death, loosening his bowels and filling the clear forest air with the foul reek of his own shit as the wolf lunged at his face. His screams echoed through the woods, scattering the birds that had just begun to settle again after the animal's unworldly howl had set them to flight.

He wasn't sure at first that he was awake. His eyes felt like they were wide open, yet everything was still black. Voices drifted from another

room, a heater hummed close by, but he couldn't see a thing. He tried to lift his hands to remove whatever was blocking his vision, but found his arms bound by something soft yet unyielding. Beneath his sweating palms he could feel clean, cotton sheets.

The blackness was like a cover over his face – suddenly he couldn't trust his senses, his skin couldn't discern whether there was really something smothering his vision. He shook his head, already crawling with the bulging, swarming roaches of claustrophobia. The wolf's face flashed before him.

Fitch.

He screamed hoarsely and found he couldn't stop. It was happening: he'd spent centuries avoiding this and now it had finally happened, he was back inside the machine. The lungfuls of sound echoing around him told him he couldn't be, but he kept on screaming anyway to prove he had a voice and was still flesh and blood. His howls echoed until they summoned the reassuring sound of footsteps hurrying toward him.

A woman's voice, close to his ear, urged him to calm down. The voice was confusing: its timbre was soft and delicate, yet the words –*Hey, knock it off now, would you* -- would have grated on his ears had it not been for a needle prick, unseen and almost unfelt on his bare bicep, followed by a spacey feeling of relief and elation. His yells died instantly, replaced by a beatific smile. The woman's voice kept telling him that everything was alright, that he was in a hospital.

"You're safe now, so you can quit your whining," she said. A delicious waft of burnt tobacco drifted through the dark space, and he slowly realized his benefactor must be puffing on a cigarette.

"You're in London now, mister, so you don't need to be worrying about a thing. Which means you can stop with the yelling." The drug she had injected melded the harsh tone of her voice into something sweet and mellow, until it felt like a steady infusion of peaceful words splashing upon his consciousness.

"What happened?" he asked. "Why am I blindfolded?"

"That's not a blindfold, hon," she said. He could hear her blow smoke. "That there's a bandage."

"A bandage? Why, what happened to me?" He knew he should feel alarm, but the drugs muted any urgency.

There was a pause, as the nurse checked a chart. He could hear her pulling at her cigarette. Even in his drugged state, the hunter realized this nurse's bedside manner was not all it might be.

"You were attacked, it says here, by a wild animal. Wow, no shit. A forest Ranger found your mule -- you were riding a mule? Jesus" -- there was a snort of laughter, succeeded by another sharp inhalation of smoke -- "wandering near Norbiton Gulley, wherever the hell that is. This Ranger followed the path back down and found you there, unconscious and...ooh..."

"What...what is it?" the hunter was confused. "Why have you got me tied down like this? Am I under arrest or something?"

"Hmm, guilty conscience, huh? Dontcha worry none, it's just some simple legal precaution. Admissions couldn't find your profile on the records. So they contacted the DPP and all they could come up with was a fit from some pirate clinic in Mexico from....let me see...wow, 2037. Which, it says here, was actually *before* the first licensed regeneration clinic was ever even opened."

She whistled conspiratorially, curious all of a sudden: she clearly hadn't read the patient's notes beforehand. "Oh boy, and since then nothing, for...what would that be, something like 600 years? Now, *that's* what's what got them going, I'm guessing." She sounded suddenly animated, pricked out of her lethargy just as he slid into his.

Although he couldn't see her, he could tell she was staring right at him. "No wonder they got a fella down there in the lobby just waiting for you to wake up," she said. "You gotta have quite some story to tell, eh, my friend?"

He couldn't think for a moment. Everything was wrong. He had to change the subject, fast. He forced his mind away from the soothing stupor it was slipping towards.

"What's your name?" he asked

"Me? Lola. I see yours is ... Luis Oriente? Guess you're probably not originally from Norbiton Gulley then?" She added, in a slightly

conspiratorial whisper, "You got any original genepool in you? You must be Latino, with a name like that. And I have to say, despite the bandage, you're a pretty good looking man. In fact, the bandage makes you look kind of heroic... a handsome revolutionary about to face the firing squad." She sounded flirtatious now, something that struck him as being almost as disturbing as the fact that an agent from the Department of Profiles and Personalities was sitting outside, waiting to question him. But what troubled him most was the creeping sense of *deja vu*. Of course, being as ancient as he was, and with so many synapse reloads behind him, that was not an uncommon occurrence, but this time he felt sure his situation actually harked back to something long, long ago.

"I have a feeling this has all happened before," he said.

He heard her stub her fag end on something by his bed. "Hey honey, everything on this dirtball planet has happened before. That's why no one wants to come back. Except me, and I'm only here 'cos I won a return trip. Anyway, I better go tell the inspector you're awake. Would you like some more of that nice drug before I go?"

He shook his head no, though he would have very much liked some more. But he had to keep whatever wits he still had about him. He cocked his head as she walked out the room, with the click of high heels. Who was this nurse, and what kind of hospital had he landed in? But the pharmaceutical buoy kept him from sinking too deep into distress.

A few minutes later, a heavier step approached, briefly accompanied by the tattoo of the nurse's stilettos. There was a pause, a whispered conversation, then the heels about-turned and clack-clacked off into the

distance again, dismissed by the flat-soles. He heard someone walk up to his bedside, pull up a chair and sit down.

"How are you feeling, Mr Oriente? My name is Keith Demarra. I'm from the DPP. You know what that is, I take it?" It was a steady, confident voice, not without genuine concern for his well-being.

"Okay," said the hunter, cautiously. "What happened to my eyes?"

"Seems some kind of an animal ate them," said the agent, matter-of-factly. "Must have been kind of painful, no? Don't worry, we'll get you a new set in a week or so. What color would you prefer? Mine are Delft blue. Got a good deal on them, part of the service medical package. Reassures people, you know, which is handy in my job, so I counted them as tax-deductible." He laughed softly at his own joke, no doubt a trademark repeated during his interrogations.

"An animal *ate* my eyes?" Oriente asked. He remembered the wolf lunging at his face. He had blacked out in pain, or fear. He had no idea how long he'd been out for.

"Seems so. I thought it was pretty strange, but animals sometimes kill for choice tidbits if they're sated. Odd, though, that it went for your eyes, not your liver or some other meaty organ. Plus it's still winter, just about, so you wouldn't expect it to have had a lot of game. Mind you, the woods are full of Cronix these days. Remarkably lucky for you, though, considering you don't have a chip."

Though it was a statement, it came out like a question: why would a person be traveling alone through wild country without the safety net of a transmitter chip implanted his frontal cortex?

"I don't believe in them," Oriente said.

The agent laughed, not loudly, just enough to show he was working his way closer to his point.

"Well, Mr Oriente, that may well be so, but you sure seem to believe in something. You're not some local yokel. Our scans show that you're about five hundred and eighty years old, and no one has seen hide nor hair of you in all that time. Now, I don't think it's all that fresh forest air and wild mushrooms been keeping you going out there in the woods all this time, is it?"

Oriente could tell the agent was leaning over the bed now, close to his unseeing face.

"Brown," he said.

"What?" The agent's voice came from a slightly different angle, as though he'd sat back abruptly.

"I'd like brown eyes, please. Light chestnut brown. Or caramel. Same as before."

"Uh-huh." The agent pulled out a pad, deliberately clicked his pen. "I'll note that down. Chestnut brown or caramel."

A pause. "Now we've got your order, sir, perhaps you could explain to us a few details."

Oriente lay still, his breathing shallow. He tried to imagine what the ceiling would look like, if he could see it. He imagined whorls of white plaster: no, that was somewhere else, a long time ago.

"Like how come your first remake managed to take place *before* any licensed clinics ever actually opened. I mean, you go *way* back. You know what? That strikes me as just a touch...well, *impossible*, shall we say? And in my experience, the impossible is very rarely legal. Very rarely. Seems that since then, you've been regenerating habitually without a license to stay earthside. Care to elaborate a little on that, Mr Oriente?"

Oriente could hear the agent's fingernails tap a military beat on the arm of his chair.

"No," he said. With the drugs and the eyeless blackness all around him, it was easy to refuse to cooperate.

"Okeydoke." He heard Agent Demarra stand up and smooth his jacket. "We got plenty of time. I'll be seeing you, Mr Oriente."

This time when he woke, the blackness was like a sack wrapped around his head, a deep memory floating in space. As the hours passed -- or was it days? -- Oriente found this asteroid of darkness to be infected with the

pervasive bacteria of memory. Microscopic details of the past, things he'd thought long forgotten, were growing in the gloom, one image rapidly spawning another. Perhaps they had injected him with something to induce memory. Because now, the long years of forgetting were unspooling, the anxiety of captivity stripping away his carefully cultivated defenses.

The lack of sight was compounded by the restriction of his movement. He was connected to a series of tubes that painlessly facilitated his bodily functions, and the only time he was allowed to roll over was when Nurse Lola programmed the bed to gently rotate so she could strip the soiled sheets.

Deprived of his eyesight and his forest routine, the fungus of buried memory sprouted in the dark recesses of his mind.

It was possible to fight back. He would run through all the chores he normally carried out at his cabin -- feeding the dogs, chopping firewood, the hours in the canvas hide surveying the forest floor for signs of game: the late summer dance of sunlight in the foliage, the shadow of a deer in shade of a hazel. He worked these memories, like a painter trying to catch the play of light on a pond, glossing over the mossy depths that beckoned from below.

Lola proved a welcome distraction. She was coarse but guileless, evidently unskilled in the art of nursing. She was as foul-mouthed as a sailor and showed scarcely a jot of interest in the world around her, save

for gossiping about other members of staff and patients, and musing about how soon her beau would agree to impregnate her.

"Hey," she said as she stormed in, an explosion of high heels and tobacco. "Guess who they just brought in to the secure unit next door? A suspected Santa Muerte. A real terrorist! I am not kidding you, he's on restraints too, only real tight, y'know, like he can't move an inch, can't even scratch his nuts. They reckon he's been blowing up soul poles out in the woods. I read two people died because this creep destroyed the poles."

"Do they think I'm a Muerte terrorist too?" said Oriente.

"Naaah," she said, opening the window to clear her smoke. "This guy's got three armed guards in his room, and he's doped up to the eyeballs."

"I don't have any eyeballs," the hunter said. "They were eaten."

"Good point," she said. "We could only dope you to your sockets." She laughed, a throaty, enticing sound. "Hey, from what I can tell, they don't know what the hell to make of you. They think you're an *enigma*." From the way she emphasized the last word he wondered if she'd had memory implants, if English were not her native language.

"Hey Lola," he said. "You've been around a bit. Who were you before? In your previous lives?"

She laughed coyly, as though flattered by his interest but determined to remain an *enigma* herself.

"My, we have been out in the wilderness a long time, haven't we?" she said. "Dontcha know it's considered extremely *gauche* to ask such things?"

"So what are you doing here, then? You get bored up in space?"

"Bored? Up there? Never. But like I told you, there's one thing I wanted in life that's something you can't get up there. I wanted a kid, a real kid."

Oriente nodded. Post-humanity had, in effect, become amphibious, an immortal world of spirits forced to briefly conjure up their old bodily forms to breed on the spawning ground of Earth. For those who couldn't afford a return, or were simply too squeamish about assuming a body of constantly oozing fluids and odious waste products, there were do-it-yourself kits to build your own children, hyper-real substitutes known as Ikkwan Children, named after their original designer, Maurice Ikkwan. Also known as Tamagochiites or, less politely, Tonka tots.

"So I spent a bundle on the best genes I could buy – I don't want to give birth to some little brat with buck teeth and no brains, do I? – and came back. And I've met this wonderful guy who's just crazy about me. He's doing his PhD in evolutionary biomechanics. Quintus Swaincroft's his name: absolute genius, for a local at least. I know, I know, so sue me. But we've been dating four months. I just gotta persuade him to get me knocked up. These locals are so ponderous about things like that, like it was some huge decision they have to think about for years and years. Commitment, he says. Responsibility, like it's a huge rock he has to

carry around for the rest of his life. I swear, they take so long to make up their minds, and live such short lives, it's amazing there's actually any of them left. I'd be better off fucking a tortoise."

"I'm sure you'll win him over," he said. "Give him some time, otherwise he might suspect you're only after his genes. Earthsiders like to be wooed. They're sentimental like that."

"You're right," she said. "I'll give him another month, after that I'll chop his balls off and take them to Doc Granger's cell shop." She cackled mischievously. Then, still with a smile in her voice, she added. "D'you want some more of that nice drug? I gotta a fresh dose from the pharmacy this morning? No? Well, you won't mind if I have it, then, will you? Don't you go telling anybody. And gimme a shout if you hear anyone coming, right?"

She tittered like a delinquent teenager, which she may well have been when she left this planet. He heard her slump in the chair by the bed.

"Sweet dreams, Lola," he said.

She was still snoring softly when he heard footsteps coming down the hall.

"Hey Lola, wake up. Lola!" he hissed. She woke with a start, mumbled something in a language he couldn't quite catch, then stood up, smoothing her dress. Seconds later, at least three people enter the room.

“Nurse Arroyo, would you mind...” Oriente recognized Agent Demarra's voice. He heard Lola slip quietly out of the room, then a new voice.

“Good morning, Mr Oriente,” it said. “My name is David Hencock, Chief Inspector for the Central Counties DPP.”

“Okay,” Oriente said.

“I have in my hand a warrant from the High Court to use all measures provided for under the Unregulated Personalities Act to establish your identity forthwith. Do you understand me?”

“What measures?”

“The charter allows a range of applications, from the use of simple medications that inhibit your ability to conceal information...”

“A truth serum?” cut in Oriente.

“If you like. That’s what they used to call it...”

“To?”

Hencock paused, as though scanning the document in his hand.

“To...interrogation in an off-world facility, should that be deemed necessary.”

Oriente was silent for a moment. “You mean, you’d kill me to question me?”

There was a humorless snort. “Hardly, Mister Oriente. Nobody *dies* round here. We simply insert a chip and terminate your physical form, then transfer you to a holding facility topside. It makes scanning your memory so much more straightforward.”

“What about the eighteenth amendment? My right to remain human?”

“That only applies to natural-born humans, Mr Oriente,” said Hencock.

“Given your age, I think we could argue that ...”

The hunter cut him off. “And once you’ve established who I am? What happens to me then?”

“Not much, probably. I’m sure whatever past you are so reluctant to disclose to us is fairly innocuous, especially given the time-lines involved. You must have blown through plenty of statues of limitations in close to 600 years. And receiving unlicensed regenerations isn't such a serious offense these days. Once we know who you are, you’ll be registered and allowed to move on to any one of the basic entry level worlds airside. Maybe receive some brief custodial sentence. From there you can do as you please.”

“And I can’t just go back to the woods?”

“I’m afraid not, Mr Oriente. The planetary recovery commission has ruled that Earth is still classified as fragile. Access is strictly controlled and will be for a while yet. Of course, indigenous peoples can live here because there are still relatively few of them and they don’t live long.

But you, it appears, have been living here for a substantially longer period than that, and against all regulations.”

Oriente sucked his teeth. “Okay then.” He was surprised at the inspector’s lack of interest in his history, given the amount of excitement it seemed to have caused in Agent Demarra. Maybe he was just a bored bureaucrat, dreaming of life on the other side. Or perhaps he was concealing his real intent.

“You’ll cooperate with us?” Hencock sounded surprised, perhaps a little disappointed not to be able to enforce the law to the utmost of his authority.

“Not just with you, Inspector. Listen, this is the way I want to do it. I’ll tell you whatever you want to hear. But I want some other people present too.”

“You’re hardly in a position to set out...”

“Shut up and listen for a minute.” His abrupt tone silenced the official.

“I want academics present. Scholars. I want a professor of applied biomechanics, advanced evolutionary theory, I want a goddam history professor to hear this. Dignitaries too. Bring the mayor of London. Oh yeah, and one other thing. I want nurse Arroyo’s boyfriend to be there too.”

“Nurse Arroyo's boyfriend?” Demarra cut in, confused.

“You heard. He’s a doctoral student in modern evolutionary history. I’m going to give him a thesis that’ll make his name. Then maybe he’ll pull his finger out and give Lola what she wants.”

There was a puzzled silence. The hunter thought maybe he had stunned his audience, but quickly realized they were probably just communicating telepathically among themselves. He had almost forgotten what the Eternals were capable of, besides being the most beautiful creatures to have ever graced the planet.

After a couple of minutes, Hencock spoke up.

“I’m sorry, Mr Oriente, this is essentially a routine, if somewhat unusual, investigation by the DPP...”

“Oh no, Mr Hencock,” Oriente felt the need to wrest the initiative from these dull bureaucrats before he vanished forever into their inscrutable heaven. “This is not in the least routine. What I have to recount is far too important to be filed away and buried by you and your pen-pushers. We are talking *history* here. Possibly the most significant and poorly documented episode of history since those goddam apes clambered down from the trees and started walking upright on the plains of Africa.”

“Uh, Mr Oriente...” Hencock began, seemingly at a loss for words. Clearly he believed he was dealing with a maniac who'd spent far too much time alone in the woods. “What exactly...who do you *think* you are?”

Oriente smiled. “Ah, Mr Hencock, I could ask you the same, since you’re the one who’s been floating around in that bubble of imagination for centuries. I *know* what I am. If you dust off your implants, you’ll find a reference to an unidentified personage commonly referred to simply as

the *Precursor*. Some of the newspapers talked about a ‘missing link’ back then. Or if you wanted to ask some of the cults out there in the woods, they might know me as the Father of the Forests. I always liked that one.”

“*The missing link?*” It was the third agent speaking. “That’s just some pseudo-scientific myth to do with Douglas Fitch...there’s a whole bunch of movies and sci-fi novels on it.”

“No myth,” said Oriente. “I was there.”

“Where?”

“I was there with Fitch at the beginning.”

“When he unlocked the first uploads?”

“Doug Fitch may have unlocked the *concept* of uploads,” Oriente said. “But he could never get them to work for shit. His brain wasn’t nearly advanced enough to do that. No one’s was at that time. It was me who made the breakthrough. Without me, gentlemen, you’d all be crumbled, twenty-first century worm shit. Now, get me that panel and you won’t have to pump me full of drugs or have my mind scanned by cognizants. Instead, I’ll make you all famous.”

The hunter lay back on his pillows, certain his visitors were exchanging baffled glances and unspoken messages. It turned out he was wrong.

“Very well, Mr Oriente,” Hencock said. “As it happens, we were already monitoring you on two separate cognizants. Standard procedure, I assure

you. One implanted in your left frontal lobe, the other...well, the other is Agent Sizen here. Against all my expectations, I must say, you check out. Which means we either have a genuine case of an advanced delusional personality or...something rather more interesting. Either way, I'm sure I can think of some people who'd be interested in hearing what you might have to say. And of course, if you will continue in your cooperation, we'll meet again very shortly."

"Thank you, Mr Hencock. Oh, and one thing more. I want my eyes before then. I like to see who I'm talking to."

The procedure took less than an hour. The surgeon connected the optic nerves, swaddled Oriente's head in fresh bandage and administered a long-lasting sedative. The next morning, Lola and another nurse arrived early, dimming the lights and drawing the blinds to remove the dressing. Lola gently swabbed away the gummy excretions that glued his eyelashes together. When she had finished, she told him to slowly open his eyes.

His vision was blurry but as it cleared, he saw her leaning in close, grinning. He found himself staring at an angel, unable to look away: her eyes were a shade of smoky blue that reminded him of evening skies in spring, her nose long and straight, slightly curled at the tip: her skin was

the color of very milky coffee, and her lips were an open invitation to lean in and....

“Ha!” She let out a triumphant cry. “I knew it was worth every goddam cent. Look at that expression! Like a puppy worshipping his mama.”

There was a sullen mutter from the other nurse. Oriente glanced at her, holding a tray with a soiled bandage and scissors. The contrast with Lola could hardly be greater: she was short and dumpy, with a huge sagging bosom and lank, lifeless hair slipping out from under her white cap. Lola followed his new eyes, then turned and pointed at the ogre staring at them as though she wanted to beat them both to death with the metal tray.

“Oh, right, and this is Nurse Shareen...she’s been helping me look after you...in her own way. Changing your sheets, spitting in your food.” Lola giggled at Oriente's look of discomfort.

“Fuck you,” growled Nurse Shareen, turning to stomp from the room.

“What’s her problem?” said Oriente, still fighting the desire to reach out and stroke Lola's perfect skin.

“You mean, apart from being hideously ugly?” sniggered Lola.

“That’s not very kind.” Oriente gently reprimanded the angel before him.

She shrugged. “Not untrue though. You should have seen your face when you caught sight of her just now.”

“She’s a local, Lola. They can’t all match up to your perfect standards.”

Lola flashed a coy smile. “Ha! That’s where you’re wrong, Senor Oriente. Not about my perfection, of course, there’s no disputing that. But she’s not local. She’s from up there.”

“Really? What the hell happened? Is that some kind of a fashion statement? An anti-beauty thing?”

Lola laughed, throwing her head back in a way that brought out the sinuous lines of her neck. Oriente found himself hopelessly staring again.

“No, she’s no fashion statement. She was sentenced to look that way.”

“Sentenced? For what?”

“She’d done some bad things up there. Very bad things. Almost got the Zone as punishment. But she had a good lawyer. She got life here instead...shhh, here she comes.”

Nurse Shareen waddled back into the room with a carafe of water and a plate of scrambled eggs on a tray. “Don’t worry, I never spat in your food, no matter what this harpy says,” she said, raising her chins at Lola. “And I can hear you from the nurses’ station. I may be ugly, but I’m not fucking deaf.”

Lola giggled and Oriente gaped at the pair of them. Shareen banged the tray on the bedside table and stood with ham-like fists on her broad hips,

staring at them both defiantly. One last sneer and she turned on her heels and clumped off.

“Jeez,” whispered Oriente. “What did she do?”

The delightfully carefree expression faded from Lola’s divine features. “What did she do? She was found guilty of transporting Tamagochiite children to Earth.”

“Ikwan...you mean the kit kids? Ones that people build themselves, up there?”

“Yeah, that’s the ones,” she said. She leant over and straightened his blankets, pulling so hard that some of the water slopped out of his glass.

“Not everyone can afford to come back to Earth and have real kids, so you get kits to build your own. Under the Law of Return, they’re never allowed to come to Earth. Of course, a lot of them grow up with identity problems when they realize they’re not ‘real,’ whatever that means. They run away, and there are gangs that smuggle them to Earth.”

“Doesn’t sound such a bad thing,” said Oriente. “Seems almost charitable.”

Lola snorted. “It would be, except to get here costs the kids a fortune they don’t have. So the nice people who smuggled them demand repayment. They end up in brothels and snuff movies and all sorts of sick stuff.”

“And Nurse Shareen was involved this trafficking?”

”Uh huh. She was a procuress, if that’s the word. Searched the cities up there for poor kids, offered them a future. The guys she was working with down here got packed off to the Zone. And good riddance to them. She was lucky, she just got subspeciation. Which is the technical word for being sentenced to live and die as an old-fashioned human being. Seems to me she got off pretty lightly.”

“I guess,” said Oriente. “And the ...” he lowered his voice... “The body, the look. Was that part of the punishment?”

Lola grinned again. “The judge said she committed an ugly crime, and her life here should reflect that fact. Every time she looks in the mirror, she’s gonna be reminded what an ugly person she is, inside and out.”

Oriente shook his head. “And they let her work here? In a hospital?”

“Gotta work somewhere. And with that frame, she’s good for heavy lifting. Guess she might atone.”

“There’s no danger she’ll...I don’t know, run off and look for a way to get another body. Get a chip and get back up there.”

Lola shook her head. “She’s free to go. But where would she run to? The woods are full of Cronix and wild animals, and she’s not exactly built for the outdoors. If she ever managed to get a rogue chip, the DPP would pick her up as soon as she hit the Orbiters. Then she’d get the Zone. And no one comes back from there.”

There was a brief silence as Lola unwrapped a small vial from its wrapper. “Now listen, this is an eye spray. You gotta administer it every four hours for the next few days. I’ll come help you, but you know how forgetful I am.” She caught him gawking at her again as she spoke, and fluttered her eyelashes coquettishly.

“So come on, ask me.”

“Ask you what?” Oriente felt his cheeks flush.

“Where I got such great genes from. You’re the one who’s always so curious.”

“Okay.” He smiled. “Where did you get such great genes from, Lola?”

“Well, funny you should ask,” she said. “By great good fortune, I unexpectedly came into some money and I found a great carpet-beater who had worked in Europe, and he came up with something very different. And very expensive.”

“What was that?”

“Well, I shouldn’t tell you ‘coz it ain’t exactly legal.” She chuckled.

“But then, neither are you. So what the hell? It’s Nefertiti.”

He was lost for a second. “What’s Nefertiti?”

“I am. Well, genetically speaking. With a few updates and add-ons. She didn’t have these blue eyes, I bet.”

“Nefertiti the ancient Egyptian queen?”

“Wife of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, in fact,” she said proudly. “The greatest beauty of the ancient world, worshipped by her own cult as a goddess.”

“Where the hell did you get her genes from?”

“Like I said, I found a good carpet-beater. You know, those guys who comb all the old furniture and heirloom rugs for skin flakes and gene pool from lost civilizations? Most of them are grave-robbers. They collect all this genetic material, then test it to see who it might have belonged to. It’s legal. Except the grave robbing bit, but then nobody really gives a shit about that.”

“And this carpet beater of yours...what did he do, break into a pyramid or something?”

“Worse,” she giggled. “He broke into the Berlin Museum of Anthropology. Seems it’s not very well guarded these days. That’s where they keep her body, though of course, she doesn’t look quite as good these days as I do. But he only took a tiny swab. Not like he ran away a leg like a dog in a butcher’s shop. Anyway, so here I am.” She stood up and took a bow. “Wasn’t it worth it?”

”I’ll say,” nodded Oriente.

“Now, where did they get the model for Shareen, you ask?” asked Lola. “You know what I heard from the other nurses? ‘English school dinner lady, circa 1940.’” She nodded happily, then tottered out of the room on her high heels, throwing Oriente a wave over her head as she went.

The man with wavy blonde hair stared at the rear wall of the large room, which was covered by a large, smoked-glass window.

“Are we recording? *Testing, one two three*. Okay? Sure? Right, I’m getting the thumbs up from the engineer. Shall we proceed?

“Good morning everybody. First of all, let me welcome those of you who haven’t been before to the Delpy Institute, one of the world’s foremost research institutes into bio-engineering and posthumous evolution. My name is Professor Jeffrey Poincaffrey, director of the Delpy. On my right this morning” – he pointed to a disheveled man in a cable-knit roll neck, his straggly beard crested with grey – “is Dr Brian Porter, head of our research department. To his right, we have Professor Leora Whiteling, director of the historical archive, and across from her is Dean Ashby Wattiki, of the Mowan Endowment, which as you probably know, is responsible for the study of indigenous inhabitants and their customs. And I’m sure you’ll recognize our very own mayor of London, Yev Lupo. Very honored you could join us this morning, Mr Mayor.”

The mayor gave a formal nod, and for a second the hunter wondered if he could possibly be a local. Certainly he had rarely seen an Eternal look as unappealing as the chief executive of the London Urban Reserve: he had an elongated face that should have been gaunt, but looked as if all of its natural angles had had been filled in with puppy fat: his teeth were so

large that his mouth almost resembled a whale's baleen filter. Yet, unless the law had changed recently, the mayor's position was reserved for an Eternal, with a local serving as his deputy. Oriente made a mental note to ask Lola when next he saw her. If this man was Eternal, he was either a complete eccentric or had very bad line of credit.

"Now, across from Dean Wattiki is..." Poincaffrey cleared his throat "...ah, Mr Quintus Swaincroft, currently a doctoral student in post-evolutionary studies at London University. And to his left we have Chief Inspector..." once again, he glanced at his notes, the smile frozen on his lips as though these last two were only here on academic sufferance ... "Chief Inspector David Hencock, from the Department of Profiles and Personalities. Welcome all."

It was the first time Oriente had actually been able to see Hencock. Like nearly all Eternals, he was an impeccably good looking man, but in an understated manner. Trim brown hair, standard square jaw with clear blue eyes, his looks spoke of the imaginative limits of a bureaucratic mind. He appeared to be an old Earth hand, one of those functionaries who dutifully returned every so often, like a colonial administrator to an obscure posting in the days of empire. The only possible sign of vanity, Oriente noticed, were his elegant, long-fingered hands, the perfectly polished nails, which gave the impression of belonging to a fastidious pianist.

"Well now, our guest of honor today is sitting opposite me," Poincaffrey said with a schoolboy grin. "And may I say what an absolute privilege it

is for me to present to you all today to Mr Luis Oriente, who I believe is going to indulge us with a most *fascinating* tale.”

Oriente nodded, arms folded, a half-smile etched on his face. Though well groomed by now, and decked out in a brand new suit, he was tired, worn down by the weeks of darkness and confinement. The memories that had trickled back into his brain, like silt filling a waterway, had receded slightly since the implant of his new eyes, but the sudden breach of his defenses left him ill at ease. All the things he had never divulged to anyone else, had tried to deny even to himself, had flooded back. He was surprised to find that now, facing a room full of academics, he felt almost relieved to unburden himself.

“It’s an honor, professor,” he murmured.

“The honor is all ours, Mr Oriente, I assure you,” Poincaffrey said.

“May I quickly take a moment to remind everyone here that what we are about to hear is subject to legal proceedings currently being undertaken by Inspector Hencock’s department, and therefore what is said within these walls must, for the time being, remain in strictest confidence. Now, Mr Oriente,” he said with a light clap. “The floor is all yours.”

Oriente nodded. “Okay, professor, but I warn you this could take some time.”

The pronouncement only seemed to increase the excitement in the air.

“Take all the time you need, Mr Oriente. “Time is what we have an abundance of.”

Oriente pulled a cigarette from the packet Nurse Lola had given him. He lit up and exhaled blue smoke at the ceiling.

“Well, it's difficult to know exactly where any story actually begins,” he said. “But what say we start with a certain Glenn Rose? One of those forgotten bit-part players of history, scuttling along the gutters of evolution like some leathery little cynodont at watering hole on the lost continent of Gondwanaland, 250 million years ago. One of those creatures, in fact, on whose thwarted little life so much of history has always turned.”