

I/D



Leon Berger

INTRO

It's not difficult to predict the future.

Just scan today's headlines and extend the trends: climate change, energy depletion, terrorist threats, government surveillance, ethnic strife, weapons proliferation, genetic engineering, corporate ethics and so on.

Yet on an individual level, there's an issue that's perhaps even more disturbing: identity theft.

In an era of security paranoia, every aspect of our lives will be recorded: from DNA to IQ; from official documentation to private finance; from medical history to psychological profile.

When that information is hacked or erased, it will be the innocent victim with no credentials who'll be labeled a security risk...

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I/D: PART ONE
The Gates Of Biblion

THE YEAR IS 2184, it's late afternoon and a young man is trying to evade capture by riding a pinto mare across a verdant spring landscape.

At first glance, there's not much about him that would attract attention. He's of average height and weight, with a crop of mousy hair and an everyman face that he tries to enhance with the fashionable chin stubble of an urban professional. He's also surprisingly robust for someone with a bio-tech heart replacement; but even that's not unusual, at least for those with sufficient means. In fact, everything about him is normal, except for one thing. His identity has been stolen. He's no longer a functioning citizen and that makes him a fugitive.

It happened a few minutes before midday, just as he was finishing up a design project at his father's lakeside estate and thinking about lunch. His application quit, the screen dissolved to a mid-scale gray and the ubiquitous phrase appeared:

A MESSAGE FROM THE GOVERNMENT

It's a standard announcement, used for no end of mundane purposes, so he thought little of it until he clicked on the link and found a polite, official statement suggesting that he might find it expedient to report to his federal administration office as soon as possible. That's when the palpitations began, an involuntary reaction that soon developed into a clammy sweat, making his scalp itch and his underarms moist. He knew, as any informed citizen knows, that a posting like that is not designed as a request and the stated course of action is not meant to be discretionary. On the contrary, deliberate non-compliance can carry penalties.

The notion of escaping out here in the mountains came to him in the primacy of desperation. He's more than aware that the decision to run was an impulsive attempt to avoid the inevitable but he only had a few fleeting moments to think

about it and a certain sense of stubborn arrogance took hold. It's one of the few traits he inherited from his over-achieving father. He told himself he'd be damned if he was going to relinquish his existence without a struggle and, from that point on, it was no longer a question of whether he would try to avoid arrest but how.

Of all the options he could come up with, the best seemed to involve exchanging his shiny vehicle in favor of a more natural kind of hybrid: a home-bred mount from his father's stable. It was an idea he retained from one of those endless nature specials, this particular one showing how the hill tribes of the Burma-Laos triangle still use elephants instead of trucks to smuggle jade in order to avoid radar detection. It made sense to him. If it works with an elephant, he reasoned, it should work with a horse. More importantly, it gave him a course of action on which to focus, a clear direction to calm the confusing mental chaos of that initial panic. Unfortunately, his plan had a serious flaw. Security technology is not the same across all parts of the globe and the terrain of southeast Asia is not yet covered by the kind of satellite-based bio-scan sensors that exist here on the North American continent. As a result, even now, even out in these open spaces, both horse and rider are being vectored onto the central system grid.

The young man glances at his watch and makes a reluctant decision to rein in. The mare is a genetically-enhanced quarter horse, strong and eager like the rest of the pampered string, but he's been pushing her hard and there's no point testing her limits. She snorts and shakes her head as she slows to an easy canter and that's when the full weight of the irony strikes him. Since the central database no longer has any record of his identity, it effectively means that the horse currently has more legitimacy than he does himself. She has a multi-generational breeding history on file at the stable, whereas he, the privileged scion of an affluent family, seems to have had his entire life erased as if it never existed. There's nothing left: not a file, not a record, not a trace. Suddenly, all status has been denied. He's become a "loser," street shorthand for the legal term, "Subject of Lost Identity", which means he now exists in official limbo. Given the continuous threat of terrorism, such people immediately become suspect by definition, so normal procedure is to consign them to electronic restriction and, for want of anything better, to employ them within supervised federal projects until such time as their identities can be restored.

That's the theory, anyway, but the system is far from perfect and, in practice, this supposedly temporary period can extend indefinitely, either with assignment to a sanitation crew or, more often these days, to one of the recycling plants.

Originally, of course, the much-touted DNA registry was meant to prevent these lost identity problems from ever happening but the supposedly unbreakable organic code eventually gave way to hackers, just like every other system, and the entire program was compromised. For a society paranoid about its own security, this represented an untenable situation: hundreds of people suddenly cut off from the grid, unidentified and unrecognized. Committees were formed, subpoenas were issued and hard questions were asked. Finally, under the glare of media and the growing pressure of public opinion, revised laws were hurriedly drafted and rammed through on a bipartisan basis, resulting in the current situation. In all fairness, the framework was designed with the best of intentions but, as so often happens, the elaborate legal niceties were subverted by everyday reality. In practice, the complex process of re-establishing a lost identity can take years, which means that victims are left in an indefinite state of suspicion.

Meanwhile, their financial resources have vanished into the ether, their signatures have been rendered obsolete, their records are meaningless and whatever academic or professional accomplishments they may have achieved have been totally wiped from every medium except memory.

As the full scope of the loss registers with the young man, his mind starts to play tricks and the bold courage he's managed to display thus far inevitably gives way, first to doubt and then to its evil twin, fear. He's beginning to think that maybe he should have waited, maybe put more faith in his own unblemished records. Perhaps with competent legal counsel, he might have been able to gain leniency; or there again, maybe not. The one thing he refused to consider, however, was to ask his father for help. Nothing could have persuaded him to do that. It would have meant showing weakness and he feels like he's spent his entire life trying to prove the opposite.

Overhead, the gray-mauves of dusk begin to shade a cloud-covered sky, with just a vague tinge of brown-pink on the horizon to suggest that pollution residue even reaches all the way out here.

The young man allows the mare to pick her careful way across the rock-strewn remains of a landslide and then, within the folds of a crevice, he discovers a rare

fresh-water source that cascades into a trickling stream. Here he pauses to let the animal slake her thirst while he gazes across to the distant hillside lights of Biblion. Soon, he knows, he'll need some sustenance himself but right now he's not sure when or how he'll obtain it. Without identity, he can't work and he can't use credit; all he can do is live on the cash he's got in his wallet and then what? Descend into crime? Turn to violence? Many others have reacted that way. He makes a conscious decision to hold such thoughts in abeyance until morning when he'll probably be able to think it all through a little more rationally. Right now, all that lies ahead is the opaque uncertainty of his position and the increasing likelihood of an intercept by the FSC, the outsourced Federal Security Corporation, whose incentivized troopers are already locking on to his position.

The mare hears it first, displaying just a minimal prick of the ears, no more than a minor distraction from the serious business of her thirst. Then it gets louder, drifting in from the direction of the western peaks: the unmistakable drone of hovering turbofans.

The young man realizes he can't afford to wait until the animal finishes and he mumbles his apologies as he touches his boot heels into her flanks. Fortunately, his father's charges are professionally trained, so it doesn't take much to urge her into motion. In less than a second, her neck is up, her head is forward and she's away, guided in the only direction possible: across an open meadow towards the distant, dark cover of the forest. It won't be beyond sensor capabilities but at least he'll be out of visual range.

As the young man finds his way into the depths of the brush, he looks back and can just about make out the craft as it settles down in the field with engines screaming and hot air blasting out a wide circumference, just like one of those crop circles the conspiracy theorists used to love.

After a while, he can no longer hear the noise and he feels he may have left them behind. With any luck, their contract doesn't include overtime and they've given up for the night; or it could just be wishful thinking by a wilderness neophyte. Either way, he knows he's not going to get much further because the canopy cover diminishes the evening light, making passage more difficult. The last thing he needs right now is an animal with an injured leg, so he decides he may as well get some sleep as best he can. He ties up the weary mare but deliberately leaves

her saddled, treatment that would be considered a firing offense for any of his father's wranglers. Then he lies down on the leeward side of a fallen tree, the driest patch of ground he can find. He's hungry, chilled and confused but sheer fatigue trumps all of that and he's asleep as soon as his eyes close.

How much time passes? A minute? An hour? He doesn't even have a moment to check because he's awakened by new sounds from smaller craft, several of them, each with a searchlight sweeping the area. There are also troopers on foot in the forest and it seems like they're homing in on his exact position.

With a surge of partially restored energy, he's back up on the mare. Darkness or not, he has to risk it. As he emerges into a clearing, a nearly full moon allows him to push her towards a gallop, while trying to avoid the glaring beams from above. From one of the hovering craft, he hears an amplified voice telling him... telling him what? He can't hear the words clearly but it's undoubtedly some call of warning to stand down. He knows they're fully equipped, so how long can it be before they open fire? How long before he feels the searing pain followed by neurological shutdown? He tries to prepare himself for the eventuality, to steel himself for the strike when it comes. He's never been in a firefight before and he's consciously trying to resist panic but, even so, he can't help the apprehension taking hold.

Suddenly, immediately ahead of him, he sees a low crash barrier, the kind they have bounding highway perimeters; but before he can react, it's too late. The mare is already launching herself into the leap, her haunch muscles propelling them high and over - and directly into the piercing headlights of an FSC cruiser. The vehicle swerves to a halt as the mare lands awkwardly on the asphalt and the young man is tossed from her back, carried forward by the momentum into a rolling fall until he ends up sprawled in the verge on the far side. His head is grazed, his shoulder feels like it's thrown out and his arm has been gashed open by the loose gravel. Inside his shirt, he can feel the droplets of blood dribbling as far as his elbow.

Behind him, the riderless mare is still trying to find her footing. She's spooked, terrified by the lights and the sudden change of surface. She rears up and turns in circles, screaming her cries of fear and rage as the uniformed trooper emerges cautiously from the vehicle. He, too, appears to be in a state of shock and for a

few precious seconds, his attention is focused on the animal in front of him, ducking to avoid the flailing hoofs as he tries to calm her. He doesn't see the fugitive make his unsteady way over, half-limping, half staggering; doesn't notice as the figure slides painfully in through the open door of the cruiser. Then, with a lurch of power and a squeal of the treads, the machine accelerates away, chasing its own headlight beams into the night.

The young man behind the wheel tries to focus his remaining energies. A thin trickle of blood is flowing from his temple into his left eye and a stronger flow is careening down his left arm, dripping onto the seat next to him. He knows that this is now a race and any sense of guile between hunter and prey has been put aside in favor of the chase, a contest of raw velocity. The only remaining question is whether he can reach Biblion before they can stop him. It's not too far, he's sure of that, but he has to drive along the twisty blacktop in the dead of night with less than perfect sight, a torn shoulder and the searchlights from a pair of helijets glowing ever brighter in his rear view mirror. He figures they won't drop down ahead of him in case he's suicidal and decides to plow straight into them. It's happened before. He's seen items like that on the news. No, what they'll do is either take him out from the air or, more likely, they'll put down some distance farther along and set up an ambush on the ground; but the road here is bounded by virgin forest and boulders, so first they'll have to find a clearing and that will take longer.

In the meantime, he's getting ever closer to his destination. What he doesn't know is whether he'll be allowed in when he arrives. Even if it can be argued that losing an identity is no crime in and of itself, there's no doubt that commandeering an FSC cruiser certainly *is* and, for that reason alone, the good citizens of Biblion may just decide to refuse him entry.

How did he get into this mess, he's wondering yet again? Yesterday at this hour, he was at his favorite table at Fennell's, snacking on lobster tail and chatting with a business client while wondering whether it would be appropriate to ask the new waitress what time she finishes. It seems like an age ago now.

In front of him, he's glad to see a series of reflective signs informing him of the upcoming turnoff and applies the brakes in anticipation of the sharp, right-angled swerve. Here there are more signs, this time warning him to halt for

identification, but he doesn't obey because he has no identification to offer. Very briefly, he considers crashing right through the barriers but that's not possible. There are concrete obstacles to prevent any such notion, so he swerves to a stop just in front of the fortified gatehouse.

By now his left eye is half-closed from the blood, his arm is numb and his brain is dizzy from the exertion. A broadcast voice is ordering him once, twice, to step out of the vehicle but he can't bring himself to move so, cautiously, the community's licensed guards emerge with weapons at the ready. They can't tell who's inside the cruiser and, as yet, they don't even know that it's been hijacked. For all they know, it's the trooper himself who's still inside. As they approach warily, the young man manages to open the door and slide to the ground. He attempts to speak but has difficulty because his throat is too dry. When the words finally emerge, they're barely audible.

"Sanctuary," he says hoarsely. "I claim sanctuary."

A silver-haired physician is wakened from his armchair slumber by the gentle sounds of a Bach cantata. Still open on his lap is the hard copy volume he was reading before he dozed off, a heavy tome from the "Light of the Lord" university library about the moral implications of commercial genetics.

He mumbles his name into the receiver. "Jonas..." In this light, he looks his age but it's of no consequence because the video mode is shut off. Only the audio is active.

His full name is Wilmott Nathaniel Jonas and he serves as Chief Medical Officer to the gated community of Biblion. Despite his seniority and longstanding membership of the council, he's still obliged to take his turn on the duty roster, which also means being on call for Guardian security whenever necessary. He doesn't mind though. Citizenship here involves social obligation, it's part of the rigor; and anyway, not much ever happens to disturb the peace. The place is too isolated, too well protected, and there are few incidents of note.

"This is Sergeant Rees," says the rasping voice. "Authorization code, sapphire theta six."

Jonas doesn't need all that security jargon. He knows Rees well enough. However, he also knows that members of the Guardian take their jobs very seriously and nobody can really fault them for that. "Yes, Sergeant..."

"Sorry to disturb you, sir, but you're required promptly at the main gate."

Jonas tries to shake himself awake. Through the earpiece, he can hear a lot of background noise, a commotion of some sort. "What's the problem?"

"Sir, we have a situation here and the lieutenant believes your presence may become necessary."

"What kind of a situation?"

"Sir, with respect, the sooner you get here..."

"Yes... Yes, of course. I'm on my way."

Dr. Jonas puts down the receiver and tries to get his thoughts in order. Before he's even on his feet, he hears his twenty-three year-old niece, Arran, calling to him from what was once the dining room but has now become her makeshift study: an untidy obstacle course of research files, discarded clothes, second-hand electronics and unwashed supper dishes, the typical surroundings of a typical student.

"What's going on?" she asks him. She's a slightly built girl with tawny hair and what would be a pleasant demeanor if it weren't for the eyes: gray-green in color, with a penetrating intensity.

Jonas likes to believe the old adage that the eyes are a mirror of the soul and that they're a sign of her exceptional intellect; but beyond that, he knows there's a deeper truth - a profound melancholy that he's never quite been able to reach. She's his only living relative, adopted when she was just a toddler after her family perished in a house blaze. That was difficult enough but then, last year, just a few days before Easter, his own wife, Schiffi, died of cervical cancer, which left the aging doctor and his niece to fend for each other as best they could. Friends and neighbors have been eager to help, because that's what Biblion is all about, but it's not been the same without Schiffi. They were married thirty-four years and she always brought life to the house with her optimism and a strength of purpose that continually amazed him....

"Uncle Wilmott?"

The voice of his niece shakes him out of his memories. "Nothing's going on," he replies. "Just some nonsense at the gate."

"Want me to drive you over?"

"Don't you have studying to do?"

"What do you think I've been doing all evening?"

"In that case, go to bed."

"It's still early."

"You need your sleep. You've got an exam tomorrow."

That's all he wants to say on the matter and he continues through to the darkened hallway; but she's no child any more and is fully capable of turning the conversation when she feels like it, often sounding like she's the admonishing adult.

"Uncle Wilmott," she says sternly, "you know what you're like, driving at night."

"Really? And what's wrong with my driving at night?"

"You don't see too well, you know you don't."

"Is that right? Well let me tell you, I see all I want to see... and I'll appreciate you not writing me off before my time. Now if you don't mind, I'm in a hurry."

He hears a sigh from the other room but shrugs it off. He considers he's earned the right to be a little eccentric in his last years. His niece may be bright and she may even have an outstanding scientific mind but she doesn't know it all.

The house, like most of the other dwellings in the community of Biblion, is a modest ranch style prefab, built in modular form and then shipped in, pre-fitted and pre-decorated. Out beyond the front patio where Jonas likes to sip his morning coffee is a good-sized stretch of lawn that he still mows by his own efforts every week just for the sake of exercise. Alongside runs a paved driveway that leads from the street to a small rear outbuilding that contains the ethanol-powered generator. Attached is a terminal where he keeps his small electric

vehicle continually charging when it's not in use. Few in the community are permitted motorized transport but since he's a medical practitioner as well as a member of the council, he has priority.

This evening, he takes a moment to make his usual check of the power gauge before he unplugs. Then he slides into the driver's seat, switches on and listens for the quiet hum.

"What's she talking about, I can't drive at night," he mutters to himself and, as if to prove his ability, he takes special care reversing out.

His destination is the main gate, which lies on the southwestern side of the community, but long before he reaches it, he's aware of something major happening outside the perimeter. There are searchlights blazing and dogs barking and uniformed men with weapons slung over their shoulders. As he arrives at the guardhouse, he's approached by Sergeant Rees, who offers a respectful salute.

"Doctor... Thanks for coming out."

"That's my job." Jonas reaches for the emergency medical pack that he always keeps ready on the back seat, then struggles to climb out of the vehicle. "What's all the fuss about?"

"Well, we seem to have gotten ourselves a situation. What you might call a standoff. Right now, it's us on this side, the FSC out there and some poor son-of-a-bitch caught in between."

"No need for blasphemy, Sergeant."

"No sir. Sorry about that."

"So what you're saying is they're trying to apprehend this man?"

"Yes sir, but he's within the boundaries and he's claiming sanctuary."

"Is he indeed? So who is he? Where does he come from? Do we know?"

"Not as yet, no."

"Is he injured?"

"Yes sir, he was injured when he arrived but not seriously."

"I see. And you're trained in medicine, I presume?"

Rees hesitates, recoiling a little from the rebuke. "No, sir."

"So I doubt you're in any position to make that judgment, would I be correct?"

"What I mean, sir, is that his injuries don't appear to be life-threatening."

"Don't appear to be? Sergeant, I'd like to make that call myself, if I may."

"Sir, the thing is that the FSC guys out there, they seem to be having a little trouble accepting the limits of their jurisdiction, and we thought... the lieutenant thought... there's a possibility of further escalation which, for our part, is what we're trying to avoid. He's out there now, trying to negotiate."

Jonas nods his agreement to that particular philosophy. All the same, he'd still like to go check it out for himself but, as he takes a step forward, he's prevented from doing so. "Excuse me, Sergeant, I need to see the patient."

"No, sir, that's not possible at this time. I'm under strict orders. If anything untoward happens, we wouldn't want you in the middle."

Jonas is about to protest again but after a moment or two, he shrugs in acknowledgment, a reluctant admission that what the sergeant is saying makes sense. "Perhaps I could be of help in the negotiations," he suggests. "I mean, as a member of the council."

"Sir, I'm sure if the lieutenant requires your assistance in that capacity, he'll make the request."

Jonas feels a twinge of frustration and is about to press his insistence when the lieutenant himself returns, striding back from the no-man's-land that seems to have been set up between the would-be combatants.

"Ah, Lieutenant..." Jonas comes to a stop, embarrassed, because he can't remember the man's name... Mosley, Morrissey, something like that? The lieutenant's a recent hiring but that's no excuse and Jonas knows it. Memory loss is just another symptom of his advancing years, yet another reminder that his time is nearing.

"Mostrie," says the lieutenant, reminding him. "The name's Mostrie."

"Yes, that's it... Lieutenant Mostrie. What's happening, can you tell me?"

"Yes sir, but first I have to call in."

"I *am* on the council, you know."

Mostrie doesn't move, a man of action rendered momentarily inert. Does he ignore this obstruction and call the Director of Public Security according to procedure or does he stand and discuss it with this senior authority who may have some influence over his next review? He decides in favor of pragmatism. "Well sir, I've spoken briefly with the FSC unit commander out there. What I'm hearing is that the man they tracked here is a fugitive and they're requesting our cooperation... even if he is, technically, within our protection."

"A fugitive?"

"Yes sir."

"What's he accused of? Do they say?"

"They say he's a Subject of Lost Identity, in defiance of federal protocol."

Jonas nods. He's heard of these cases. "And that's what they're calling a fugitive these days?"

"They also say that in the process of resisting arrest, he assaulted an officer and commandeered an official transport."

"I see," says the doctor. "And the man himself? What does *he* say?"

"He says what they all say."

"Which is what?"

Mostrie takes a deep breath, as if he's already tired of the explanation. "Which is that he's a victim, not a criminal."

"And is there any validity to that, do you think?"

Mostrie looks at Jonas, not at all sure about the direction this conversation is taking. "There's no evidence one way or the other," he says stiffly.

"Then shouldn't we give him the benefit of the doubt? Let he who is without sin cast the first stone, Lieutenant."

"I'm afraid, sir, it's not as simple as that."

"No? Why not?"

Mostrie has no idea how to respond. It's always difficult when they start quoting scriptures at him and he's beginning to think he made the wrong choice. He should have just gone inside and called the Director as he intended but if he does so now, he'll be accused of disrespect and he can't afford that kind of tarnish. This is a good job he's found here at Biblion and he'd like to keep it. He's got three kids and a mortgage.

"So what's your recommendation?" Jonas is saying to him. "Just hand him over?"

"Sir, if I was going to do that, I'd have done it by now."

"So?"

"He's claiming sanctuary."

"So I understand."

"Yes sir. Which is why I was going to call my Director to ask him how I should proceed."

"And how, I wonder, does this outsider know about our rules of sanctuary?"

"I wouldn't know, sir, but he does and that's what he's claiming."

"Then I suppose we have to grant it, don't we?"

"That would be my guess, sir, but I have to call and check first."

"Yes, I understand... Well, fine, fine, don't let me keep you."

Again the look from Mostrie and, again, the self-discipline of not saying what he'd like to say. Instead he just turns and disappears inside, leaving Jonas standing there with Rees in a kind of strained silence. It's a long couple of minutes before Mostrie re-emerges.

"Well?" says Jonas.

"The Director's decision is that we'll offer him sanctuary on a temporary basis, pending a meeting of the council."

Jonas considers the merits of the argument and pronounces himself satisfied. It's the simplest and most logical resolution under the circumstances. "Very good. Now may I please see my patient?"

"Not yet, sir, no. First I have to complete my negotiations, then you can see him."

"How long will that take?"

"Sir, with due respect, it'll take as long as it takes."

“That’s no answer, Lieutenant.”

Mostrie feels he can’t take much more of this. “Sir, I’m just doing my best to resolve this peacefully, as befits a God-fearing community, but I really can’t say how that bunch of cowboys on the other side might react. Now, if I can just be allowed to do my job?” It’s clearly meant as a rhetorical question and he strides away before the dialogue can descend any further.

The young man regains consciousness and immediately feels the discomfort of his injuries, despite the strong medication they've given him. His shoulder feels like it's been reset and is still very sore. As for the rest, they've cleaned the gravel out of his arm and bandaged his forehead. They've also inserted soothing drops into his left cornea and given him an eye patch to wear, just like a pirate, except in white.

He looks around as best he can with his one good eye and finds himself in some kind of small ER facility with a full bank of electronic equipment. On the opposite wall, he notices a handsome, brushed-metal sign with an embossed motto but he has no idea what it means:

KEEP THE PROMISE

Above the sign there's a high row of windows that reveals a pale, neutral sky. It appears to be a morning light but since there's no way to confirm the time, that's just an assumption on his part. Meanwhile, images of what happened the night before are dissolving in and out of his mind like a poorly adjusted monitor and he begins to realize that this is no prison clinic. It's too pristine, too impeccable. It means he must be in Biblion – which, in turn, means they must have let him stay in defiance of the FSC.

"Ah, glad to see you're awake," says an aging man in a white coat. "How're you feeling?"

"Bit of a headache." In fact, his entire brain is throbbing relentlessly.

"That's from the concussion. I can give you something for that."

"This is Biblion, right?" He needs the confirmation, needs to hear someone say it.

“Sure is. Large as life and twice as happy.”

Like most outsiders, the young man doesn't know too much about the place, just that it might be his only chance, a bolt hole where he could perhaps pause and consider his options. It's not that people haven't heard of Biblion, it's that for the most part, it's always kept very much to itself, one of those tightly-bound, self-administered communities that have been granted an authorized state license for religious privacy. There are many scattered around the country belonging to all kinds of sects and religions, each maintaining the legally enshrined right of a spiritual retreat from the frenetic pressures that seem to plague the rest of humanity. Very simply, the people who live here have made a lifestyle choice and whether the reason is true fundamental faith or just the search for more traditional family values, they've decided to opt out of mainstream society.

“My name's Jonas,” says the man as he fusses with his spectacles. “I'm the local quack in case you're wondering and that charming lady over there is Sister Clareth who's in charge of this fine clinic. We never argue with Sister Clareth, first thing to learn.”

The young man glances across the room and sees a prim, mature woman in a crisply starched blue uniform who's busy with her charts. She wears her steel gray hair pulled back, which only serves as a counterpoint to a face of open sincerity. She's completely engrossed in whatever she's doing and appears to smile benevolently as she mutters something to herself over and over again, like some kind of incantation.

“You know, you gave us something of a scare there for a while,” says the doctor as he leans over to look into the young man's eye. He lifts the patch gently with his thumb and peers in. “How'd you get these injuries?”

“I fell off a horse.”

“Ah well, yes, that would certainly account for it. How about your heart? What's the story there?”

“It's a bio-tech transplant.”

"That much I know. When did you get it?"

"About six years ago. I started to get dizzy a lot, you know, sports and stuff. That's when they figured out I had a defective valve."

"They couldn't just fix that?"

"There were complications. It was simpler just to replace the whole thing."

"Expensive procedure."

"They said there was less risk of rejection."

"I know a couple of cardiologists who might argue with that. But not to worry, it seems to be holding up just fine. I'd like to take a look at the records though. Any chance?" There's a pause until Jonas remembers why the young man came here in the first place. "Oh, right, lost identity and so forth. So how about a name? Let's start with that."

"I'm afraid I don't have one of those either, not any more."

"No, I suppose not... but in the interim, we'll still use the one you were born with, if you don't mind. Can't keep saying 'hey you.'"

"Calder... My name's Calder."

"Good, so now, Mister Calder..."

"No, Calder's my first name." Then, just to show some empathy for his current location, he adds: "My *Christian* name."

Jonas acknowledges the effort. "All right, Calder. I was about to say you must be hungry."

"Hadn't really thought about it."

"Well, you've got to keep your strength up. Cuisine's not much, I'm afraid. We live fairly simply out here in the boonies but we'll see what we can do."

"You're not..."

"We're not what?"

"You're not going to turn me in?"

"You mean to those people last night? You're here, aren't you? Doesn't that tell you something? You claimed sanctuary, so like it or not, that's what you've got. At least, for the time being."

"For the time being?"

"How did you know about us, by the way, just out of interest? How did you know about our rules of sanctuary?"

"My father."

"Your father? And who might that be?"

A hesitation. "Grantham Quinlan."

The old doctor gazes at him for a long moment. "You're the son of Grantham Quinlan?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Oh, I see."

"Yeah, I know, that's what everyone says."

"Well, we don't hold a grudge, if that's any help. Not towards you, anyways. But I wouldn't go shouting that name from too many rooftops around here if I were you. Just some friendly advice."

“Appreciate it.”

“All right, let’s see about getting you a bite of breakfast, shall we?” Jonas smiles briefly, then goes over to talk quietly to the woman, Sister Clareth, before the two of them leave, still in deep discussion.

Once they’re gone, the young man who now seems to have his name back, closes his eyes. It hardly surprises him that his family name is infamous around here. His father was one of the original partners in the development of the Biblion community’s infrastructure but the consortium failed, leaving the Light Of The Lord church to pick up the financial pieces. It was a real mess by all accounts and a strain, even for an institution with deep resources. Whether fairly or unfairly, the church principals placed blame on Quinlan because his corporate activities were being simultaneously investigated by the governance commission. True, he was eventually cleared for personal responsibility but the CFO of his construction subsidiary was found guilty of irregularities and the stench of the judgment was enough to permeate every aspect of Quinlan’s business. He became the corporate villain of the month, the evil developer who took advantage of some fine upstanding believers, and for a while the media enjoyed a field day – at least until the next scandal came along. The church has never forgotten though and nor, it seems, have the worthy denizens of Biblion.

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In his dream, he’s still on the mare, still galloping as a dozen airborne searchlights turn darkness into day. Again, she makes the jump but this time when he falls, he doesn’t hit the road. He just plunges into nothing but empty space and keeps going, floating down, spiraling towards the depths of an unknown eternity until he’s interrupted by the sound of Sister Clareth. Slowly he opens his good eye and blinks a little, as if startled to find himself in the same place.

"Breakfast," she says in a good-natured, singsong voice, as she enters with a tray in her hands. She fingers a button to raise the head of the cot before placing the tray on his lap.

To Calder, it looks like yogurt with a species of red berries he doesn't recognize, plus several slices of coarse black bread and a tall glass of a clear liquid he suspects is plain water. He'd prefer coffee but has a feeling it's somehow against their principles. "You the only one who works here?" he asks her. He recalls the doctor saying she was in charge of the clinic, yet here she is serving his meal.

"No," she says slowly, "there are others." But then, as if sensing that the reply was hardly sufficient, she adds: "It's a special situation."

"Special, how?"

She doesn't answer, offering instead a beatific smile, pure and innocent, full of the best intentions. "Eat," she says encouragingly. "Doctor's orders."

She watches him until he picks up the spoon, then satisfied, she takes a small device from her pocket and begins tapping in some notes. As she does so, she begins her mumbling incantations again and this time she's close enough to Calder that he can just about make out what she's saying.

"Let there be light, let there be light, let there be light..."

"Is that your prayer?" he says to her.

"My prayer?" It's almost as if she's unaware she's doing it. She turns to him and smiles. "In a way."

"It comes from Genesis, doesn't it?"

"Excellent," she says, beaming at him like a missionary with a newly won convert.

Somehow it makes him feel uneasy and he doesn't respond immediately. He just listens to her mouthing the same thing over and over again and thinks about that

phrase she used, "special situation." It gives him no reassurance at all. Finally, he feels the urge to say what's on his mind.

"This is confinement, isn't it?"

She stops her incantations. "Confinement? No, of course not. Not at all. It's a special..."

"Special situation," he says. "Yes, I know."

She seems unfazed by his interjection. "It's just until the council makes a ruling."

"Am I allowed to leave?"

She appears to be surprised by the suggestion. "Aren't we taking good care of you?"

"Yes, yes, very good. It's just that..."

"You need a peaceful environment. It's the only way to recover."

"I'm sorry, I just need to know. Hypothetically... could I leave if I wanted to?"

"Why would you want to?"

Calder feels he's getting nowhere and makes a point of sighing loudly, just to show his frustration.

She stops what she's doing and looks at him. "Young man, let me remind you, we're a Christian community," she tells him sternly. "The Lord *heals* the sick, he doesn't persecute them." That's when she decides to take pity, striving to understand what it must be like to be on the run, to be disoriented and confused, to wake up in a strange place where freedom of movement is restricted, even if it's necessary for a while. "It'll all work out," she says, "you'll see."

He begins to eat a little of the yogurt. "What's it like here?" he asks her. "To live here on a permanent basis?"

She's checking the equipment now, noting the scan readings and making minor adjustments, all the endless technology of nursing in a modern clinic. "All in good time."

"Can you at least tell me if you like it here?"

"Like it? Of course, I like it!" A small laugh, as if to say it's the silliest question she's ever heard. "This is the best place in all creation," she says, as if the phrase comes readily.

"That's saying a lot."

"Not once you get to know it." A pause. "What I mean is... *if* you get to know it.... if they give you the privilege of getting to know it, then you'll see it's true. The best place in all creation," she repeats, smiling at him.

"How long have you been here?"

"All my life."

"You were born here?"

"My family was among the first to move here when it was opened up for settlement. I was just five at the time. I don't remember much before then and nor do I want to."

"And you'll never leave?"

"Leave?" She seems shocked at the very thought. "Goodness, no, why would anyone want to leave?"

"I don't know. Curiosity?"

"There's nothing out there I want to know about," she replies firmly, then turns abruptly to leave, her work here concluded for the moment. "I'll be back later for the tray. I expect it all to be finished."

It's the kind of thing his parents' Filippino housekeeper used to say when she gave him lunch in the kitchen. He attempts a thank you but it's too late. She's gone, with the door closing automatically behind her and he can't help thinking that he may have insulted her in some way by the questions he was asking. That word "curiosity" seemed to provoke a reaction but it's hard to know for certain. He's not sure what's expected of him here, or what he himself should expect, and he tells himself to keep an open mind, not to judge too quickly.

The real problem for Calder Quinlan is that he still hasn't fully come to terms with the fact he's not really Calder Quinlan any more. He's a Subject of Lost Identity and his life has probably changed forever.

When Dr. Wilmott Jonas returns to the house, he finds his niece, Arran, still there. She's in the process of getting ready for school but he has the strong sense that she's been waiting for him. In fact, he's hardly through the door before she's all over him with her questions.

"So who is he?" she's asking.

"Who is who?"

"Now don't get all 'council' on me. I want to know his name, where he comes from and exactly how he got here."

"I don't know what you're talking about." He makes his way through to the small kitchen but she follows him, seemingly unaware that she's expected to take no for an answer. He takes cheese, figs and a bowl of sour cream from the fridge, plus a container of guava juice, one of the few personal treats he allows himself. It's not generally available here but he brings it back when he goes each week to teach class at the university. "You want some juice?" he asks her, offering to share his bounty as he arranges himself at the table.

She sits down opposite, unconcerned with juice or anything else except the subject at hand. "What I want," she says, "is for you to tell me who he is."

He cuts a slice of the firm cheese, a locally produced cheddar, and chews on it. "You know I can't do that."

"Why, what will it hurt? The place is full of rumors anyway."

"What rumors?"

"That he's a young FSC trooper who refused to obey orders and when they tried to arrest him, he crashed his cruiser through the gate."

He looks across at her, totally bemused at such a fairy tale. "He's nothing of the kind."

"So?"

"So, what?"

"So if he's nothing of the kind, who is he?"

"Arran, please."

"Is he a trooper at least?"

"No, he's not."

"So why was he in a cruiser? Did he steal it? That's it, isn't it? He's a fugitive, he stole it and then crashed it through the gate."

"Nobody crashed anything through the gate."

"But he did seek sanctuary, you can at least tell me that."

"Don't you have an exam today?"

"This afternoon, I told you."

"Then you should be studying."

She breathes a long sigh and begins to imitate him. "You should be *sleeping*, you should be *studying*..."

He puts down the spoon he's holding and takes a sip of the juice. "Over the years, I've found a little peace does wonders for the digestion," he tells her, then carries on eating as if she's not there. Using homespun medical clichés is a trick

he formulated over the years, a way to protect himself. He's not a natural parent, never claimed to be. He's just an old man doing his best.

As far as Arran is concerned, however, it's simply one more frustration in the daily struggle of living in this xenophobic backwater and she storms out, making sure that her body language registers sufficient protest. For her, the worst part of living here is knowing that, for all his minor eccentricities and petty annoyances, her Uncle Wilmott is actually one of the best. While never exactly liberal in his philosophy, his presence on the council has always provided a welcome dose of common sense and moderation against those who would inflict a more severe dogma. Unfortunately, even that will come to an end soon. His time is approaching and she doesn't even want to think about what might happen when he's gone. The extremists will no doubt vote in yet another of their own and whatever sense of balance still remains will be gone.

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Arran completes her online examination, then takes a minimal meal in the refectory, fully intending to read up for the next test. But her brain is tired and she can't fully focus. Besides, she's unable to resist joining the rest of her girlfriend crowd to discuss the latest gossip concerning the newcomer.

Currently, the most favored story is that the young man, whoever he is, committed some crime so horrendous that they're now denying he even exists. One girl suggests he's a terrorist. Another says no, he's a mass murderer, that he walked in and liquidated an entire precinct. Yet another wonders if he's a serial rapist and she receives a shocked silence in response. All of them are well aware that it was Arran's uncle who treated the outsider's wounds and they welcome her to the conversation, expecting instant satisfaction to their questions. When she can't answer, they're convinced she's holding out on them and they threaten, only half-joking, to exclude her from any further discussion unless she's willing to share.

Arran has known these girls since she was a toddler but lately, she's been finding it more and more difficult to join in with their giggly games. Okay, she has to admit that she herself tried to squirm elusive details from her Uncle Wilmott, which makes her something of a hypocrite. Yet she firmly believes that, with her, it's different. She has a desperate need to know about the world beyond the gates, whereas the only thing these other girls seem to want is trivial gossip, a way to find out if there's another eligible male in the selection pool. She can see only too easily how they'll eventually turn into perfect Biblion wives, spending their self-satisfied existence dutifully obeying their officially sanctioned husbands and bringing up their allotted children, genetically chromosomed to provide equal numbers of each kind, male and female, just as the Faith demands.

She has nothing against the Faith, nothing at all. If that's what people want, then that's fine, no problem. It's all the rest of it she can't take: the "do-as-you're-told" sermons; the "we-know-what's-best" paternalism; and the more she broods on it, the more she pushes herself towards the kind of critical level that can result in fatal consequences. The transgression of suicide is not unknown in this so-called haven and gradually, day-by-day, she's beginning to understand how such finality can occur. There's no reason for it, no generic psychological profile that differentiates the people who choose to commit such an act. It's just the way certain individuals react and she's starting to believe that if she's not careful, she may end up as one of them. Part of it, naturally, is the constant wondering and imagining what it's like beyond the gates, what it's like on the other side of the mountains. There's no media connection, no satellite download, and the only permitted network is the supervised education link run by LLU, the Light Of The Lord University, in which she herself is enrolled. There's also no physical contact with the outside, except for a very few trusted people like her Uncle Wilmott, who have been granted a council pass. For the rest, the necessities of life are delivered into a bonded warehouse and all workers who interact with the outside, including Guardian security, are banned from speaking freely with community citizens. In effect, it means the only way to receive any external information at all is from the occasional new arrivals who've decided to join the community; or - an even rarer circumstance - from a fugitive who shows up claiming sanctuary.

Through the high clinic windows, myriad constellations are visible in the blackness of the sky. As the young Calder Quinlan gazes at them, he concludes that this has been the weirdest twenty-four hours of his life.

After the previous night of frantic exhilaration, he just spent a day of almost mind-bending boredom here in the clinic: no network, no video, no news or entertainment of any kind. All they gave him to read was a newly printed Light Of The Lord version of the Bible, plus a copy of last week's issue of *The Biblion Weekly Herald*, published by the Light Of The Lord publishing guild. This week's issue, they told him, would not be out until tomorrow. When he heard that, he almost blurted out that he could hardly wait but he didn't actually say it because, just like before, it would serve no purpose insulting the people who are still protecting him from the FSC. If it weren't for these walls, he'd no doubt be wearing a loser-leash by now, one of the mandatory GPS tracking anklets that Subjects of Lost Identity are required to wear. Worse yet, he might be in a holding cell awaiting trial for resisting arrest and theft of a federal security vehicle: a double whammy that could put him away for a very long time.

He's still thinking about just how bad his situation might be when his one good eye detects the door opening, slowly and tentatively. This is neither the nurse nor the doctor and he's immediately on his guard, even if there's not a great deal he could do in his own defense. He's still bandaged up like an entombed mummy. Yet the shadowy figure who enters doesn't seem to be threatening and the young, female voice whispers over to him: "Hello? You there?"

It's fairly safe to assume that she'll find him anyway, so he whispers back: "Yeah, over here." But exactly why they're whispering, he has no idea.

She makes her way over and he can see her now, her face illuminated by the fluorescent glow of the equipment dials.

"You're all bandaged up," she says to him, stating the obvious.

"And you are?"

"Arran Jonas."

"Jonas... like the doctor?"

"I'm his niece. His great-niece actually. I came... I came to see how you're doing."

"You couldn't wait for visiting hours?"

"There are no visiting hours. Nobody's supposed to be here if they're not authorized."

"And the doctor's great-niece is not authorized?"

"No."

"So why..."

"You don't want to talk to me?"

"Sure I want to talk to you. Nicest face I've seen since I got here." He sees her lower her head, embarrassed by the compliment. In a puritan society like this, he figures she probably doesn't get too many.

"What's *your* name?" she asks him in return.

"Can we start with an easier question?" he replies. It's a joke but she doesn't quite get it. "Calder," he says. "My name's Calder." He's reluctant to add his family name, based on her Uncle's advice.

"Are you a trooper?"

"A trooper?" He laughs out loud and sees her gesture for him to keep it down.
"What gave you that idea?"

"You arrived in a cruiser."

Now he understands. "No... That is to say, yes, I did arrive like that but no, that doesn't make me a trooper."

"So what then? A fugitive? Did you steal the vehicle?"

Suddenly he feels like he's being tested and he's immediately suspicious that this may be some trick, some surreptitious method of questioning in order to... to do what? To confess? He's got nothing to confess because he didn't do anything wrong - except steal the damn vehicle, of course, which is what she's asking him.

"I'm a victim, not a criminal," he says, drawing inspiration from the slogan the losers chanted in that infamous protest march a few years ago, just before the FSC broke out the riot gear and rounded them up like cattle. Many were beaten and two even died of their wounds. Of course, there was a government inquiry and a couple of troopers were suspended for a month but there were no consequences of note.

"It's okay," she says, trying to calm his anxiety. "I'm just here to talk. Do you always have that?" She fingers her own chin to indicate his stubble.

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Why?"

"Why?" he laughs. "What kind of question is that? Because I want to is why."

"Nobody has it like that here."

"All clean-shaven types, I suppose. It figures. Look, if you're not authorized, how'd you get in here?"

"Does it matter?"

"You stole your uncle's key pass, didn't you?" He waits but her lack of response only confirms his suspicion. "You're as bad as I am, you know that? What do you want to talk about, anyway?"

"I don't know. We get so little news from outside."

"As far as I can tell, you don't seem to get any at all."

"We get the *Herald* every week."

"That's my point." He sees her smile and decides he likes her better when she does that. It changes her face and gives a more natural warmth to her personality. "Don't you ever think about going out to see for yourself?" he asks her.

"We're not allowed."

"You mean never?"

"It's possible to get dispensation. My Uncle has it because he's on the council and teaches at the university. But that's an exception."

"Don't you ever wonder what it's like?"

"What what's like? The university?"

"No, everything. The great world outside. Don't you ever wake up and feel you just want to... well, go?"

"Sometimes... but I was born here. I've lived here all my life. It's all I know."

"Never heard of exploration?"

She shrugs. "They always tell us it's dangerous outside. They say we're much better off in here where the community can protect us."

"Protect you from what? Dangerous people like me?"

She doesn't respond.

He looks at her now, trying to comprehend how it must all seem from her perspective - like a zoo animal yearning instinctively for its natural habitat and being told: "You don't want to go out there, too many predators." It's difficult for him to conceive how it feels and all too easy to be cynical of such attitudes. "Aren't you even..." He's about to say "curious" but then recalls Sister Clareth's reaction and finds another word. "Aren't you even interested?"

"Yes, of course," she says. "I'm interested in all kinds of things."

"Like what?"

"Like you... like how you got here."

"I don't think you want to hear about that."

"Yes, I do."

He looks at her, at the light reflecting in her eyes. They're intense he notices, but at the same time thoughtful and honest. He decides she doesn't seem much like an interrogation expert, so he can probably afford to let his guard down a little.

"I was at my father's place," he says eventually. "Horse ranch over near Spring Lake. You know it?" Before she can answer, he corrects himself. "No, right, I guess you don't. Anyway, I was online, just finishing up a project, when the screen went dead. Seemed to crash just like that, in the middle of the day. There was no power outage so my first thought was, okay, the network's down, but then I got this message saying I should report to my local precinct. I couldn't believe it."

"What did it mean?"

"What did it mean? It meant that I'd suddenly become a nonentity, a nobody, a nothing... Worse than nothing. A loser."

"I don't understand."

He looks at her, unable to believe that she's never even heard the expression before. "My identity has been erased," he explains patiently. "Or stolen. I'm not sure which."

"Your identity?"

"Sure. Name, status, clearance, credit, records... everything."

"Even your name? How can that happen?"

"Boy, you people really *are* sheltered, aren't you?"

"But... your name's your name. It's what your parents gave you. It's what people call you. How can somebody steal it?"

"You don't understand. It's not just my name. I have no money, no qualifications, no job..."

"You mean you were fired?"

This is difficult, like trying to teach a kindergarten child about life as an adult.

"No, I wasn't fired. But the moment you lose your identity, it's like you don't exist, like you weren't even born. You have to report for reassignment and if you don't, you become a fugitive. Those are the choices... and I chose the latter."

"But what about your parents?"

"My parents," he repeats with some distaste. "My mother plays mahjongg and my father paves over the forests." He smiles gently at her incapacity to comprehend and searches for a way to make it simple. "Too much money, too few scruples," he says.

"They wouldn't help you?"

"I wouldn't ask them."

"Why not? They're your parents."

"Yeah, well, it's not that easy. I guess you think that's a sin, right? 'Honor thy father and thy mother.' What's that? The tenth commandment?"

"The fifth."

"Whatever."

"I'm not judging you."

"No? That makes a change. Most everyone else does... especially my parents."

She doesn't seem to know how to continue such a conversation, so she doesn't even try. "Go on. After you saw the message on the screen..."

"Not much else to tell. I made a decision. Whether it was right or wrong, I still don't know. It was just pure impulse, a reflex I guess you'd call it. I saddled up a horse and rode out. I mean, it was so simple." He becomes more wistful now as he thinks back. "She was a good horse too, a lot of integrity, you know? I hope she's okay."

"Where is she now?"

"I kind of exchanged her for the cruiser."

"So you didn't steal it?"

He gives out with another laugh.

"Do you know who did it?" she asks.

"Who did what?"

"Stole your identity."

"You mean the hacker? No, but he's probably with one of the syndicates. Big business, identity theft."

"And there's no way you can get it back?"

"Get it back? Are you kidding me? It must have been carved up into a million pieces by now. Brazil, Russia, China... You have any idea how many bits of Calder Quinlan are being passed around, even as we speak? By now, I'm probably being used for more scams than you can possibly imagine. I mean, what exactly am I going to get back? A criminal record? A bullet in my brain?"

She hears him out without comment or response. Eventually, she says: "So what will you do now?"

"Now? Now, I'll sit here and eat your food until I get these bandages off. And then... And then I don't know."

"If you go back out there, will they chase after you again?"

"Probably."

"Maybe if you stay here, they'll just forget about you."

"The FSC? No way. You know what their slogan is? 'Zero tolerance.' That's how they sell themselves. I guess you've never seen their ads? No? Do you even know what ads are?"

"Of course I know."

"Well, anyway, it means they've built their reputation on refusing to let even one fugitive get away."

"Lieutenant Mostrie doesn't like them much."

"Nor does anyone. Doesn't mean they're not effective."

"What if I ask my Uncle to make the sanctuary permanent? He's on the council. He could do it, I'm sure. You could stay here, live in Biblion, become one of us."

"Hey, steady now."

"We have a religious permit. They're not allowed to come in here, none of them."

"Right... You see, that's where there just might be a problem, right there with that religious thing."

"You're not religious?"

"Not what you'd call fervent, no."

"Nobody forces you to be religious in Biblion."

"Excuse me? The whole place is a fundamentalist haven. Hell, your nurse keeps chanting Genesis at me."

"You shouldn't say that here."

"What, Genesis?" He's joking with her. He knows perfectly well the word she meant was "hell" and he smiles an apology. "See?" he says. "Even my language wouldn't fit in."

"I think you're being melodramatic."

"I am?"

There's no answer, just an awkward period of silence, which stretches out far longer than either of them expect.

"I should go," she says finally.

"No... No, don't go."

"I've got exams tomorrow."

"What are you studying?"

"Physics."

"Really?"

"You seem surprised."

"Well, sure... I mean, isn't that against your religion?"

"Why would you say that?"

"Aren't you into creationism? God made the world in six days and so on?"

"Didn't you read our new Version? You should. It explains everything. There are footnotes, commentaries... It all makes sense from a scientific perspective."

"It does?"

"Yes, it does." A pause. "You think I'm just giving you propaganda, don't you?"

"No... no, not at all."

"Well, I am."

"Excuse me?"

She looks down and lowers her voice until she's hardly audible. "I'm saying what they expect me to say."

"But you don't believe it?"

She's not certain how to answer. It's like she wants to be honest but at the same time, she's afraid of it. "I like to think I have an open mind."

"Good for you."

"Good for me? I don't know. Sometimes I think..." She takes a breath, very unsure of herself.

"What? What do you think?"

"It's... it's not important."

He looks at her and feels some pity at this personal struggle she's evidently going through. "Science is about discovering yourself, isn't it? Isn't that what they say?"

"I wouldn't know. Look, I'm sorry, I really have to go."

"Wait... listen... What's that sign mean up there?"

"What sign?"

There's nothing to be seen in the darkness of the room. "There's a sign on the wall says 'Keep The Promise.' What does it mean?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"It's not that I don't know. What I mean is, I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because that's part of the promise."

To Calder, it makes no sense at all, nothing but circular logic, but before he can say anything else, she's gone, shutting the door gently behind her.

It was good listening to her problems for a while. It took his mind away from his own but now that he's alone again, he's still no closer to an answer. He should have taken more time, asked more questions about the place, instead of which he feels he may have wasted the opportunity. He doesn't even know if she'll be back.

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Arran Jonas creeps back into the house and removes her shoes trying to make as little noise as possible but just as she reaches her room, she hears her Uncle calling out to her.

“Arran? Arran, is that you?”

“Who else would it be? I thought you’d be asleep.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. Didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“I was worried. Where’ve you been?”

“I’m sorry... I was studying. I guess I kind of fell asleep.” She knows it’s an unlikely story but it’s all she can think of to tell him. She’s never been very good at excuses but then again she’s never had to be. While she may have nurtured some inner rebellion, especially in recent years, she’s always been exceptionally careful not to give her Uncle any cause for concern.

“I’ll have to start thinking about a chaperone,” he’s saying, but it’s just his sense of humor and his tone is light-hearted. “Now, no more studying. Just go to bed.”

“Goodnight, Uncle Wilmott.”

There’s no reply and she retreats into the sanctum of her room, just grateful that he’s the kind of man he is, as soft on the inside as a Thanksgiving marshmallow. Others in her crowd have fared far worse, some having received the Ordeal as punishment for the same infraction of staying out past home curfew. One even

received the shame of an official demerit from the council, which can, under certain conditions, be applied towards the Judgment.

She undresses and takes a steaming hot shower because that always relaxes her, then just before settling under the duvet, she opens the side drawer where she keeps a small locked box with a coded combination that only she knows. Inside the box is a book - but it's not the Bible in any of its versions and it's not one of the other authorized works either, which is why she keeps it locked away. She knows her Uncle would never look in there because he'd never search her belongings but, on the other hand, she's always felt a smidgen of guilt about using his own honesty against him.

The book is a treasure, given to her illicitly by an earnest young member of the Guardian who was once smitten with her and summarily banished for contravening discretion protocols. She didn't love him and wasn't even attracted to him, at least not romantically. He was a friend, no more than that, yet he cherished her, adored her, pursued her to the point of detriment. The day he was required to leave, he gave her this book, telling her he hoped it could be an inspiration without really explaining why. It's a slim volume, old, with a plain cover that has now been dulled and dog-eared by years of wear, and she opens it carefully, lovingly, within the glow of her nightlight. It doesn't matter which page she lands on because she just about knows the whole story verbatim, having memorized it over hundreds of late night readings like this - and each time she learned to appreciate the analogy a little more, realizing its relevance and taking heart from its message. This year especially, it's meaning is abundantly clear and it may just be the only thing that's saved her from considering the suicide alternative more seriously.

"My name's Grantham Quinlan and I demand to see my son."

"Demand all you want," replies Lieutenant Galvin Mostrie of the Biblion Guardian. "It's not going to happen. Now, we're giving you precisely one minute to clear the perimeter or..."

"Or what? You'll kill us where we stand? Not a very Christian attitude."

"You're not welcome here, Mr. Quinlan. I suggest you take your private army and go."

For his part, Grantham Quinlan would continue the confrontation, eyeball-to-eyeball, but he feels a hand on his elbow. It belongs to a man called Ulrich, a field officer with the private security company that Quinlan keeps on retainer. Their usual assignment is to cope with the ecological militants who gather by the dozen, sometimes by the hundred, whenever he plans a development but today the mission is very different and the officer's not sure he wants to slug it out with an entire gated community that's protected by federal jurisdiction. It could get very messy. A man of considerable experience, Ulrich's inclination is to tread more softly than his client.

"Nice and easy," he says to Quinlan. "We've got it covered."

Opposite them, about ten meters away, Lieutenant Mostrie is facing his second crisis in as many days. First it was those FSC cowboys chasing Quinlan junior and now it's these freaky soldiers of fortune led by the kid's old man. What is it with this family, he's thinking? Why do they all want to disturb this nice little routine he's got going here? He doesn't need this and he's starting to get just a little steamed.

"Your minute's up, gentlemen," he calls over. "Stand down and, if you wish, we can continue this conversation by phone. That's my final offer."

"We're not going anywhere," replies Quinlan.

Mostrie removes the large weapon from his shoulder, handling it smoothly and easily, then releases the safety. "You are in contravention of federal law and the licensed community of Biblion hereby claims the right under article four-zero-four, subsection nine of the religious privacy amendment, to defend the boundaries of this community as stipulated within our mandate, with all sufficient measures as may be necessary... Sergeant Rees?"

"Yes, *sir*."

"Have they been warned?"

"They have, *sir*."

"Are we within our rights?"

"We are, *sir*."

"And what's the next step?"

"To repel the intruders, *sir*."

"By what means?"

"By any means necessary, *sir*."

Across the divide, Grantham Quinlan laughs out loud at these comical theatrics put on for his benefit. But he can still feel Ulrich's restraining hand on his arm and, reluctantly, decides to heed the strategic advice of his mercenary commander. He turns sharply away, leaving Ulrich to complete the negotiations and signal the men back to the VTOL in which they arrived.

This craft is not as well equipped as those operated by the FSC, either in terms of weaponry or sensor array, but then it doesn't have to be. Its function is different. It's not used to hunt down fugitives on the run but to intimidate crowds of environmental activists, the do-gooders and tree-huggers that show up at every one of Quinlan's developments. Just to spite them, he had the nose painted with a mean-looking cartoon, just like one of those old P-38's from the WWII history books. But instead of an eagle, he took perverse pleasure in taking the extinct spotted owl as his mascot just to infuriate the protesters, giving it an evil eye, a vicious metallic beak and oversized talons.

Once airborne, the craft banks over and settles into a southerly course, back the way they came; but it's just a ruse. They only fly far enough to be clear of the Biblion sensor reach and touch down in a clearing at the side of the access road. Here, the ground is at a higher elevation and it's from this pre-planned vantage point that Ulrich intends to launch the next phase of his assault, his pre-arranged Plan B.

"Are we ready, Mr. Quinlan?"

"More than ready."

Ulrich swivels around and orders his detachment to don their protective ear covering, then to the technical specialist just behind him who touches the floating screen of an array panel. This equipment not part of the aircraft but some mobile electronics hastily installed for the purpose. As the display configures, a sound begins to ramp up, amplifying towards a level of several thousand decibels and projecting in the direction of Biblion. It's an old military trick, used many times before when a non-lethal solution is required. In this case, the nature of the sound, the aggressive scream of Drastic rock, has been chosen carefully for maximum disturbance. From the insulated aircraft, it just feels like a distant throb but within the gated community, the noise is more than irritating, more than annoying, it's intrusive to the point of pain, the designated aim of the exercise being to disrupt normal life as much as possible. In half an hour, contact will be re-established by audio communication as the Guardian lieutenant suggested and the initial demands will be repeated. By that time, hopefully, his response will be more cooperative.

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“What the Christ is that?” yells Calder Quinlan, trying to make his voice heard above the cacophony.

Next to his cot, Sister Clareth is doing her best to remove his bandages while Dr. Wilmott Jonas attempts to concentrate on his notes.

“We don’t take the name of the Savior in vain,” he says. But he too can hardly be heard.

“What?” says the young man.

“No blasphemy.” It still doesn’t get through, however, and Jonas dispenses with the admonition in order to lean over and speak directly into the young man’s ear. “I believe it’s your father.”

This, Calder understands. Suddenly it’s all clear to him and he pulls Jonas back down so he can answer. “I’m sorry for all this trouble,” he shouts, and means it.

The doctor responds with a nod. It’s one thing to offer sanctuary as a charitable policy but another to have the entire place under siege by this bone-crushing noise. “How long will he keep it up?”

“Until he gets what he wants.”

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Thirty minutes later, the eardrum attack has been rescinded and an eerie silence returns to Biblion. Another hour after that, the door to the ER section is swung open by a visibly peeved Lieutenant Mostrie followed by Dr. Jonas and a delegation of elderly councilors. There are three of them, all male, all looking very grave and self-important. One of them is muttering the same mantra as nurse Clareth.

Calder is up and dressed at this point, sitting in a chair to wait for the inevitable appearance of his father. He doesn't have to wait long. All at once, the clinic is filled with that familiar arrogance as Grantham Quinlan strides in, flanked by a couple of officers from Mostrie's Guardian security. No one from Ulrich's mercenary detachment has been allowed to accompany the visitor.

"Hey, son, how you doing?" says Grantham Quinlan. "How they treating you in here?"

Calder looks over at his father and recognizes the ploy. The use of the word "son" is meant to make the two of them appear close, parent and offspring, to make it seem as if family values reign supreme within the house of Quinlan.

"Well enough," he replies.

"Glad to hear it. What the devil got into you, running off like that?"

"Mr. Quinlan, please..." This is from the chairman of the council, a heavy-set, balding man with a creased neck who goes by the name of Nolan Seward. He appears to be reacting against the use of the word "devil." He gives an asthmatic cough, then says solemnly: "These proceedings will be conducted appropriately,"

"Proceedings?" replies Quinlan. "We don't need any proceedings. What we need is for you to release my son. Soon as that's done, we'll be on our way and you can get back to whatever it is you do around here, make us all happy, how about that?"

This time, Seward's voice is firmer, more like an instruction to keep quiet without actually saying it. "Mr. Quinlan, if you don't mind." Then, forcing himself to

adopt a calmer tone: "There are certain issues we need to consider and this is the reason we're gathered."

"What issues? There are no issues."

Calder's already weary of the dialogue, as he knew he would be. He's sat through such bluster a million times before. "They saved me from the FSC," he says directly to his father. "The least we can do is hear them out."

In response, Grantham Quinlan raises both hands in a parody of surrender. "Fine, fine," he says, his voice heavy with sarcasm. "By all means, let's consider the issues, waste even more time."

Nolan Seward takes a wheezy breath, then waits an extra moment before continuing, just to make sure that his authority has been reestablished. "Very well," he says sternly. "Now the primary issue here is that the young man has sought sanctuary within our midst and, by our own constitution, we're obliged to give weight that request."

"Sanctuary," says Grantham Quinlan in disgust. "What is this, a monastery?"

Surprisingly, Seward nods his agreement. "The analogy is valid," he replies. "In some ways, Biblion is very much like the monasteries of old."

"Well, in that case, I'm sorry I disturbed your vow of silence this morning. I guess that wasn't too holy of me, was it?"

This is Quinlan's idea of a joke but he's the only one who's amused. As for Seward, he chooses to ignore the comment in order to preserve the dignity of the forum.

"The issue of sanctuary is very clear and must be respected," he says. "The protocol is clear on these matters. If any outsider arrives and claims sanctuary, he will be awarded such on a temporary basis until the next meeting of the full council, but he will be kept within certain restrictions and will only mix with a limited number of community members... in this case, Doctor Jonas and Sister Clareth. Once the council convenes, he will be asked if he wishes to make his

sanctuary permanent. This is a major decision and not one that should be taken lightly. If he answers in the affirmative, then, at the discretion of the council, he is eligible to become an apprentice member of the community, with all the privileges and protection that such membership entails. If he declines, he must leave forthwith, no matter what awaits him on the outside. Those are the rules and they will be applied without exception."

"And what if I object to this 'protocol' as you call it. What then?"

"Like I said, without exception."

"Now you just wait one goddam minute..." Quinlan attempts to step across to where his son is sitting but the two Guardians restrain him, one on each side. "Calder," he says, "get over here, will you? We need to talk."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," says Seward.

"Calder, get over here."

This time, it's Wilmott Jonas who interjects. "I don't advise movement at the present time. I didn't even want him to sit in the chair but he insisted."

"And who might you be?"

"Wilmott Jonas, Chief Medical Officer."

"Yes, well, excuse me, but my son and I need to talk. What's wrong with a father and son talking? You people against family?"

Seward does indeed take pride in his family beliefs yet, at the same time, he has responsibilities. He looks around at his council colleagues for some kind of guidance but they offer nothing except their murmurs. Finally, he brings his eyes back to Grantham Quinlan. "The protocol is clear," he repeats.

"Yeah? Well, so is Drastic rock... *loud* and clear." Another joke. "How'd you like another dose of decibels, maybe crank it up a little. You know, we've still got a ways to go before maximum output."

Seward looks towards Lieutenant Mostrie but there's little help coming from that direction. Normally, it might be possible for the Guardians to call in help from outside, from the FSC for example, but that option has been pretty much wasted by yesterday's fracas and they're unlikely to do him any favors today. Of course, under constitutional law, it's possible to request help from other enforcement agencies but that could take some time to arrange. Those forces have their own agendas – terrorism, insurgency, organized crime, drug trafficking, illegal immigration and other macro threats – so they're hardly likely to come rushing to the aid of a tiny gated community which has a problem with a single young fugitive. In the end, Mostrie is obliged to shrug, as if to say he has no further solutions to offer.

"All right," says Seward eventually. It seems he has no choice. Then to Quinlan directly: "In the interests of kinship, you may have one hour with your son." He holds up his index finger to emphasize the point before solemnly leading the mini procession out of the medical facility.

The last to leave is Jonas, who pauses at the exit in order to speak directly to his patient. "My advice, for what it's worth?" he says. "Take your time. Don't make any hasty decisions." Then he, too, makes his way out, closing the door after him.

Calder Quinlan watches his father pull up a chair from the other side of the room and sit down, displaying all the traits he's seen so many times before: the weary slump, the worldly sigh and then, finally, the self-satisfied wink of a man who's used to getting his own way.

"That's more like it," says his father. "So what's all this nonsense about? Why'd you take off like that?"

"Why? You're asking me why? I had my identity stolen, in case you haven't heard."

"Yeah, all right, so you panicked a little."

"I didn't panic."

"Sure you did, but that's all right. It's understandable. Not sure about the means you chose but that's a whole other thing."

"You got the horse back?" Calder says to his father. He's been concerned about that, feeling guilty that he just left her there on the highway to fend for herself.

There's a laugh, as if it's of no account. "Sure I got her back."

"Is she all right?"

"A little the worse for wear but, yeah, she'll be fine. More to the point, how about you?"

"I'll be fine too."

"What exactly happened out there?" He waits but there's no answer. "Don't feel like talking much? Well, that's okay, you been through a lot. Question is, what're we going to do now?"

"We?"

"Okay, *you*. What're *you* going to do?"

"I don't know yet. I haven't decided."

"Listen, Calder... What I'm trying to say is, I know it was a shock. It always is when something like that happens, it's like you feel your whole life is down the toilet. But you've only got one choice now and that's to come back with me."

"To face the music?"

A nod of appreciation. "That's funny."

"I don't feel like spending the rest of my life in a work unit, thank you."

"It won't come to that."

"It might."

"So what's the alternative? You stay here with these people?"

"I like these people."

"Gimme a break. You don't even know them. I give you a month, not even that. They'll have you climbing the walls, you know they would. And that's even assuming you could take all that pseudo-religious crap."

"They're fundamentalists, they follow the Bible. What's wrong with that?"

A dismissive shake of the head. "They're a cult is what they are. Can't you see that? I've got nothing against religion but they just make it up as they go along. They call themselves Christian, sure, but that's not Christianity. That's just make-believe with a fancy name. And you know what's worse? They not only brainwash the kids, they keep 'em locked in here, so they never get to see any alternative. They even have to approve your marriages here, you know that, don't you? You have to go suck up to all these fat old men on the council to plead your case. Is that what you want? Then you're expected to have kids so they can provide more 'crusaders' to go fight the hordes. You know those people who lynched that Muslim in Detroit last month? They come from places like this. Yeah, that's another of their nasty little secrets. Along with the flagellation and the animal sacrifice and their stupid judgment day. You think you like these people? You think you understand them? You don't even know the half of it."

Calder has no response and the pause extends far too long, as if reflecting his sense of isolation and indecision, the feeling of being caught between two uncertainties. That's when his father comes back at him with something else.

"You know, your mother's worried about you."

This is a whole new notion and the change in Calder's attitude is immediate, from thoughtful to visceral in one leap. "The only thing my mother's worried about is her next hair appointment."

"Now that's not fair, dammit, and I don't want to hear it. She deserves your respect."

"Oh, right, like she deserves yours."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

Calder backs off, reluctant to spell it out. He's an adult, fully capable of saying and doing as he likes, but he still has difficulty facing down his own father, always has.

If he let it all out, he'd say how he knows the whole story. How his mother was a dancer in his father's porn subsidiary. How his father tried to disavow the resulting pregnancy. How his mother thought that having a child would take away her enhanced looks and asked a gynecologist to take of it. Then, finally, how his father found out the fetus was male and began to think about having an heir to take over the corporations and the estates, to carry on the name. That's when he changed his mind. So Calder was born, after all, but it didn't quite work out the way Grantham Quinlan planned. Instead of siring a prince, he found he had a son who never showed any interest in his corporate empire. And instead of a trophy wife, he was left with a narcissistic shell of a woman who was no longer interested. He therefore opted out in his own way. He maintained the status quo for the sake of political appearances but indulged himself with other ambitious porn starlets, as many and as often as he wanted. And all of that is what Calder Quinlan could easily throw back at his father but he doesn't do it. He remains tightlipped and the moment passes.

"So what now?" his father says. "You just give up on everything? You stay here and listen to their sermons and rot your life away? Is that it?"

"I knew you wouldn't understand."

"Listen, Calder, come back with me now. We'll leave together, we'll get a bunch of lawyers, get your identity back..."

"That's not possible. I mean, even *I* know that much."

"All right, I didn't say it was going to be easy. But I've got a lot of friends, believe me, and..."

"I don't want your friends and I don't want your lawyers."

"You wanted my horse when you needed it. You were glad enough to take that."

"That was different."

"Was it?"

"Answer me one thing," says Calder. "Do you know how it happened? Do you know who did it?"

"Did what?"

"Stole my damn identity. What else are we talking about?"

A shade of anger. "Why would I know? You think I'm into that stuff? Do you? And even if I was, do you think I'd let that happen to my own son?"

Several empty seconds elapse. Then Calder says: "All right, look, I can't do this. I just can't do this any more. It's always the same between us, you know it is, so why don't you just take your toy soldiers and go home. If you see me again, you see me. If you don't, you don't."

"Yeah, well, sorry but I can't do that."

"Sure you can."

"You're my son."

"Only biologically."

"Hey, that hurts."

Calder looks at him, then relents. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean... I don't know why I said that. It's just... we're so damn incompatible. I don't know why but we always have been."

"That can change."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"Only if I become the person you want me to be. If I learn your business, sit with the lawyers and the accountants and the engineers figuring out how to wreck yet another slice of the planet."

"Have you finished?"

"Tell me that's not what you do."

"And tell me you're not just a spoiled brat who's willing to accept what money buys but not what it takes to achieve it."

There's another long moment. When Calder speaks again, it's in a calmer voice, less antagonistic. "You know," he says, "back in the middle ages, people used to go away and join monasteries all the time. It was no big deal. What's the difference with this?"

"The difference is, you're my son."

"That's right, that *is* the difference, isn't it? This has nothing to do with me, this is about you. I'm your son, so if I cut and run there must be something wrong with *you*, right?"

"I don't have to listen to this."

"No, that's right, you don't. You don't have to listen to any of it. You didn't even have to come here." At this, the young man sees his father get slowly to his feet. The discussion between them didn't take anything like an hour but that, too, is

not unusual. Calder's never had an hour's discussion with his father about anything his entire life.

"I know you're in a jam," says Quinlan senior, "and I know you're afraid. It's all right, nothing to be ashamed of. Tell you what, why don't I let you sleep on it, okay? I'll come back in the morning."

"And then what?"

"And then we'll make a decision."

"What if they don't let you in again?"

"Trust me, they'll let me in."

For a few brief seconds, Calder just looks at his father across the generational void. "Give my love to mom," he says. It's a cynical parting shot he couldn't resist but it only slams up against father's disinterest and has no effect.

Arran Jonas has finished studying for the evening, her eyes tired and her head spinning. She's standing in the kitchen with a glass of water, just about ready for sleep, when her uncle wanders in wearing the black suit and tie he reserves for his most formal functions.

"You seen my focals?" he asks her.

"In the hallway on the dresser."

"Ah, right." He's about to go get them when she stops him with a question.

"What's happening with that fugitive?" she asks, trying to make it sound as casual as she can.

"I really wouldn't know."

"I heard his father's given him twenty-four hours to make up his mind, stay or leave."

"I see. And where did you hear that? No, don't tell me, I already know. Gossip."

"Is it true?"

"I'm sorry, Arran, I really can't talk about it, especially not tonight. Where did you say they are? Yes, the dresser."

"You going to the Cathedral now?"

"Soon. It's a nice evening, I thought I'd walk."

She nods and watches him pass slowly through to the hallway. He somehow seems older tonight but that's not surprising. He's about to lose a friend he's known since childhood and, worse than that, he has to officiate at the ceremony. She takes her empty glass over to the sink and washes it out, sharing some of his heavy sadness as well as a little of her own guilt about distracting him, tonight of all nights. Yet the question she asked was important, essential in fact, because if the young man really does only have until tomorrow, she has to act fast.

As soon as her uncle's gone, she goes upstairs to slip into some easy clothes and then exits the house herself. Just like last night, she finds the key pass to the clinic in the side pocket of his medical kit, the one he always keeps on the back seat of his transport.

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It's close to midnight when Calder's woken from his confused half-sleep by Arran's illicit entry and, once again, he hears her whispered voice.

"It's all right, it's just me."

"Arran?"

She approaches from the darkness to discover that his face and arms are free of bandages. Only his shoulder is still strapped up. "You're looking much better," she says, although they can still only just see each other in the faint glow. "Are you still sore?"

"It's not so bad," he replies, but that's an outright lie. Truth be told, he's feeling more pain now as the medication starts to wear off.

"Can you get up?"

"I think so, why?"

"You have your clothes?"

"Sure, over in one of those closets but I still don't..."

"Get dressed," she says, interrupting him. She makes it sound like an order. "We don't have much time."

"Time for what?"

"There's something..." Here she hesitates. "Something I want you to see. Come on, get dressed."

It takes just a few minutes before they're edging their way out the door, Arran in the lead and Calder following as a matter of blind trust. He has no idea where she's leading him or why he's even agreeing to go; but here he is anyway, yet another of his impulse decisions. One of these days, he knows, this idiot instinct he has to act first, think later, might just prove fatal.

There's more illumination out in the corridor, just enough to mark the route to an emergency exit. Arran pushes the fire door open and they escape out into the cool night air. The cloud has partly dissipated since this morning and small clusters of stars manage to shine through.

He's about to speak again but this time she puts her finger to her lips and moves ahead, gesturing him to keep up. Around them are the lights of the community, the same lights that Calder first saw in the distance just thirty hours ago. It seems like an age. Lining the street on either side are identical ranch-style houses but there's nobody around and no traffic either, not a single vehicle. To Calder, it makes for a strange feeling, like a movie set before they call "action." He wants to ask where everyone is, whether they're all asleep or whether it's the result of some curfew. He's got a thousand such questions but he keeps them to himself, because she keeps putting that same finger to her lips every so often, demanding his absolute complicity in maintaining the silence.

At one point, a front door opens and there's a rectangle of light as a woman in a housecoat bends down to pick up her cat. She's absorbed, standing in the doorway while she fusses over the animal, while Calder and Arran remain immobile, hoping their presence won't be detected. Finally, relief, when she turns to go back inside and shuts the door. They can proceed but, at Arran's quiet urging, they pick up the pace.

They pass a line of modest commodity stores: grocery, pharmacy, hardware, apparel, electronics and so on, with an automatic conveyor link for ease of shopping and payment. At least, Calder assumes there's payment. And that's another question. Do they require credit like everyone else and, if so, how do they earn it? Or are all earthly needs provided by the church? Just how benevolent is this society? There's no bank here, he notices, which may offer some kind of a clue.

After another few minutes, they arrive in what appears to be a large square. In the center, there's a hexagon of grass with an august stone monolith commemorating the the Light Of The Lord founder but Arran prefers to skirt around the edges, past the various council and administration buildings. Their destination, it seems, is the imposing church they call the Biblion Cathedral, situated on the far side. Architecturally, it's an attempt at a traditional gothic style with twin steeples, even though this structure, like the rest, was prefabricated. Once they reach its walls, Arran leads Calder around the back to a janitor's entrance tucked deep within the cavity of a small stone porch. The door is unlocked.

Inside, the air is tainted with odors of varnish and disinfectant. After negotiating an area of back offices and storage rooms, they arrive at a wide passage which seems to run the length of the entire building. Here, the only thing screening them from the main nave is a heavy velvet curtain.

Arran pauses and motions Calder to join her. Then she inches back the fabric to reveal several people gathered near the pulpit. The only one he recognizes is Dr. Jonas, the old man's hair like dull platinum under the flickering candlelight. Next to Jonas is a pastor in black robe and dog-collar, who's reading some kind of a prayer with his hand outstretched, touching another aging man on the forehead.

The man's wife stands next to him, arm-in-arm, sobbing openly. The others try to comfort her but she seems inconsolable.

It looks to Calder like they're preparing for some kind of ritual and, as if to confirm the notion, a tall man in a robe leads in an animal by a leash: a small goat. It bleats loudly, instinctively afraid, as if it has a premonition of its own fate. The goat is lifted onto a wooden table and tied down firmly with leather straps so it can't move. Then, as Calder watches in horror, the tall man lifts a shining blade high in the air. As it glistens above him, he says a brief incantation and then, without hesitation, plunges it down, deep into the animal's flank. The goat twitches in its death throes, offering one last piercing scream that echoes in the rafters, before it lies still, its head flopped over, its eyes glassy. The only movement left is the hot blood coursing from the fatal wound and dripping noisily through a purpose-built drain in the sacrificial table.

Calder looks at Arran, his face pale, but she doesn't react one way or another and all he can do is recall his father's words, "animal sacrifice," which is exactly what just happened.

Out front, in the nave, there are more recitations and, at one point, the people gathered seem to be murmuring the Lord's Prayer, but Calder finds it difficult to make out the words from this distance. Finally, the pastor gently takes the arm of the older man, attempting to guide him away from the grasp of his weeping wife. Her sorrow is turning into defiance. "No, no, please, no..." It takes two or three of the others to hold her back but she refuses to let go of her husband and the sympathetic pastor doesn't want to apply any more force than is absolutely necessary. But he has his faith and eventually he succeeds in leading the man towards an archway in the back. By this time, the man's wife has collapsed, a tragic figure in a crumpled heap, and those around her find they can be of little use.

It's all over and Arran indicates by her expression that it's time to go. The forefinger to the lips is now an automatic gesture. They leave the church as quietly as they entered and retrace their steps all the way back to the clinic where Arran must again use her borrowed keypass to let them back in. It seems to be only here, in what has essentially become Calder's holding cell, that they can actually communicate and even then, it's only by whispering.

"What was all that about?" he says once the door's closed but she doesn't answer and only now in this faint glow does he appreciate how much she was moved by what they just saw. "Arran?"

"It's his time," she replies slowly.

"What was? Whose time? Talk to me."

"He's one of my uncle's closest friends but it's his time. And soon it'll be my uncle's time, too."

"Time for what? I don't understand."

"Time to keep the promise... You asked me what it means. Well, now you know."

"No, I don't know."

That's when she turns on him, all the more aggressively because she has to keep her voice down. "For pity's sake, what's not to know? Can't you guess? Three score and ten. It's all there in the Bible. Don't you ever read the Bible?"

"No... Well, not since I was a kid." He recalls his mother once having the bright idea to send him to Sunday school but he loathed every minute and tried to avoid it with any excuse that came into his head. For a moment, he's distracted by the thought of it until Arran's expression of frustration pressures him into absorbing what she's trying to tell him – and that's when it begins to penetrate, to permeate his brain and arrange itself into coherent form. Yet even when the idea has solidified and settled, he can't bring himself to accept it. "Whoa," he says slowly, "you mean..."

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

"But that's..."

"What? Barbaric?"

"I wasn't going to say that."

"Of course you were."

It's true and he knows it, so he doesn't even bother to argue. What other word can there be for a society with animal sacrifice and mandatory euthanasia? He looks at her, almost unable to find a question to ask. "Doesn't anyone object?" he says, but it sounds stupid, even to him.

"Didn't you hear the man's wife back there? What do you think she was doing? And what do you think I'm doing now, just by telling you, by showing you? You know what would happen if they found out?"

He can guess very easily. "Demerits," he says flatly. But what I don't get is why? What about 'Thou shall not kill?'"

"That's not how they see it. There's no compulsion. That's why the motto says 'Keep the Promise.'"

"What about those who don't?"

"That doesn't happen. It's what our whole life here is based on."

"Go on."

"Go on what?"

"Tell me about your life here, how it works."

She sighs, almost as if she's annoyed with him for failing to understand. She knows perfectly well it's not his fault, yet this has been percolating inside her for a long time now and she's had no way to let it out. "There's an accounting," she says, keeping as calm as she can. "We call it the 'Consequence' and our tally is recorded, merits and demerits... until our seventieth birthday."

"Judgment Day," he says. Something else his father mentioned.

"In a way, but we don't call it that. We call it the 'Promise'... from the Promised Land, you know? We make a promise at confirmation and we're expected to keep it."

"So all the merits are added up and..."

"And the council decides."

"Decides what?"

"Everything. Our fate, our destiny, everything." She sees that he's still not getting it, so she spells it out. "Where we spend eternity."

"You mean heaven and hell, that kind of thing?" His voice is incredulous.

"That's exactly what I mean."

"But how..."

"It's all in the way they do it. If the council decides in favor, we're sent to the light. If they decide against, we're consigned to the flames."

He looks at her as if she's making it up. "You're kidding me," he says, but there's no response and he begins to realize she's not joking around. Her expression is earnest and its effect is to remove any chance that this might be just a fiction for his benefit, that he's being teased in some way. "How?" he asks her. "The light, the flames? How?" It's almost like he's afraid of the answer.

"It's very scientific," she tells him, taking on a more matter-of-fact tonality. "The light is found by delta wave."

He shakes his head. "I'm not a scientist."

"If the promise is the light, then they apply a delta wave to a certain node in the temporal lobe, a point that's been found to induce the ecstasy of spiritual awareness and offer a potential passage. Here we call it the Sublime State."

"Yeah, right, I've heard of that. But surely..."

"Surely what?"

"Well, if it's artificially stimulated then it's not real."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because the light, the ecstasy... that all happens in the head. It has nothing to do with the real world."

"Really? What makes you so sure? Who can say how the final journey happens? What did you expect? Some kind of celestial elevator?"

He smiles but there's no humor in her face and he's guessing that the quip was simply regurgitated from the Biblion curriculum, perhaps a little levity to help young students swallow the doctrine. "You sound like you believe it," he tells her.

"I'm a scientist. Nothing's ever been proven one way or the other, so I neither believe it nor disbelieve it."

"Is that what your uncle taught you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. He says science keeps an open mind on all things until categorically proven. Anything else we choose to believe comes under the heading of faith."

Calder nods, as if it's no more than he expected. To him it just proves that anything can be rationalized, anything at all. "Go on," he says. "Then what happens?"

She shrugs. "Well... once the scans indicate attainment of the Sublime State, a broader wave goes to the cortex shutting down all further inter-neural activity."

"Brain dead."

"That's one way of putting it."

"And if the promise is the flames?" He waits but she says nothing. "What happens then?" he insists.

"It's never happened."

"You mean nobody ever goes to hell?"

"We call it the Disgrace."

"All right, the Disgrace. Nobody ever goes there?"

"The Lord is forgiving."

"So everyone is always forgiven?"

"It's not automatic."

"So it could happen?"

"Yes... In theory, it could happen."

"So?"

"I'm not supposed to say."

"You've come this far."

"The corporeal form..." she begins, but then hesitates before continuing. "The official explanation is that the corporeal form must be purged so that the soul can be sentenced."

"Purged? How?" He can't let it go now. "Arran? Talk to me. It's cremation, isn't? You're talking about..." The words don't come easily. "You're talking about live cremation. That's it, isn't it? That's what you mean by the flames."

"It's never happened," she repeats, "not in all the history of Biblion."

He shakes his head as his brain tries to summon up images of what it must be like, how it would actually take place. Would that be done by delta waves too? Or would it be more medieval, the way they used to burn witches at the stake, with a jug of kerosene and a lighted torch? He needs more answers, he needs to know, but at the same time, he can see how hard this is for her, breaking this secret, this promise she's sworn to keep. Inside her, there's a conflict, a deep paradox which causes her to slip from protestation to propaganda, from objecting to defending. She's trying to be a scientist but she's also a lifelong resident of this place and such a volatile mix can't help but produce a kind of schizophrenia. Somehow, her uncle seems able to manage the trick but, for her, it's nothing but confusion as she tries to reconcile her science aspirations with the societal values she's been taught since childhood.

"Why did you want me to see that tonight in the church?" he asks her. "Why did you take me over there?"

"Because I wanted you to know. Because I wanted you to understand why."

"Why what?"

"Why I want to leave."

She says it like it's a monstrous confession, as if he's going to react in shock at the very notion, but she's confusing him with her community compatriots and he doesn't really respond at all, except that it sounds like the most normal thing in the world. "Smart decision," he says.

"Smart decision? That's all you can say?"

"What do you want me say? You want me to absolve you from the sin of thinking that way? I can't do that."

Then there's a change, almost a plea. "Take me with you," she says, "when you go tomorrow. Take me with you."

"Who says I'm going?"

"You mean you're not?"

"No... I didn't say that. It's just that... I guess I hadn't really made up my mind, not completely. I was going to leave it till the morning." In the back of his mind, he can still hear his father telling him to sleep on it. With hindsight, it wasn't such bad advice.

"And now?" she asks him. "After tonight?"

"Well, after tonight..."

"So? We can go?"

"I don't know," he says.

"What don't you know? You want to go, I want to go. Why can't we go together?"

"Will they actually *let* you leave? Just like that?"

"I doubt it. But you and your father... you'll tell them, you'll persuade them."

She makes it sound simple but getting her out of this place will be anything but. Besides, he's still got to contend with the FSC out there. If he leaves here, they'll want to arrest him and that will put everyone at risk: his father, his father's private army and Arran, too, if she's with them. This is a very messy situation and she just doesn't seem to comprehend it.

"What will you do if you leave?" he asks her. "I mean, assuming for one minute we can manage it... Where would you go?" He half-expects her to say "*with you*," afraid she may be fastening on to him as her only hope, but she doesn't do that.

"There's a place," she says, a little wistfully. "It's a scientific institute... physics. You may have heard of it... the U-Tech Institute?"

"Sure, up in the northwest. That's where you'd like to go?"

"It's just a dream, I know, but just to be able to study, to be immersed in something." Her voice has become wistful. "Maybe cosmology or dimensional theory... or even quantum mechanics, that's what they're famous for. Just to be able to spend time thinking and analyzing without... without all this."

"Sounds like a plan to me."

"Now you're just humoring me."

"No, really."

"That's all right, I don't mind. All I want is the first step. Can you do that? Can you help me?"

"What about the Doctor?"

At the mention of her uncle, she looks down, her mood now changed. "I don't know," she admits. "Sometimes I think he's with me and then sometimes... I really don't know."

"Were you upset that he was there tonight. I mean, taking part in all that?"

"No, not really. Elias is his friend... *was* his friend. Ceremonies of the Promise... well, they can be large, extravagant affairs, you know? But Elias wanted it kept small and my uncle arranged that. He kind of had to be there. There was no way he could avoid it. And anyway..."

He thinks he knows what she's about to say. That his own time is near. "How old is he?"

"Who, Uncle Wilmott? He just celebrated his sixty-eighth birthday."

"Two years to go."

"One year, eleven months and thirteen days."

She sounds like she's marking off the calendar, as if her uncle were a prisoner on death row. "And does he agree with it?" he asks her. "The whole thing?"

"He chose this life"

"I guess. But *you* didn't, did you? You were born here."

She reacts as if the idea is distasteful and she'd prefer not to think about it. "Will you at least *try* to take me with you? Will you do that at least?"

He's still reluctant to tell her anything definitive, afraid that his father will just look at him and say: "Are you out of your mind?" Yet it's such a simple request. After all, what harm can there be in merely trying? "Yes," he tells her eventually, "I'll try."

Only then is she satisfied. It's not the same as a Biblion promise but it's nevertheless some kind of commitment.

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No sooner does she leave than it occurs to her that she took too long. She didn't mean to talk so much, to get so involved. Her idea was to show him the proof of what goes on, then to extrapolate that directly into her reason for wanting to leave, as brief and efficient as a science project, but it was naive to think he wouldn't have a hundred questions. Unfortunately, it's caused her to arrive back later than she intended and she's hoping her uncle isn't home yet from the church. She can't say she fell asleep while studying, two nights in a row.

That's when she begins to wonder why she needs to make any excuses at all. She's asking this stranger, Calder, to take him with her and, if that happens, she'll be gone by tomorrow – which means, in effect, a final goodbye to Uncle Wilmott... *a final goodbye.*

She can't even bear to think about that and she wipes the moisture from her eyes as she slips home along the deserted streets. She takes a shortcut through a stand of neighboring spruce and arrives at her backyard. From here, all being well, she'll be able to access the door to the rear deck where her uncle likes to sit and read in the summer months. He likes to feed the blue jays, too, and to leave a little something for the old racoon that occasionally waddles through on his nightly rounds. All of this she's going to miss and she feels the weight of self-pity even though she doesn't even know if she's going yet. And that's when her thoughts are disturbed by the sound of the front door, around the other side of the house. It's Uncle Wilmott. She wasn't quick enough.

She can try to race up to her room but she won't make it, the staircase is in the front. Nor can she wait here in the back of the house, in the kitchen, because he usually takes a glass of juice from the refrigerator before retiring. This is stupid, she's thinking, and doesn't understand why she doesn't just face him down, lay out the facts logically and have done with it. That's what a real scientist would do. But she can't do that, she's not ready, not prepared; and there's also the fact that her uncle has just had one of the most miserable evenings anyone can have in this earthly paradise of Biblion, saying his own final goodbye to one of his best friends before sending him away on the ultimate journey. So she just stands there on the threshold, not knowing what to do. Half of her is still the dependent child, the other half an independent woman.

Then an idea. She's always been good with ideas.

She doubles around to the front door and creeps in after him. A brief pause, straining her ears to listen for sounds from the kitchen. So far, so good. Then a quick run across the hallway and up the stairs two at a time, carefully avoiding all the places where the boards creak. At last, she makes it unnoticed to her bedroom. Home free, she thinks, but she has to correct the phrase. She's home but she's not free – not yet, anyway.

Once her pulse has stopped racing, she settles into the comfort of her sleep routine, possibly for the last time. The last thing she does as she climbs into bed is to take out the book, the special book, the one she knows almost by heart. This she must take with her when she goes – *if* she goes – a small memento to hold onto and a strong reminder of why she has to leave.

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At the clinic, Calder Quinlan can hardly bring himself to close his eyes, never mind sleep. His brain can't rid itself of the scene he just witnessed: the terrifying scream and dripping blood of the animal; the man being escorted away from his hysterical wife; and then, by his own imaginary projection, the inevitable conclusion – the subject's head being held firm by some kind of clamp mechanism as the delta wave is focused and, finally the forced release into death which, in this community, is called "Keeping the Promise."

He thinks, too, of what the council process must be like: the members gathered in some sort of chamber, looking at the "consequences" and weighing up all the merits of a person's life like they're the receipts in a retail store. All this to calculate whether he or she is in the profit column or the loss; the black ink or the red; a success in life or a failure. And who represents the subject at this quasi-trial? Anyone? Is he or she allowed to engage counsel who can intervene and argue the case in a series of motions and sidebars? Can any of the demerits be reversed or excluded if new evidence is brought to bear? Can they bring character witnesses? What if the council's split on the verdict? What if the verdict's wrong? Is there a court of appeal or is that the role of St. Peter when the subject finally arrives at the celestial light?

So many questions, so many arguments, that he's denied any chance of rest.

If that's not enough, there's the girl, Arran, who outmaneuvered him into making that dumb commitment, that blurted promise of his own to try to help her escape. Is such a thing possible from here? It would depend entirely on his father's whim and that's enough make him choke. For Calder Quinlan, it's bad enough to have daddy come and bail him out without asking for more favors.

It's mid-morning when Grantham Quinlan strides in to see Calder, just like he did yesterday. Today, however, at his own insistence, he's accompanied only by Nolan Seward, so there's just the two of them. He dislikes crowded meetings because they always lead to a clash of egos, his own included, as everyone tries to posture and save face in front their colleagues. This way is much better, he feels, a one-on-one situation, which is far more conducive to doing business.

"So," he says directly to his son, "what's it to be?" No hello, no how-are-you, no pleasantries, no superfluous intro of any kind. This is more like the usual Quinlan way of doing things.

"I'm leaving," says Calder, equally forthright.

"Attaboy," says Quinlan, but he's a little premature.

"With one condition."

"What kind of condition?"

"There's someone here who wants to leave with me."

"Wait, don't tell me. It's a female, am I right? I knew there was a female involved, I just knew it. What do you think of that, Seward? Been here five minutes and he's already got 'em chasing his tail. Son, you're a Quinlan and no mistake."

This isn't helping and Calder can already see the glower enveloping Seward's face. The man prides himself on being Christian so he doesn't explode; but still, it's hard for him to turn the other cheek to something so fundamental.

"Which *female*?" he says slowly.

"Yeah, which female?" adds Quinlan. "Let's take a look at her. What's her name, son?"

Calder doesn't like this habit his father has of calling him "son" but he's made a resolution not to be irritated and he's trying to stick to it. "Her name's Arran Jonas," he says calmly.

"Arran Jonas?" replies Seward, raising his eyebrows, as if that's the last name he expected. "Impossible. There's no way she would ever consent..."

"I didn't ask her. It was *she* who approached *me*."

"Approached you? When? When did you leave the clinic?"

Calder really doesn't want to get into any of those details. He doesn't want to get her into trouble, at least no more than she's in already. "Why don't you just ask her?"

"That's right, Seward," says his father in full agreement. "Why don't you just ask her and have done with it? We need to get this show on the road."

"I'll not do any such thing."

"In that case," Calder replies, "I'm not going anywhere."

"Now wait a minute..." This is Quinlan, sensing that things are starting to unravel here. "We'll have none of that nonsense, okay? Fine you feel sorry for her, maybe you even feel more than that." A smirk. "Fine, I can buy that. Just means we have a minor problem... but nothing that intelligent people can't solve, right? Am I right?"

Seward looks at him, his expression severe. "Let me say once and for all. It cannot be done because it cannot be allowed."

"Now, look, I'm trying to be reasonable..."

Seward doesn't want to hear. "If there's any attempt," he says, interjecting, "and I mean *any* attempt to remove a member of our community, then I call the church. If necessary, I'll even call the legislature to send in forces to protect the community. And while I'm about it, I'll also ask them to arrest your son, sanctuary or no sanctuary. I'm reasonably sure I can persuade the council to conclude his status in that respect. Am I making myself clear?"

Grantham Quinlan glares at Seward and there's a period of tension, verging on hostility. But before it can get any worse, Quinlan readjusts. His sense of business kicks in, as it usually does and his face brightens, a magical transformation. "Mister Seward," he says amiably, placing his hand on the man's arm. "Tell you what, why don't we have a little chat outside?"

"I really don't see the need."

"Please... if you don't mind."

The switch to politeness has its effect and Seward is obliged to respond with a magnanimous shrug. Neither of them thinks to ask Calder if he minds.

Once they're out in the corridor, face-to-face, Quinlan says: "Now look, Mr. Seward, I didn't want to do this in front of my son because, well, sometimes he doesn't care for my methods, but I'm a man who gets things done, know what I mean?" A laugh as he pulls his wallet from his pocket. "Point being I have in my wallet a credit transfer already made out to the Light Of The Lord church in the name of Nolan Seward."

Seward, for his part, has no idea what this is all about and shows it on his face.

Quinlan takes his time unfolding the transfer. He had it all prepared in advance, expecting something like this, and hands it over to Seward. "All it takes is your signature," he says, "and your church university will receive an endowment, specifically for a chair in community management practice."

"Are you trying to bribe me, Mr. Quinlan?"

"Bribe? No, I wouldn't think of it. A bribe implies a personal benefit of some kind and I wouldn't insult you like that. This is just an endowment, enough to create a chair..."

"In community management practice. Yes, so you said."

"That's right. Now the point is that an endowment chair is usually in someone's name, so I'd say better you than me, right? I might be mistaken but I don't think I've exactly got the credibility around here to do something like that, do you?"

"You're telling me this chair would be in *my* name?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you. 'The Nolan Seward Chair in Community Management Practice.' Sounds good to me... and what better legacy for a distinguished career like your own? Can you think of anything better? I certainly can't."

Despite everything Seward believes in, he finds himself torn. He can't help it and the dismissal of such a scheme doesn't quite spring so readily to his lips. On the one side, he can see that it's an evidently transparent ploy and only to be expected from someone like Quinlan. Yet, on the other side, he can see two advantages. The first is that the university really would receive a valuable financial donation and that's not to be turned down lightly. And secondly, well, he'd rather not think of that because the shameful truth is he'd like nothing better than to be remembered in that way – a chair in his name set up to teach the very occupation to which he's dedicated his life.

"I'd have to speak to Dr. Jonas," he answers eventually, but even as he says it, he can hear the howling winds of compromise and vanity blowing a giant hole through what's left of his integrity.

"All right..." says Quinlan cautiously. "Who's Dr. Jonas? Do I know that name?"

"Tall man, silver hair. You met him when you were here yesterday."

"I don't recall."

"Well you should. He was the man who treated your son's injuries."

"Oh yeah, okay."

"He also happens to be the uncle of the girl in question."

"Is that right? Well, sure, go talk to him if you like, talk to anyone you want, but let's not mention the endowment, shall we? Not yet, not until we're all ready... but after that I'll be glad to lay on a full court press if you like. Reception, the media, whatever you need. A big occasion, Mr. Seward, a big occasion. Red letter day for the university, trust me on that."

"Yes, believe it or not, I do trust you on that. Incidentally... how would I explain where I obtained such a sum? Can you tell me that?"

"Didn't one of your relatives die recently?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Sure, I read all about it, didn't I? You know, your third cousin there, the one who was into those energy futures, the one who made a fortune. Or was it your brother-in-law?"

Seward can't believe how tacky all this is becoming. He should have known. The man in front of him has no scruples whatsoever. Yet he's also been around long enough to know that it's people like Grantham Quinlan who run the world. Even the church, may the good Lord forgive them, has a few like him supervising their day-to-day business affairs. All Seward can do is shake his head, both at himself and at the sheer predictability of what's taking place out here in the corridor. Still, he thinks, best to stay calm despite the provocation.

"Mr. Quinlan," he says with as much self-control as he can muster under the circumstances, "you know I have to say it's a generous offer and I greatly admire the fact that you'd do such a thing for your son... but please remember, we're still talking about a young member of my community and our protocols must be respected. If either she or her uncle has anything against the idea, I must insist

that the matter be closed immediately, endowment or not. Do we understand each other?"

Quinlan just puts his hand on Seward's shoulder like they've been pals forever. "Why don't you just go talk to this guy, this doctor whoever he is, see what he says. I'm sure you'll be able to convince him, especially if that's what the girl really wants. Oh, and tell him thanks for taking care of my son."

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Wilmott Jonas sits at his kitchen table with his head in his hands. Opposite is his niece, not knowing how to comfort the man, nor even where to look. She loathes herself but it had to be done. He had to be told.

They've been through all the issues of where she'll go and what she'll do with such a lack of worldly experience and she hasn't given him a single, solid answer. He's asked her a hundred times if she's sure, whether she's thought it through sufficiently, and he's reminded her a thousand times that it's not too late to change her mind but all in vain. He just couldn't make any headway.

"And what if they won't let you go?" he asks her. "What then?"

"I was kind of hoping that... What I mean to say is that I'd very much like you to talk to them... if you would."

"You'd like *me* to talk to them?"

"I know it's asking a lot."

"In order to do what? Convince them to let you leave? Is that what you want me to do? This is unbelievable. Worse than unbelievable. You know, if your parents were alive..."

"They'd be the first ones to help me, you know they would."

He gives out with a sigh. Yes, sadly, he *does* know that, which means she's even managed to defeat him with one of his own arguments. He doesn't even know how to respond any more. He just can't find the words. What with last night's goodbye to his old friend Elias and now this thing with Arran this morning, he's feeling his age, thinking that it'll almost be a relief when his time comes around. And he's just offering a silent prayer to that effect when he hears the door-chime. It's programmed to play the "Ode to Joy" but he doesn't feel much like joy at the present moment.

It's Arran who goes to see who it could be at this early hour. When she comes back, she's followed by a familiar, bulky figure.

"Uncle Wilmott, it's Mr. Seward. He'd like a word."

"Nolan?"

"Hello, Wilmott," says Seward with as much sensitivity as he can muster. "Sorry to disturb you."

"Believe me, you can't disturb me any more than I've been disturbed already."

"Arran, would you mind?"

She takes the hint from Seward and heads back up to her room. She figures she'd better be packed and ready just in case it happens.

Once she's gone, Seward says: "She's the one I'm here about."

"I know."

"She told you?"

"Yes, she told me."

"And what do you think?"

"What do I think? I don't know any more, Nolan. I thought I did but I don't."

"Will you let her go?"

"Me? Since when have I ever been able to stop her doing anything?"

"Do you at least have any idea what she wants to do out there?"

"Sure. She wants to be a scientist."

"She can be a scientist here."

"No she can't. She's talking about real science, not that pseudo nonsense we pump into their heads."

"Wilmott, please."

"No, I'm sorry, Nolan, I'm past playing games. I can't do it. You know exactly what I'm talking about, so let's not fool around, all right? We're both too long in the tooth."

Seward stands quietly, not wishing to start the kind of argument that could only be embarrassing for both of them. "Are you saying we should just let her go?" he asks quietly.

"Not my decision."

"You're her next of kin. It would need your authorization."

A heavy sigh from Jonas. "What do you want me to say? You want me to sign something? Is that why you're here? You need a disclaimer, keep you from getting flak? Is that what this is all about?"

"What this is all about is what's best for Arran."

Jonas looks at him, trying to penetrate the mask. He would have expected Seward to talk about what's best for the church or what's best for the community... but Arran? Usually, that's the last thing he'd consider. There's something else going on here but he can't even begin to work it out. All he can do for now is accept the man's words at face value. "I think she wants to go," he says eventually.

"So what exactly are you saying? If it's what she wants, you'll give your authorization?"

"You mean my blessing?" Jonas gets to his feet and paces wearily over to the window. After gazing out for what seems like a long time, he speaks in a voice that's hardly audible: "Yes, I suppose I would." He stares out at the backyard and the trees beyond, and he can't believe what he's just done. He wants to change his mind, to scream out "No, I'll never allow it!" but he knows that if he does that, if he's the only one preventing her from leaving, she'll resent him deeply and then the affinity they've always shared will be gone anyway.

Yet the thought of losing her, the last thing left in his life, is already starting to eat at his soul. It means that when his own time comes, he'll have to die here alone and the thought of that, even in all its selfishness, is almost too much for him to take.

When the hour nears for departure, the area near the main gate is cordoned off by a Guardian platoon under the immediate supervision of Lieutenant Mostrie - who is himself under direct orders from the Director of Public Security, not to mention the entire Biblion council under Nolan Seward. As often happens in such circumstances, the overly long chain of command actually hinders the efficiency of the arrangements and Mostrie finds himself struggling just to keep it all coherent.

Adding to his problems are the complex human dynamics involved. Dr. Jonas, for example, is trying to say goodbye to his niece but he's so choked he can hardly speak. Meanwhile, Arran herself is being pulled in both directions simultaneously. Of course, she feels truly terrible about what she's doing to her uncle and she, too, allows the tears to run. Yet at the same time, she can't wait to get on that VTOL and be out of here, off to a new future, even if it's to a place she can't even begin to imagine. Next to her stands Calder Quinlan, silently enduring his own crisis of conscience. For him, it's not the act of leaving, it's the methodology and he just loathes the fact that he's obliged to accept the help of his father, the same help he foreswore when he tried to make a run for it. Then there's the frowning anxiety of Nolan Seward who so recently compromised everything he thought he stood for when he chose to be persuaded by the siren song of prestige from a man whose morality he despises. He not only feels badly for his friend Wilmott Jonas but he's genuinely saddened by the loss of such a bright youngster as Arran to his community. However, even with all these second thoughts, Seward knows can't go back now. It's too late. The direction is set. At least the university will benefit, he keeps telling himself, and he tries to take comfort from his rationalization as he watches the unthinkable happen.

Of course, Mostrie is unaware of any of this. All he knows is that what should have been a simple process of showing one unwanted fugitive through the gate has become a major strategic operation. In addition to all the emotional stress

around him, he has to contend with not one but two potential confrontations just beyond the walls. First, there's Grantham Quinlan's mercenaries waiting just outside the gate. Then, beyond the perimeter but still within sensor range are the goons of the FSC, still waiting like vultures to claim their prey. So now here they all are, lining up for crisis number three, when all Lieutenant Mostrie wants is for it to be over and done with.

He allows the minutes to pass while the participants in this little drama do their best to compose themselves. Then, after a final glance around, he orders Sergeant Rees to lead the entire procession through the gate. "Nice and easy," he calls to no one in particular. It's one of his favorite expressions. "Nice and easy."

Once they're beyond the perimeter, the Biblion contingent comes to a standstill while Calder continues alone across the clearing to where his father and the private posse is waiting. Arran follows but a lot more tentatively and she's only progressed half way when her uncle loses his self-restraint and dashes forward, half-walking, half-running to his niece. He wants to hold her one last time, wants to beg her to reconsider.

"Arran, please..."

She stops where she is and so does everyone else, surprised by his outburst. He grabs hold of her by the arms and that's when Grantham Quinlan steps in, immediately concerned that this whole set-up might just fall apart. He leans over to touch Jonas on the shoulder, his idea being to ease the older man away from the girl in order to offer a few words of comfort, to tell him it won't be so bad. But he doesn't get the chance because Sergeant Rees mistakes the gesture. Rees has known the Doctor a long time and he doesn't want anyone manhandling him, especially not this Quinlan guy who nobody seems to trust. With a burly shoulder and a strong arm, he removes the offending hand from Jonas's shoulder. Inevitably, that continues the escalation as Quinlan's unit commander, Ulrich, begins to intervene. Ulrich has been hired to take care of the man who pays the bills and he can't be seen to let this no-account Biblion sergeant push his client around, so he too moves in, adding yet another factor to a situation that's rapidly turning into a melee. Even Nolan Seward wants to join the ruckus, if only to separate them and restore some semblance of order, so it's only Lieutenant Mostrie who has the presence of mind to see that, while all this is taking place, a

small unit of the FSC has surreptitiously breached the security wire not far from where Calder Quinlan is standing, taking advantage of the distraction in order to enter the area.

It might have been better for Mostrie just to let them take the Quinlan kid and have done with it but he can't let them do that. This is *his* jurisdiction and he'll be damned if he's going to let those FSC clowns break through as they like. He calls out to get their attention, instructing them to stand down. But either they don't hear him or they prefer to take no notice. They're closer to their target now, almost within range, so Mostrie lifts his weapon to his hip and fires off a warning salvo, aiming deliberately above their heads. He hopes it might make them think twice before pressing on with their incursion but it has the reverse effect. Active units of the FSC are trained to respond to incoming ordnance and their NCO decides to take the lead by readying his firearm. It's difficult to say whether he's aiming to hit his mark or, like Mostrie, to miss deliberately, but it doesn't matter. Neurological field weapons are notoriously awkward and although the power blast misses Mostrie, it finds an accidental victim among the crowd.

The victim cries out, collapses in a heap and all movement in the area comes to a halt. Even the FSC unit pauses, instantly aware that they're now in deep trouble. This isn't how it was meant to be. There's been a casualty within the perimeter of a licensed, gated community and from here on in, there'll be all kinds of problems raining down on them: political turbulence and mass suspensions, certainly, but also the distinct possibility of arrest and trial. It's happened before. Zeal with extreme prejudice is a recognized trait of the Federal Security Corps, a direct result of the Justice department's generous incentive program, but when they step over the legal line, they know that all risk is theirs. It's the price of doing business. On this occasion, they know only too well that they're in the wrong and, instinctively, the NCO waves his men back the way they came; a silent, guilt-filled retreat beyond the perimeter.

Unfortunately for the FSC, the person who took the brunt of the blast is the one man they should have avoided above all: Grantham Quinlan.

Calder is the first one to reach his father's side. He's asking him if he's okay, if he's hurt badly; but although the man's eyes are open, they seem glazed over and he's not responding. Then the nervous system shuts down and by the time Dr.

Jonas has the presence of mind to come over and offer his services, Grantham Quinlan is gone, consigned to whatever eternity may await him.

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“Get these people out of here!” This is the piercing voice of Lieutenant Mostrie, interrupting the moment to scream at Quinlan’s stunned commander, Markus Ulrich. Mostrie wants the private squad to get their act together and pull out right now. “You and you,” he says, taking full charge of the mercenaries, even though they’re not under his command, “pick up that body!” Then he points to Calder and Arran and screams orders to his own sergeant: “Rees, get these two aboard that craft. I mean *now*! The rest of you, on cover detail there... and there! Weapons disengaged! I repeat, all weapons disengaged! All right, let’s do it! Move, move, move!”

The urgency has its effect. Both detachments are in motion and Lieutenant Mostrie is forced to acknowledge that this is how he should have organized the exit in the first place. He should have paid no attention to Seward or the council with all that pussyfooting around. A military task calls for military procedure and he should have known.

Three minutes later, he’s watching the VTOL ascend slowly, its spotted owl mascot no longer quite as cocky. Once the machine reaches treetop level, it turns on its axis and accelerates away. Mostrie looks around, squinting across the clearing for the FSC but they’re nowhere to be seen and he figures that they, too, must be airborne by now, no doubt busy trying to figure out their own defense.

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Inside the craft, Calder stares out the window as the ground passes by beneath him: the hills, the forest, the boulders, the streams. It all looks so different from up here.

Sitting next to him is Arran but she's not looking at the scenery, or anything else for that matter. Her eyes are closed and she's completely withdrawn, shocked into a state of mental paralysis. She's out of Biblion just like she wanted but at what cost, she's asking herself? A man's life? The sorrow of her uncle? The disruption of a community and an entire way of life? Suddenly she's experiencing a terrible fear that she's never felt before. From inside her jacket she takes out the book she treasures, not to open or to read but just to hold it in her hand and feel its familiarity, the way a child might hold a teddy bear.

Calder glances at her but doesn't say anything and, a moment later, turns back to the window. In back of the fuselage is what remains of his father but he can't bring himself to accept the idea. He can't even bring himself to think about it. Like it or not, the man was a presence and his resources were... well, they were just *there*. Calder never wanted for anything: the finest education, the best medical treatment for his heart trouble, the right introductions when he began his career. Then there were the clothes, the trips, the sports, the vehicles and, yes, the horses too. Of course, from another perspective, there were always his father's tantrums, as well as that insufferable arrogance and the take-no-prisoners attitude. But somehow, none of that seems to matter right now and the one fact he can't deny is that, whatever his father's motives, at least the man showed up here. Surely, thinks Calder, that has to qualify for some kind of redemption.

Then he has another thought. He didn't communicate with his mother yet and he's fairly sure that Ulrich didn't either – which probably means that she doesn't even know her husband's dead. How will she take it? Will she be able to cope? Will she take over the corporate empire or will it all just fall apart amidst the endless bickering and lawsuits of greedy vice presidents? And if it does fall apart, what then? What happens to all those resources he's been counting on to help solve his own dilemma?

And now, in addition to all of that, he's got another problem. He's got this other person sitting beside him, this total stranger he picked up along the way. Is he

responsible for her now? How can he accept such a responsibility when he can't even look after himself? What happens at the end of this ride when the VTOL comes in to land? Which way does she go? Does he point her in the opposite direction and say: "Bye, it's been fun?" Or does he take her by the hand and link her fate to his, like lovers in a bad screenplay? Is that how it's supposed to be?

He can't come to grips with any of it, so he just stares out the window until he can see the pink-tinged pollution up ahead and then, gradually, the monolithic gray sprawl beneath. The urban conglomeration of Edifice is where Calder Quinlan built his career. At one stage of his brief sojourn in Biblion, he wasn't sure he'd ever see the city again; and, now that he's back, he has no idea how it will receive him.

When it all comes down to it, he knows that nothing's changed in his situation. He's a fugitive, a loser. Will the people he knew want anything to do with him? Will anyone even recognize him as Grantham Quinlan's son? Will his own mother welcome him or curse him? Will this girl next to him be risking incarceration just by associating with him? His entire life has become nothing but an endless series of questions and he feels his stomach turn queasy at what might be awaiting him below as the VTOL begins its measured descent.

I/D: PART TWO
The Lawn Mines Of Edifice

As ever, the keynote of the mayoral address concerns the threat of terrorism in all its forms and Calder Quinlan watches the live broadcast for the want of something better to do.

This is now the mayor's third term in office and, according to the polls, the citizenry is still prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt; but that's only for the moment and only for want of someone better. It certainly doesn't help his cause that violent incidents are still happening on a daily basis throughout his campaign. Yet here he is, once again claiming how determined he is to rid the city of disruptive elements. That's his theme this year, just as it's been every year. His slogan is the same, too, and it invariably appears as the backdrop at every photo op:

DEFENDING OUR QUALITY OF LIFE

To Calder, the man's just another sleazy pol, just more noise to ignore amidst the constant hail of unwelcome news, but today he can't help noticing this slogan, somehow equating it in his mind with that other phrase he saw recently: "Keep the Promise." Both sets of words are so vague as to be essentially meaningless, yet he can see how their endless repetition gets drummed into the communal consciousness until they become part of the info-scape. Of course, he understands there's nothing new in all this. Candidates and their spin-doctors have been doing it for generations but this is the first time that Calder's ever really paid attention and it's only because his recent experience hit him so hard. The words weren't so meaningless when he actually saw the result with his own eyes – an old man voluntarily going to his own death for the sake of a belief.

The mayor receives another rousing ovation from his carefully orchestrated supporters. As the cameras pan the assembly, some producer back at the network decides the applause is a good opportunity to cut to an ad and Calder uses the

break as an excuse to shut down the screen, mildly annoyed with himself for even spending the time to watch.

He looks across the open-plan space of his late father's loft and sees Arran over at the desk, monopolizing the sole netlink terminal, a retractable glass plate built into the desk. From this single translucent screen, images continually emerge: either in two- or three-dimensional format, either static or moving, either download or interactive, either real or fantasy; all of it depending on the sophistication of the site. This is how she's been spending most of her time since she got here, seemingly engrossed in everything she finds, from the scientific journals to the tabloid blogs; and when she's not doing that, she's reading that small book of hers, which she still refuses to show him or even talk about. In fact, she hasn't said much of anything since they arrived here two days ago, so he still doesn't know what's expected of him – whether to play the good host or just leave her be, lost in her own tiny cyber-bubble.

In front of him on the coffee table, there's an empty bowl and he touches the fingerpad on its base, hoping to gain her attention. Within the bowl, one of his father's pornograms comes alive, a collection of photons that portrays a young woman with high cheekbones and white-blond hair in the flimsiest of lingerie who writhes in sexual ecstasy as she cradles her perfect, oversized breasts to the accompanying soundtrack. When Arran looks up, Calder shrugs an apology, hoping to raise a smile, but it doesn't work and she turns back to her screen, her face as neutral as it was before. He switches off the image and slumps back in the chair, at a loss of what to do or even how to engage her in conversation.

It was his father's mercenary, Markus Ulrich, who brought them here to this corporate safe house, a penthouse loft maintained by an untraceable offshore subsidiary of the Quinlan conglomerate. The place was designed specifically so that his father might have a secure zone, a hiding place should he ever need it: a luxury apartment constructed within the framework of the highrise roof structure and right above the corporate executive suite on the fifty-fifth floor. The space is deliberately not shown on any architectural plan and, indeed, the main elevator shaft doesn't even come up this far. The only access is either by a hidden door in the fire escape stairwell or by air, directly onto the external landing pad. In addition, the walls, floors and ceilings have a disseminating fabric lining that repels all but the most sophisticated sensor systems and it's unlikely that

anything short of an intense sweep by Defense would register any activity. As for services, the place is fully functional with priority power and water supplies, just like the rest of the building, even during brownout periods of rationing, an occurrence that's becoming more and more frequent. The result is that, with enough provisions, someone who wishes to remain in seclusion – or in hiding – could remain here for weeks at a time, possibly even months if necessary.

Calder, himself, previously knew nothing about this secret apartment. He understands perfectly why a man like his father, despised by so many, might well have needed such a retreat and although he still resents what it stands for, he fully appreciates his own good fortune at this moment in time. It's yet another of the contradictions that have plagued him all his adult life, an ongoing battle between moral principle and inherited advantage – and he can't shake the feeling that the latter seems to be winning hands down.

If it's any consolation, the same debate is constantly raging in society at large. Edifice, like so many cities across the continent, sees itself as enlightened civilization's last stand against the forces ranged against it: not just rampant theocratic terrorism with its constant threat of nuclear, biological and various other WMD, but also multiple other dangers, both human and environmental, including air quality, waste disposal, food genetics, toxicity, plague, poverty migration, narcotics, hallucinogenics, and, of course, the omnipresent scourge of digital crime, to which Calder himself has fallen victim. In an effort to counter this vast armada of problems, the front-line defenders in this ever-expanding conflict have employed as much technological capability as they know how to muster: everything from the urban totality of the sensor grid to the individual tracking of DNA; from the ubiquity of call monitoring to the legally administered warrants to test mental and emotional stability. The constant question, of course, is how much is enough and it raises endless argument amongst the legislative jurists and the civil libertarians about where the limits should be and how far they should extend. For example, is micro scanning a bedroom legitimate or a perversion? Is monitoring brain activity an invasion of privacy or a necessary method of profiling? Where's the balance between society and security? When does a liberal democracy step across the line to become a police state? How much does it take for the citizens to admit that it's just not worth it any more, that they've already lost what they set out to defend? There are no answers. The encroachment is ongoing. The war they're fighting is one of continual attrition.

So far, they've managed to prevent the bludgeon of annihilation and they've even been moderately successful in overcoming the worst effects of planetary degradation but at what cost? It's still possible for the affluent and the educated to look forward to a normal life and career but, as Calder Quinlan has now learned, that word "normal" is only a relative term, no more than a temporary expression which can be redefined with shocking suddenness. One moment he's maintaining his enviable lifestyle, the next he's cooped up in this golden jail with nowhere left to run. If he stays, he may go crazy but if he leaves, he'll be destined for a far worse fate.

Once again, he glances over at Arran but she's still online, still completely pre-occupied. She's undoubtedly bright but, at the same time, so painfully naive. How can he possibly explain all this? How does he even begin?

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It's just after lunch when Calder's mother, Myrla, arrives, escorted from the VTOL pad by the mercenary, Markus Ulrich, who's managed to maintain his monthly service retainer by instantly transferring his personal loyalties to the boss's widow. Today, she's coming straight from the funeral and shows up dressed from head to toe in black, as if to prove how heartbroken she can be.

Calder gives her a polite peck on her surgically smoothed cheek but it's more out of habit than affection. "How was it?" he asks her.

"Good as money can buy," she replies, as she removes her gloves. "He'd have liked the eulogy I gave him. I called him a 'gifted entrepreneur' but I have to say, I almost choked on it." She looks at her son, noticing the tired eyes and the pale complexion. "You okay? You look awful."

"Thanks."

"You eating?"

It's a bit late for her to turn into a real mother, he's thinking, but he doesn't say that. "Eating a little, sleeping a little. What else is there to do?"

She turns her gaze over to Arran who's still busy with the link and doesn't even look up. "She's a lot of fun."

Calder ignores the sarcasm. "She's okay."

"Are you two..."

"No, we're not." He sees her dubious expression, so he just changes the subject, a well-honed tactic when dealing with his mother. "You want some coffee?"

"Yes, make me a cappuccino. May I sit down?"

"Sure, you own the place."

She smiles at him. "That's right, I do."

As she finds a place on the sofa, she flicks on the pornogram just like he did and stares at it for several seconds without any expression. It's what she used to do herself, dancing and performing in an animation studio so that the computer modeling could look make the lightshow as lifelike as possible. Her specialty role was that of a dominatrix but only because her tall stature helped her look the part. She was always more comfortable brandishing a whip than actually using one, which was what Grantham Quinlan saw in her. He knew that upscale soft porn would always be more profitable than hardcore triple-X, so he made her into the leading star of his production arm and his risqué tablegrams became popular distractions at many a fashionable dinner party, an amusingly ironic show to go with dessert. Whenever the lust goddess, Myrla, forced muscular males with mighty erections to grovel before her, it invariably brought ripples of applause from appreciative guests as they savored their organic cognac. Indeed, possessing Myrla's latest pornorama had once been a mark of status among the glitterati. Even the mayor once joked about enjoying them.

She flicks off the machine and settles herself back in the chair, legs demurely crossed, as her son brings in the foam-laden cup. "Thank you, dear. You know you really do look bad. You sure you don't want me to send for a doctor?"

"I'm fine."

"How about a nutritionist? I know this wonderful man who can..."

"I said I'm fine."

"All right, no need to snap." A pause. Then, in a more conciliatory mode, she says: "Have you decided what you're going to do yet?"

That, too, is typical of her. She can meander her way through a conversation for what seems like an age, easily managing to convince everyone around her that she's just a socialite ditz and then, without any warning, she can zero in on the most critical point.

"You mean whether I'm going to give myself up? Throw myself on the mercy of the courts?"

"We're not short of lawyers, you know."

He's grateful that she's committed to doing something but he's still as unsure about a legal course of action as he was at the start of this nightmare. It almost doesn't matter what the lawyers say, no matter how much they charge, the result will be the same. All they can do is simply plead his case: "Young man of good standing, blah-blah, worthy member of the community, blah-blah, never been in prior trouble..." and so forth. But nothing can really affect the overall decision, so what are the alternatives? What are his options? He shakes his head and sips his coffee and is all too aware that time is drifting by.

"You keeping Ulrich?" he says, for the sake of filling the silence.

"For the time being, although I can't think why. Once I've liquidated your father's assets..."

"Is that what you're going to do?"

"What kind of question is that? Yes, of course that's what I'm going to do. Do you really think I'm going to run a business I don't even understand?"

"You understand the porn business."

"Well, my word. Is that a compliment I hear? Thank you, dear."

"What *do* you want to do?"

"Buy a yacht."

"Buy a what?"

"The biggest, most sumptuous yacht I can afford, with a full crew and a great chef. I'll base it in someplace warm and then I'll just sail back and forth, back and forth, wherever I choose."

Calder has to smile. To him, it's exactly the kind of outrageous thing his mother might propose, but the more he thinks about it, the more he can actually see her doing it. "And you'd sail it on your own?"

"No, I told you, I'd have a crew... lots of bronzed young men swabbing the deck... Sorry, I shouldn't say things like that. You're my son. Plus, of course, I'll have the usual load of gatecrashers to contend with. All the usual suspects. My God, can you imagine Valencie on board? How much vodka can a ship's galley store anyway?"

"I'm sure you'll find out."

"Yes, I'm sure I will. What do you think of my plan?"

"I think it'll suit you."

"And you'll come and join us. Yes, I know, they're not exactly your crowd but you can bring a few friends of your own. What about that girl you were seeing? What was her name? Nikralle, was it?"

As it happens, he split with Niko three months ago but that's beside the point. "I think we may be forgetting something," he says quietly.

"Your little problem, yes I know. I haven't forgotten. But we'll sort that out, I'm sure. Oh, that reminds me..." She opens up her purse and rummages around until she comes up with a flashcard and hands it to him. "That's the law firm you should call. There's one guy there, Franklin, a real shark. He did a lot for your father. Also settled your cousin Barolo's divorce problem. I'm sure he'll be glad to help you."

"How? How can he help me? You don't seem to understand..." He comes to a stop, not knowing how he can even begin to explain.

"What, dear? What don't I understand?"

Calder gazes at his mother, not really sure what registers and what doesn't. Ever since he was a kid, he couldn't seem to work out whether she was inherently smart and just played dumb as camouflage, or whether she really was as ethereal as she seemed and the intelligent moments were just by random chance. "It can't work," he says. "This 'shark,' whoever he is, will charge you a major chunk of change and for what? A plea session?"

"But he knows the judges."

"He knows the judges? What's that supposed to mean? He can bribe them?"

"I've know idea how he works."

No, of course not, thinks Calder and gives up, exhausted by the conversation. "The boat's a nice idea," he says.

Myrla Quinlan unilaterally decides that her visit is over. She gets up and gathers her things together. "Anything you need, dear? Some ice cream cake?"

He can only smile at the recollection. Ice cream cake was his childhood passion, his favorite treat in all the world, whether for birthdays, camping parties, Thanksgiving... any excuse would do. "No, I'm fine, thanks."

"You want my advice? Call the lawyer. I'm sure he can help." She pulls on her tight gloves, wiggling each finger in turn as she does so, another of her many affectations. "I'll look in tomorrow, all right?"

"Okay, thanks for stopping by."

"Don't be silly, dear, I'm your mother."

After his mother's gone, Calder locks and reseals the door behind her. That's when he senses Arran looking at him intently. When he turns, she doesn't look away, she just maintains the direct eye contact until he has to respond.

"What?" he says.

"You have a girlfriend?"

He wasn't even aware she'd been listening to the conversation. "*Had,*" he corrects her. "Past tense."

"What was she like?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Just asking."

"You done with the terminal now?"

"Where did you meet her?"

He really doesn't want to talk about this but at least she's willing to converse, which is more than she's done up to this point. "At work. I met her at work."

"Is that where people normally meet?"

"Sometimes."

"What happened? Did you ask her or did she ask you?"

"I don't remember."

"Sure you do."

He shrugs. "I asked *her*."

"What did you say?"

This is all very juvenile but he can see she doesn't have the first clue about any of it. "I said... I *think* I said... 'You want to catch a show later?' Or something like that." He smiles to himself. It sounds so mundane in the telling.

"So that's what you did? You went to a show? Did you kiss?"

"Jesus Christ."

"Don't say that."

"Why not? Hey, I got news for you. This ain't Biblion no more." He says the last part in a fun voice, like one of those ancient Bugs Bunny cartoons, but he instantly regrets it because he sees how upset she's become. "Sorry," he says, but it's too late. She's not interested and all further communication on her part seems to have been suspended until further notice. She chooses to go back to her web surfing and her silence so, in retaliation, he turns to his own form of screen gazing by switching the TV back on. He doesn't select the mayor this time but calls up some interactive mystery he's never seen. After a few minutes, he discovers it's mindless but he leaves it playing because somehow it's very monotony allows him to fade out and think.

• • •

At night she comes to him, creeping into the darkness of his room, just like at the clinic. Her own room is on the other side of the loft but here she is now, waking him from a heavy sleep.

"Am I your girlfriend now?" she says in a quiet voice.

He can hardly get his eyes to open, never mind make his brain work. "Excuse me?"

"I want to know if I'm your girlfriend now."

"My what? No, you're not my girlfriend."

"Why not?"

He lifts himself onto his elbows, sees that it's just after three in the morning and flops back down. He'd like to ignore all this, to pretend it's not happening but she's insistent.

"Why not?" she says again.

"Why not? Because it doesn't work like that."

"So how does it work?"

"I don't know," he replies, his voice starting to show signs of impatience. First his mother and now Arran. Between the two of them, he'll end up in an asylum, identity or no identity.

"Do we have to copulate first?" she asks him.

"What?"

He touches a finger pad on the side table and the soft lighting glow fills the area. He's wide awake now and, for a moment, he's distracted by the fact that she's wearing no bathrobe, just the pajamas he gave her, the new ones he found in his father's closet still wrapped in the original plastic. They're about four sizes too

big and they give her a ragamuffin quality, like an urchin child who's found her way in here from some other reality – except that she's not a child because it's all too evident that underneath the pajamas, she's not wearing anything at all.

"Copulate?" he says. "Is that what you call it in Biblion?"

"Why, what do *you* call it?"

"Almost anything but that."

"Your mother asked if we were doing it. Should we?"

He recalls that his mother didn't actually spell it out, which means Arran must have been listening fairly intently.

"No," he tells her, "that's not how it works either. What I'm trying to say is... I don't know what I'm trying to say. But you can't ignore me for two days and then come in here expecting to..."

She interrupts him. "Are you diseased?"

"Excuse me?"

"They told us that many people outside are HIV positive. They told us that it leads to AIDS, which has killed billions and... I was wondering if that's why you don't want to... to do whatever it is you call it."

He rubs his eyes and then brushes his hand through his hair. He doesn't even know where to begin. "Listen to me. Are you listening? Once and for all, this is not the way it happens between two people, like this. There has to be some kind relationship first, know what I'm saying? They have to at least like each other first."

"Don't you like me?"

"Sure I like you... but when I say we have to like each other, I mean more than just 'like,' you understand?" He waits for some reaction but the way he's

explaining it, he's not even sure he even understands it himself. "You know what 'love' means?" he asks her.

"Yes," she says, "I know what love means."

"So there you are."

"But love doesn't matter in Biblion. Marriages have to be approved."

"Well, it matters out here," he replies firmly. But even as he says it, he can't believe how he could come up with something like that. *It matters out here?* What kind of lunacy is that? His own father built a whole lucrative enterprise based on sex without love, so who the hell is he to be preaching such idiocy? "And just to answer your other question," he goes on, "I am not, repeat *not* HIV positive, are we clear on that? Are we?"

She offers a nod and he's glad to see that he's managed to get that much through to her at least.

Then from out of nowhere, she says: "What do you do?"

"What do I *do*?"

"At work."

"You mean my job?"

"Yes, your job."

That seems like a very long time ago now and he suddenly remembers all the work he still has to do, the work he didn't finish when the message appeared on his screen. But then in the next thought, it occurs to him that it probably doesn't matter any more and he wonders if anyone thought to call his office, or if they're simply informed as a matter of course by the government. It's entirely possible they received a message at the same time, instructing them to cease his employment forthwith. It's worth checking and he begins to think how he might

go about finding out but she's still sitting there on his bunk, waiting for an answer.

"My job, when I still had one," he says with a degree of bitterness, "was designing holoboards." He sees her looking blank. "You know... *holoboards*. They're all over the place. Walls, buildings, malls... You've never seen one have you?"

"I have too."

"When?"

"Online, today."

"Online, today," he repeats. "That's some education you had in that place."

"There are no holoboards in Biblion," she replies.

"No... No, I suppose not."

"So does that mean you know technology?" she says. "I mean, if you design them..."

"No, not really. I just think up the concepts. Well, okay, it's not as simple as that. We have to look at site development, we have to do studies, then consumer research... you wouldn't believe what's involved. Then, after all that's done and the idea's approved, I work with the media company to get them produced..." He comes to a stop as he realizes that he's starting to sound as boring as anyone else who tries to describe a career, especially since this is a career he may not have anymore. "Anyway," he says, "it's other people who have the real technical expertise."

She nods as if it all makes sense now. "So maybe some of these people can help you," she suggests.

"Help me how?"

"With your problem."

He's about to dismiss it, mostly because it comes from her, but in fact it's not a stupid suggestion at all. "Come to think of it..."

"What? You've got an idea?"

"I'm not sure... but there's a guy I know, works on targeting holographics for a couple of defense contractors. We consult with him sometimes. Total tech-head, but he's into government projects. He might just know something. It's not like he's a friend or anything but he's okay."

"Why don't you call him?"

"Call him? You mean, right out of the blue, just like that? What would I say? 'Hey Baseman, guess what? I'm a fugitive now and I wonder if you'd help me evade the law.'"

"Baseman? That's his name?"

"That's what everybody calls him."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Are you worried he might report you?"

"Yeah, he might, but I don't have too many other ideas right now."

"Except for the lawyer."

"Except for the lawyer," repeats Calder cynically. It's evident he doesn't put too much faith in that concept.

He can see that she wants to be of use to him, perhaps to repay some imaginary debt of gratitude, but she's so lost in this wider world that it's difficult even to

discuss it. Although he's been to her home community and seen it for himself, it's still hard to register how much she's out of sync with everything: the way she talks, the way she thinks. Even the most basic social interaction seems beyond her experience.

As if to prove the point, she gets up to leave his room without any warning and his eyes follow her as she leaves. Definitely nothing under the pajamas. Despite himself, he can't help feeling some of his own hormonal longings and wonders if he dismissed her approach too casually. Yet, it's also possible it wasn't "copulation" she was looking for at all but simple affection, some human warmth, some reassurance to tell her she's not alone out here and that somebody cares. It's possible that all she was really looking for was a hug but he was brusque and intolerant and he chides himself for his own attitude.

He's about to turn out the light when she suddenly returns. But this is only to place her treasured volume down carefully on the side-table and then disappear again without uttering a word. He senses that's it's a gesture, an offering, but of what? Friendship? Understanding? Sex?

When she's gone, he reaches over and opens up the dog-eared cover but it's not the creationist Bible he was expecting, nor is it some gothic nonsense, full of castles and princes and other impossible dreams. Instead, the title announces:

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR

A novel by George Orwell

He's never read it himself but it's famous enough that he knows the concept: a mid-twentieth century prediction of a totalitarian future, set in the year 1984 – exactly two hundred years ago. He can't even remember the last time he opened a hard copy edition like this, yet it seems to mean so much to her that his eyes begin to scan the first page.

• • •

In the morning, he gets up later than usual and arrives somewhat bleary-eyed in the kitchen to find her already showered, dressed and at the table with bread, cheese and her habitual glass of plain water.

"Good book," he tells her as he fiddles with the coffee machine.

"You liked it?"

"Sure I liked it." As the machine warms up, he looks at her. "But I'm not sure why *you* like it so much. It's all you seem to read... like it really means something to you."

She looks at him. "You don't see it, do you?"

"Don't see what?"

Arran shakes her head, as if it's all so obvious. "It's Biblion... What he's describing is Biblion."

Calder finds that to be something of a stretch. "Well, yeah, okay... I can see how there might be some similarities..."

"Similarities? It's the same, it's exactly the same. The people in that book... They're not permitted anything, they're watched all the time... And the slogans. How about the slogans? 'Peace is war.' That's just like 'Keep the promise' isn't it? Isn't it?"

That part, at least, Calder recognizes and offers a faint nod but she's worked up by this stage, frustrated in her attempt to explain what it means to her.

"That book opened my eyes," she says. "It's what made me first realize. That book is why I had to leave, why I'm here now, here with you. Don't you see that?"

"Kind of... I think."

"I can't believe you don't get it."

"Hey, relax, all right? I get it. I do, really. It was your inspiration, I understand."

"Inspiration? No, it was much more than that. It was my... I don't know how to say it."

"Your salvation?"

"Don't make fun of me. I hate that."

"No, okay, I apologize."

"That book... It was my reason to live. No, I'm serious, literally my reason to live. If not for that..." She pauses, as if hesitating to give up a trusted secret but then decides it's of no consequence. She's come this far, what would it benefit to hold back? "You know how many people my age commit suicide in Biblion?" she says to him quietly. "It's like their secret shame, something they don't tell anyone."

"Is that what you would have done?"

"I might, I don't know. But what happened to those people in the book. I was determined that wouldn't happen to me. I was going to resist at all costs."

"Why didn't you just try to escape?"

"And go where? Do what?"

"So what was your plan?"

"I didn't have a plan," she admits.

"You were just going to wait until some miracle came long?"

She objects to his use of that word too but she doesn't mention it. "I don't know," she replies, "I just felt..."

"Felt what?"

"I felt that if the opportunity ever came along, I'd recognize it and, you know, try to take advantage of it."

"And I was the opportunity?" He glances around at this loft where they find themselves; this place he can't even leave. "Yeah, well, I'm not sure you did yourself any favors." The expression "out of the frying pan into the fire" occurs to him but he stops himself from saying it. He really doesn't want to remind her of flames, so he just lets it go and tries to focus on breakfast.

He makes himself scrambled eggs and toast but he's only halfway through eating when his mother returns. He notes that her mourning period didn't last too long, because she's already out of black and into something more regular, which for her means an exclusive designer ensemble: very up-to-the-minute and horrendously expensive. He always figured that her annual clothes budget must be equivalent to the GDP of a moderately sized city.

"Morning, dear," she says to him as she strolls in. When she sees Arran look up, she says: "Good morning to you, too, I suppose."

She waits but Arran doesn't reply, so she sits herself down while he finishes eating and begins talking as if it's a direct continuation from yesterday, without any interruption. "The lawyer's going to call you this morning," she tells him matter-of-factly. It's as if she didn't even hear his objections yesterday. "He's in court this morning so it should be around lunchtime, all right?"

Calder puts his fork down. "Mom, I need to go across the city..."

"But you can't."

He sighs. "I know I can't. That's why I want you to do it for me."

"Me? Why?"

"I have to see someone. He might be able to help."

"And who would that be? A friend?"

"In a way."

"Why don't you just call him?"

He knows his mother is just being herself, so he makes a major effort to stay reasonable. "Mom, they monitor the phones."

"They do? What, all of them?"

"It's automatic. The system algorithms are configured to... Look, it doesn't matter how they do it. They just do. Anyway, I think it would be better to go out there personally. He should be home today." This is total guesswork on his part, based on the simple fact that it's Saturday. Come to that, he doesn't even know if the guy still lives at the same address. Calder was only there once and that was just to consult with him on a holoboard project.

"Where does he live?"

"Fieldview."

Myrla Quinlan seems impressed. Fieldview is an upscale suburb to the east of the city. "Pricey area," she says.

"Yeah, he makes an income. Can you go out there?"

"When, today?"

"Can you?"

"Well, I had other plans."

Calder is thinking that, just for once, she can take a break from her shopping or spa treatment or mahjong, or whatever it is. But he doesn't say that. "Please, just go see him for me, all right?"

"What do I say?"

"I don't know, something like... No, wait, better idea. I'll just write a note and then all you have to do is check him out when you give it to him."

"Check him out?"

"Sure... You know, see if he's interested in helping, whether he's genuine about it, that kind of thing."

"And if I think he is?"

"Then you bring him back here."

She looks dubious, the shrewd side of her personality showing through. "Oh, I don't know if that's such a good idea. Why don't you just talk to the lawyer?"

"I *will* talk to the lawyer, all right? I promise. I'll listen very carefully to everything he says. But I need you to do this. Will you do it?"

She's hesitant and delays her response by sitting back in the chair and crossing her legs. Then she seems to realize she doesn't have much choice but to do him this favor. "Give me the details," she sighs.

He spells out the guy's full name, then looks up his number and checks his address while his mother repeats it all carefully into her PDA, customized to transcribe her voice. When she's done, Arran enters the conversation for the first time, a surprise to both of them.

"May I go with you?" she asks, a little timidly.

"Ah, it speaks," says Myrla unkindly.

Arran seems unperturbed. "May I?" she asks again.

"Why would *you* want to go? Do you know this person my son's talking about?"

"No... I just want to go."

Myrla Quinlan looks at her son. "What do *you* think?"

Calder's expression suggests he has no real opinion one way or the other. Arran has lived her entire life behind the perimeter of a gated community, so it's perfectly natural that she wants to get out and see the city. Besides, her identity is still officially registered, everything as it should be. Unlike him, she's free to come and go as she pleases.

"What the hell," says his mother, resigning herself one more time, as if maternal duties never cease. Then, once Arran has scurried off to get ready, she turns back to her son. "Go write your little note, dear," she says, "and you'd better tell my new driver where we're going. I had to get rid of Osman, did I tell you that? Just last week. Yoyo saw him draining off the power, can you imagine? Nasty business."

Osman was her long-time pilot chauffeur and Yoyo's the Asian housekeeper who helped raise Calder. His mother also employs an eccentric chef with a fake European accent, as well as a personal trainer who may or may not have been an Olympic athlete in his youth. But Calder's really not interested in his mother's staffing problems at the moment, so he gets up quickly, before she can start in on the rest of her tribulations.

After a minute or two, he's tapped out a brief paragraph on her PDA. "That should be enough," he says, handing the device back to his mother. "It just says I need to see him urgently."

"He might think it's about your work."

"That's the general idea," replies Calder.

By this time, Arran has returned, wearing the same gray jacket and flat-soled shoes she wore when leaving Biblion. She seems genuinely excited at the thought of going out. "Ready," she announces to no one in particular.

"Like that?" says Myrla, looking her up and down.

"She's fine," replies Calder, trying to deflect any insult before it arrives. Then he turns to Arran: "Be careful, it's your first time..." But before he can finish, his mother interjects.

"If we're going, let's go," she says. "I don't have all day."

Her attitude doesn't exactly reassure Calder but before he can give any kind of voice to his misgivings, they're gone and he's left alone to ponder the wisdom of trusting this one chance to his mother. Perhaps it might have been better to send Ulrich on this mission but it's too late for afterthoughts. The craft is already airborne. He recalls Sister Clareth back in Biblion telling him it'll all work out but he just couldn't bring himself to share her faith and he still can't. He considers himself a victim, one of fate's random casualties, and there's only so much he can do to affect anything. Whatever happens out there, happens. He'll just have to live with it.

The sumptuous air limo holds static position just off the high Quinlan building until it receives clearance from traffic control, then descends according to flight path regulations in order to negotiate the city grid.

For a long time, there was some environmental resistance to urban air traffic but the administration budgets had become accustomed to accepting vehicle lobby funding and galvanized into passing the vote. However, that was just the start. It took a year to draft the complex air traffic code, then another three years of trials before the city began to issue permits for driver training. It was a bold venture on many levels and few cities have had the political will to take such a risk but, as of now, the Edifice system appears to be working and all the fearful visions of problems, glitches and transports falling out of the sky have failed to materialize. The system has become a matter of civic pride, as well as a tourist attraction, and the first thing many visitors want to do is take an air taxi ride through the downtown core.

Arran's reaction is typical as she gazes awestruck at the reflective towers and commercial signs. It's all so much bigger, so much more overwhelming than anything she expected. To her, it seems like there's no human scale to any of it, just a maze of leviathan architecture. Even the holoboard is thirty stories high and she wonders vaguely if Calder designed any of them. One projects an image of a sleek land vehicle, its headlights blazing out across the city like white lasers. Another, even more spectacular, is for sports shoes, with a professional athlete leaping high into empty space as if caught in the act of dunking a basketball onto the adjacent building's roof. Yet a third shows a genetically enhanced supermodel radiating a joyous smile across an entire facade because she's using a certain brand of implant.

"That's what he does, isn't it?" she says to Myrle Quinlan, who's pre-occupied with her electronic agenda.

“What’s that, dear?”

“Calder. He designs those things.”

Myrla glances briefly through the darkened protective glass before returning to whatever it is she’s doing. “I suppose so,” she says vaguely.

It sounds to Arran like the woman takes zero interest in her son’s career, so she gives up the idea of conversation and, instead, she tries to imagine herself living in a city like this: going to work in a highrise office; commuting by air on the mass transit; shopping for clothes and decor items on the weekend. Then she tries to picture the apartment she’d have. Would it be modern or traditional? Would she cook or would she process? The teaching at Biblion always claimed that urban life was full of decadence and obscenity but that’s not her first impression. Sure, she can see how it might be impersonal and perhaps even intimidating – but it’s hardly the den of iniquity they wanted her to believe. Even last night, when she approached Calder in his room, she genuinely believed he’d jump at the chance to have free sex with her. She was prepared for it and was even ready to encourage it but his reaction totally surprised her. For Arran, it was a major lesson and only proves to her how much she has to learn, how many assumptions she has to correct, not just about men but about this massive new world she finds herself in.

All this flashes through her mind as she stares out at the vista that surrounds them. Once they reach the East Central Skyway, the driver is able to accelerate up to full cruise velocity. This route to the outer suburbs is a scenic, low-altitude flight path which bypasses the refugee absorption neighborhoods and the industrial parks and, in just fifteen minutes, they’re at the Fieldview exit. Here, the driver reduces velocity, then activates the GPS control to direct the craft to the pre-inscribed address.

Meanwhile, Calder’s mother just sits there, fingering her tiny screen, whispering her notes and zapping her messages into the urban link. Is she genuinely trying to cope with her newly acquired business responsibilities, Arran wonders, or is she merely organizing her social calendar in the narcissistic way that Calder described? It’s hard to tell but then, what difference does it make? The woman seems soulless.

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Although the maps show Fieldview as part of the Greater Edifice Conurbation, it's technically a self-managed entity that pays a heavy tax burden for its connection to the city's infrastructure. But that's no problem for its residents who seem well able to afford it. Here, the exorbitant real estate prices ensure that only the most desirable income bracket will find a home and the demographic quintile is very much the envy of surrounding communities.

Such privilege doesn't come without its own set of issues, however. Being an extension of Edifice also means being prey to every kind of criminal incursion, from home invasion to ideological terrorism, and by far the most important of the residents' committees deals with communal defense. This includes not only a well-equipped militia but also a trained vigilante reserve to which every armed resident can sign up.

In addition, there's the matter of property protection, which is organized on an individual basis. Each homeowner has the right and, some would insist, the public duty to install the most sophisticated resources that technology can provide: not only alarms, sensors and surveillance but also a semi-offensive capability.

One such methodology involves a computerized landmine grid on all exposed acreage. When the system is operational, the home becomes an invisibly protected refuge. Nobody approaches without express permission, which must be received by calling in advance so the inhabitant can program a clearway through the hidden minefield. The downside is that the area's fauna has taken something of a hit: mice, squirrels, gophers, birds and so on, in addition to many a household pet. This has led to inevitable protests by animal rights groups, who sometimes resort to violence themselves, hurling rocks from passing vehicles so as to detonate the very mines they're protesting against. Most of the homeowners agree that the continuing escalation is madness but nothing deters them from their

course and they consider it a small price to pay for the overall protection this system affords.

The person Myrla Quinlan came to see is one such inhabitant and she's therefore obliged to call through from the limo before setting foot on the property. An older woman with a leathery face appears on the small screen. She speaks with a strong accent.

"Benitez house."

"Yes, my name is Myrla Quinlan. I'm Calder Quinlan's mother."

"You the one called earlier?"

"Yes... You said Mr. Benitez would be there."

"Hold on."

The screen cuts to the holding pattern for ten seconds until the extension is activated and another face appears. This time, it's a young male: oval face, narrow eyes, slick black hair. He's about the same age as Calder but a little more street-smart and a lot more cocky.

"Yeah, hi. You're Granthan Quinlan's wife?"

"I'm Myrla Quinlan, that's right."

"Pleased to meet you. What's it about?"

"It's about my son, Calder. I believe you know him."

"Vaguely. Why?"

"He needs to speak to you. But first *I* need to speak to you."

"Like I said, what's it about?"

“Work. It’s about work.”

“And he couldn’t contact me himself?”

“He’s very busy.”

Manitel Benitez, also known as Baseman, shakes his head. “Sorry, don’t buy it. What’s really going on?”

Myrla sighs to herself. So much for subterfuge. “All right, he has a problem and he needs your help. He’s written you a note.”

A hesitation as Benitez weighs it up. On the one hand, he doesn’t want to be bothered with trivial personal problems. On the other, he doesn’t like to burn bridges if he can possibly avoid it, especially with people like the Quinlans. “Yeah, okay, since you’re here,” he says reluctantly. “I’ll buzz you a path.”

“Do you mind if I bring someone with me?”

“Who’s that?”

“Calder’s girlfriend.”

On hearing this, Arran interjects. “I am *not*,” she protests, but Myrla ignores her.

“Two only,” says Benitez. “Don’t move until I confirm.” Then he hangs up in order to program a time-code clearway through the mined landscaping.

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They’re drinking jasmine tea in a vast living room that has a plasma projection of a Pacific beach paradise on the far wall, designed to look like a picture window with a view. Waves roll in from an ocean of turquoise as wispy white clouds drift

slowly above. The atmospheric image, the gentle sounds and the faint ozone-tainted breeze are all of such high quality that the senses are almost fooled into believing it's real.

"This is very pleasant," says Myrla, glancing around. She's already taken an instinctive dislike to young Benitez but she's trying to be as civil as she can. Elsewhere in the room is antique Chinese furniture topped with artifacts from various dynasties but, again, exactly which are real and which are projections is hard to tell.

Manitel Benitez nods at the compliment but he's not one for small talk. "Ms. Quinlan, I got a million things going on. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing for me. Like I said, it's for my son."

"You said something about a note?"

"Right."

She searches her purse for the PDA and hands it over to Benitez. It takes him all of two seconds to scan the message it contains.

"This doesn't say anything," he says.

"Its says it's urgent, which it is."

"Look, I don't mean to be impolite but can we stop wasting time? Otherwise, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"You're not being impolite, you're being downright rude."

"And you're being downright pushy."

By this time, Arran is becoming impatient with all this pettiness. "He lost his identity," she blurts out. "It was stolen," she adds, as if the explanation were necessary.

Myrla Quinlan doesn't hide her annoyance at the interruption. Opposite, Manitel Benitez chooses not to reveal any expression one way or the other but he does appreciate a plainspoken female when he meets one: pale complexion and dowdy clothes but not unattractive in her own rural way.

"Tough break," he replies directly to Arran. "What's he want me to do?"

Then it's Myrla again, still trying to stick to the pre-arranged script: "He was wondering if you might go see him."

Benitez answers but doesn't take his eyes from Arran. "Yeah, right," he says cynically. "I've got millions riding on government contracts and you want me to go see a fugitive?"

"He needs your help," says Arran. Then she tries to help her case by plaintively adding: "Please?" It was a tactic that often worked in Biblion.

At this, Benitez looks at her with even more interest and replies with a smile, which somehow makes Arran feel cheap. All at once, she realizes that he has no intention of helping, none whatsoever. Annoyed and not a little hurt, she puts down the fine porcelain cup and storms out of the room, heading for the front door.

"Cute," says Benitez unmoved. Then, almost lazily, he yells after her: "Check the alarm."

That's when, all of a sudden, Myrla Quinlan wakes up to the risk. The girl's not used to the city. Maybe she doesn't understand that the mine clearway is on a time release, which he could have set for several minutes or several hours. A moment later, Myrla's on her feet, running for the open front door with increasing urgency but only reaching it in time to see Arran half way along the pebbled walk. On either side is the broad spread of lawn, interspersed with exotic shrubbery.

"No, wait!" she calls out and sets off after her. But that's when it happens.

There's a brilliant white flash, the color of burning magnesium, followed by an eruption of shockwaves which ricochet off the house. The neutron explosion is powerful but concentrated, because that's how the mines are designed: sufficient to destroy a human invader but shallow enough to minimize damage to the surrounding property and landscape.

Arran doesn't have time to react. The force of the blast throws her forward and she lands face down, scraping her hands. By the time she's able to turn her head, it's over. All she can do is let out an involuntary scream from somewhere near the back of her throat as she views the corpse of what had, until a moment ago, been Myrla Quinlan. Both legs have been severed and what's left of the lower torso is little more than a bloody stump, an oozing pulp of burned flesh, frayed sinew and sharp splinters of bone. The head is still more or less intact and the eyes are still open in gruesome surprise

Manitel Benitez arrives at the front door and surveys the damage. His expression is one of distaste, nothing more. Then he looks beyond the mess and sees Arran sprawling on the ground. "Don't move a muscle," he calls over.

She doesn't need to be told. She's petrified, rooted to the spot. Her mouth is still open but she has no idea whether there's any sound still emerging. Tears are welling up and her vision is blurred. To her, the scene is little more than a stain of dark red in a vista of green.

A few seconds later, Benitez is back. He's shut down the system and now he's pacing in a wide arc around Myrla's pulverized remains, as if it's nothing he hasn't seen before.

"You all right?" he asks when he reaches Arran. He helps her to her feet.

This is the second violent death she's witnessed in just a few days and she's now in such a state of profound shock that she's numb. When he receives no answer, he's not sure what to do. He makes a move to wrap his arm around her but thinks better of it and, instead, turns to survey the damage yet again.

"Bummer," he says quietly.

The day of the funeral has to go down as the most depressing day in Calder Quinlan's young life.

It's not so much the fact he can't make it to the service but more that he has to remain marooned in this same fifty-fifth floor loft, powerless to affect anything. As if that's not enough, he has yet another of the recurring headaches he's been experiencing since the fall from the horse. Sometimes it's just a dull throb, not worth worrying about, but occasionally, like today, it's almost as bad as when he first woke up at the Biblion clinic.

He pushes the button for yet another coffee, even as he debates whether the caffeine is having an adverse effect on his head. But he takes the cup anyway, then sits cradling it in his hands, a comforting warmth against the brutally cold logic of his situation. In remarkably quick succession, he lost his identity, followed by his father and then his mother. It's true he had little respect for either of them while they were alive. Neither were exactly model parents but, in the final analysis, they gave him life – and in their own way, they gave their own lives trying to help him. So, in addition to all the self-pity he's feeling right now, he also has the heavy anguish of guilt.

On the other side of the room, Arran is curled up on the sofa, her sleepless eyes devoid of all expression. Yet, in a strange way, the trauma she suffered has been his one piece of luck, because it meant she couldn't speak as a witness during the police investigation. She couldn't reveal the truth of why they were there in the first place – to ask Benitez for help in aiding a fugitive.

After the authorities were called, she was taken to the Fieldview precinct and questioned by a female officer of the EPD. Arran sat in the interview room for over an hour but she could say nothing: not a single, coherent word. A police doctor was called but he could find no physical injuries other than minor hand lacerations, so he recommended counseling and signed the release form.

As for Manitel Benitez, he was also questioned but claimed not to know why Myrla Quinlan had come to his house, that she didn't have time to explain. He said the girl hurried out first and the woman chased after her, a feat of exceptional bravery, which was not far from the truth. The only part he neglected to mention was about Calder Quinlan's possible fugitive status, because what would that accomplish, except to get him even more involved? How do you know Calder Quinlan? Why didn't you call the authorities if you knew he was a fugitive? It would be endless.

Then there was the Benitez family housekeeper, the woman who first answered Myrla's call, and she knew even less.

Finally, the last potential witness, Myrla's newly hired limo driver, turned out to be one of Ulrich's security operatives and their normal doctrine is not to volunteer any information at all. When pressed, he said he was dozing when the incident took place and that he didn't see anything until it was all over.

Later, he was the one who ferried Arran back to Calder's hideout here in the loft, mostly because he couldn't think where else to take her and, now, Calder finds he's stuck with this additional burden. In some ways, he'd like to send Arran back to her community in Biblion just to be rid of her but he doesn't have the heart; and anyway, she probably wouldn't want to go. She's naive but she's not a child. She can't just be ordered here and there.

He clicks on the remote just to get some media noise, just so he doesn't have to feel so damn alone, and gets lost in a sports highlight show until the buzz of the phone inserts a video frame onto the screen image. The face that appears is that of a prosperous male, obviously fighting middle age, with an enhanced, sun-bronzed complexion and perfectly groomed hair, tinged with designer wisps of gray.

"Hi," says the man hurriedly, "just to let you know I'm on my way."

"Do I know you?" says Calder to the image.

"Delmar Franklin, Franklin & Strauss."

Calder nods. His father's legal counsel and the lawyer his mother kept talking about. He's heard of the man, something of a legend in the field of land and property development, but he's never actually met him before. "How'd you know where to find me?"

"Your mother made the appointment. Condolences by the way." A moment's distraction. "Sorry, another call. See you in ten."

The video frame closes as abruptly as it appears and the broadcast resumes full screen. Calder looks across at Arran but she hasn't moved, hasn't even changed expression.

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It's ten minutes precisely when a small, private helijet sets down on the rooftop pad and releases its passenger: tall and distinguished, wearing a sharp pinstripe. On his wrist is an antique timepiece and, in his hand, he carries a handsome briefcase: looks like he'd be right at home on Myrla Quinlan's dream yacht.

Calder offers him coffee.

"No thanks, don't have long," he says, finding himself a place to sit. Even his syntax seems to have a tight agenda. Then he nods in the general direction of Arran. "She's the one from Biblion?"

"Her name's Arran."

"She still has I/D?"

"Far as I know."

"She cannot be party to our conversation."

Calder looks at her, then straight back at Franklin. "I trust her."

Franklin doesn't flinch. "If she stays, it's at your risk. Understood?"

"Sure... I guess."

"I'm fulfilling this appointment because I knew your father a long time. Contrary to popular belief, developers are not heartless as a species. Not entirely, anyway." A standard joke and a standard clipped smile. "Now, for the purposes of this meeting, you're my client. That means that the conversation, the location, even your existence, are all privileged. As soon as I leave, that situation will no longer exist. Is that clear?"

Calder just looks at him, a little bemused by the rapid-fire efficiency. "Do I have a choice?"

"No, you don't."

"Then it's clear."

"I have to inform you of certain realities. They may not be pleasant but you need to know."

A hesitation. "Okay..."

"First, your identity as Calder Quinlan cannot be confirmed."

"Gee thanks, I hadn't realized."

Franklin just plows through the sarcasm as if it wasn't there. "That means you cannot inherit your family estate, nor any part thereof. Second, any services you currently use that are paid for by the corporation must cease and desist."

"Like what?"

"Credit, netlink, security... In a word, everything. Third, anything you currently possess or occupy that belongs either to the estate or the corporation must be returned or vacated forthwith."

"You're talking about this place?"

"You'll have to leave."

"When?"

"Officially, as of this moment. Unofficially, I'm prepared to give you twenty-four hours."

"That's big of you."

"Fourth. I cannot act as your legal counsel on the issue of your identity."

"Why not? Wait, let me guess.... because I no longer have the funds to pay you."

"Like I said, you're my client for this meeting only. It's gratis but it's all I'm prepared to do. Fifth..."

Calder rolls his eyes. "You mean there's more bad news?"

"No, the rest is good."

"Really?"

"Under the circumstances."

"Naturally."

"Fifth... There's a package I've been instructed to deliver. That's why I came in person. Your mother arranged it before..." There's a polite hesitation.

"Before she got blown to smithereens," says Calder.

"Officially, I don't know what's in the package."

"And unofficially?"

Franklin looks over at Arran but she's still lying there, completely inert. "It may or may not contain cash," he says cautiously.

"Cash? How much cash?"

"If I were to take a wild guess, I might say fifty million."

"Fifty mill? From my mother?"

"Technically speaking, no. But as executor, I do have a limited amount of discretion regarding the estate... ongoing costs and so on and, well, as a long-time friend of the family..."

He doesn't continue but it's not necessary. He's trying to say he's doing this out of the goodness of his heart but Calder suspects the real truth. If he, Calder, ever did manage to get his identity back, then Delmar Franklin would no doubt wish to resume his lucrative duties as the Quinlan legal counsel. It's a simple enough calculation. It also makes Calder wonder how much Franklin is paying himself as a part of those ongoing costs.

"I appreciate the gesture," replies Calder, as politely as he can. "So what happens to the estate now? I mean, technically speaking."

"It's a matter of probate."

"Which means?"

"Which means distribution of the assets cannot proceed until the court decides. And since your claim to the identity of Calder Quinlan is officially pending, the court can't render a judgment until that issue is resolved."

"So it's all in limbo."

"Correct."

"And it'll all wait for me? No matter how long it takes?"

"Under the Act, yes."

"I guess that's something. In the meantime, the business will still run, right?"

"Of course. There *are* other shareholders, you know."

"But what happens if they have to vote? My father held a majority."

"Which was duly transferred to your mother. Now, the voting rights on those shares will be held in abeyance until such time as your own case is resolved."

"So the family loses control."

"Essentially, yes. But that's a temporary situation until..."

"Until I get my identity back. Got it."

"Nothing else I can do at this stage... except for the package, which is a one-time transaction funded as miscellaneous expenses."

Calder can only shake his head at such accounting pretzels. But he's grateful enough for the cash, so he decides to forgo any further discussion on either estate inheritance or corporate governance and, instead, brings it right back to his own circumstance. "Okay, let me get this straight," he says. "I've got fifty million here, just falling into my lap, but that's still not enough for you to handle my case?"

"I didn't say that was the reason."

"So what *is* the reason?"

"Very simple... I practice civil law, not criminal."

"I'm not a criminal, I'm a victim."

Franklin sighs, as if it's a phrase he's heard far too many times before. "Yes, I sympathize, but nevertheless..."

"My mother said you'd help."

"With all due respect, your mother didn't have all the facts. Let me be frank, if I may. I can recommend other counsel to take your case if you wish but..."

"You're going to tell me it'll cost a fortune in fees with no chance of success."

"I wouldn't say *no* chance."

"How about very slim?"

"I prefer to say... the precedents are not encouraging."

"That's what I thought."

Franklin opens up his briefcase and brings out the package, shrink-wrapped in black plastic. Then he closes the lid, fastens the snaps and stands up. The visit is over. "Thank you for your time."

He turns to leave without shaking hands but that's when Calder calls out after him.

"Wait... just a minute."

Franklin turns, his expression that of a busy man who's tolerant enough to be polite. He stands there but Calder's not yet sure what he wants to ask.

"Look, I need... I need a favor. You can say no if you like."

"Of course I can. What kind of favor?"

"I was wondering... is your phone secure?"

"Nothing is ever completely secure."

Calder's getting tired of the legalisms. "Under normal, everyday circumstances."

"I suppose you could say that. Why?"

"Any chance I could borrow it?"

Delmar Franklin stares at him, incredulous. "You want to borrow my phone?"

"The moment I leave here I'm wide open to their scans and, even in here, I can't make any calls. I just need some way to communicate. I've got... I've got a few things to arrange."

"I can't just lend you my phone."

"Why not? It's secure."

"That's not the point."

"What's the problem? You're protected by attorney-client privilege. Isn't that what you said?"

"Only for now."

"So extend the time period. Nothing stops you from doing that. I mean, hell, how much business did my father give you over the years?"

"That's neither here nor there."

"Isn't it? And then there's all his buddies, his pals... all the good ol' boys he hung out with. Aren't they your clients too? What if one of *their* sons was in trouble and needed a small favor? Would you refuse them too? Is that the kind of reputation you want?"

"Is that some kind of a threat I'm hearing?"

"No, it's not a threat. It's just a damn phone. People lose them every day. They leave them in taxis, on buses, in other people's apartments. What's the big deal?"

Franklin considers the situation for a second or two before shrugging. Then he reaches into his pocket, pulls out the device and tosses it on the table. "Twenty-four hours," he says. "That's how long I extend our formal relationship. Then I realize I lost the phone and cancel the subscription. Understood?"

"Thank you," replies Calder calmly.

A minute later, Delmar Franklin's gone, leaving just a hint of his aftershave lingering in the loft. That's when Arran speaks, for the first time today.

"Who do you want to call?" she says softly.

Calder sits down and runs a hand through his hair. Despite fifty million in cash and a temporary phone, his position just got a lot worse. "Well, for a start," he replies, "we need to find some place to go tomorrow."

"Will you call Biblion?"

"Biblion?"

"I thought you might want to send me back."

He looks at her as if she'd been reading his mind. "Why would I do that?"

"How else are you going to get rid of me?" That's when her tears reappear but she's ashamed and tries to hide them with her hand. "I didn't know," she says. "I just didn't know it would be like this."

"No... No, nor did I." He goes over, sits down next to her and takes her hand, an unlikely gesture. "Do you *want* to go back?" he asks her.

She shakes her head. It's just a slight movement but unmistakable.

"You still want to go to that science place? What's it called?"

“U-Tech.”

“You still want to go there?”

This time he sees a nod, just a single, hopeful nod.

“Okay then,” he says, turning on the phone that Franklin gave him, “let’s see if we can make it happen.”

The following day, Calder and Arran eat a final, quiet lunch together: a meat stew from the dwindling supply in the loft's freezer. Most of the morning was spent packing, carefully selecting supplies so that each of them would have no more than a large rucksack to carry and, as of now, they're as ready as they can be to abandon the loft. The only problem is that they'll be going to different places and the thought of parting makes for some strain across the table.

"Leaving here..." she says. "It's like leaving the womb."

"I don't remember back that far," he replies. It's an attempt at a joke, something to lift the atmosphere, but it doesn't really succeed.

"Or a butterfly," she adds, "when it leaves the chrysalis."

"And which one are you? The baby or the butterfly?"

She thinks about it, giving the question more weight than it deserves. "Maybe a little of both."

"So that's good, right? Either way it's an adventure. You can't lose." At the mention of the word "lose" he feels her looking at him but he just shrugs it off. "I'll be fine," he says, answering her unasked question.

"Why don't you come with me?" she urges.

"We've been through all that."

"You might have a chance. You said so yourself. The police here are not like the FSC."

"Maybe not. But there's still a federal warrant and that makes me a risk to you. Look, I don't want to talk about it, okay? We made a plan, so let's just eat and go."

She's not ready to give up though and there's a brief flash of the old Arran, the Arran who could boss her Uncle Wilmott around when she felt like it. "It was *your* plan, not mine," she says firmly.

"You agreed to it."

"I did not. I just went along with it."

"Same thing."

"No, it's not."

"This is juvenile. Being with you is like..."

"Like what?"

"Sometimes, it's like being back in high school. Look, do you have a better plan? Do you? Maybe one that doesn't involve my arrest inside fifteen minutes? I mean, if you do, let's hear it. Come on, don't be shy, spit it out."

She doesn't reply. She just glares at him, a combination of anger and frustration, and he gets back to eating, ripping up a piece of bread as if it had caused the argument. But at least, he thinks, she's out of that zombie stage she fell into after witnessing his mother's death. That's something. Anger's better than timidity and frustration's better than acceptance, certainly for what she's about to face. It's a tough world out there for neophytes – whether they're as naive as a newborn, or fragile as a moth.

• • •

The first taxi which arrives on the loft pad is for her and Calder escorts her as far as the exit. There's a slight drizzle, which for Arran is just as well. It helps mask the tears that seem to come all too readily to her eyes.

"I don't want to leave you," she says and, for a moment she grips tightly to his sleeves. "Can you..."

"Can I what?"

It's difficult for her to say. "Can you kiss me?"

He leans forward and allows his lips to touch her cheek but it's not enough. After a moment's hesitation, she pulls his head towards her, locking their mouths together. He doesn't resist and they remain like that for several seconds.

"We should have done this earlier," she says softly and searches his eyes for the same regret. "Next time, we won't wait so long."

He doesn't want to mention that, on one occasion, she actually offered him her body. "You think there'll be a next time?" he asks her.

"I'm sure of it." That's when she smiles at him. It's tentative and shaky and betrays all her many doubts but it's a smile nonetheless and that's how she prefers to leave. With some effort, she lets go of him and walks out to the waiting craft before she loses her nerve.

• • •

There's air traffic congestion due to a low weather system and the trip across the city takes longer than it should. In theory, it should give Arran another chance to sightsee, to get to know this strange new world she finds herself in, but she can't see much because her eyes are still blurry. She dislikes this emotional side of

herself and makes a determined effort to pull out of it. But still, she can't help herself, as the moisture continues to cascade down her cheeks.

Her destination today was arranged by Calder using Delmar Franklin's secure phone: the home of one of Grantham Quinlan's real estate partners. She knew it would be large but when she arrives, she can hardly believe the sheer scale. It's not so much a house as a fortified mansion, with extensive formal gardens and, in the rear, a small lake, all of which is surrounded by multi-level security fence. Her first reaction is to wonder if this place, too, is encrusted with landmines but the driver seems unconcerned as he sets his small craft down on the front pad with no problems.

As she emerges from the cab, a tall man arrives from the house to pay the driver. He's not the owner, he's just one of estate's small army of weaponized staff and he gallantly carries her rucksack as he escorts her indoors.

For a country girl like Arran, deprived of both travel and communication, the decor is more extravagant than anything she's ever seen, or could possibly have visualized. Here there are no holo walls or screens, no subtle scent effects, just broad stretches of marble on the floors, crystal arrays in the ceilings and rare mahogany paneling on many of the walls. Unlike the Benitez residence, here the furniture is not Chinese but classical Baroque, each piece more ornate than the last. There are tapestries and oil paintings and she gazes at them like an awestruck child as she's shown through to the back of the house, to the enormous kitchen where wide French doors access a broad terrace overlooking the lake. Here she's presented to a large, balding man who's sitting in his shirtsleeves reading a micro pad, an empty coffee cup at his side. Opposite him is a skanky girl, a couple of years older than Arran, playing some kind of video game, a device which is strapped around her forehead with a direct sensual interface.

"Your guest," says the staffer, his way of announcing Arran. Then he dumps her bag in the middle of the floor and leaves.

The shirtsleeved man glances up. "Yeah, hi, how you doin'? I'm Peco Leandros, call me Peco. That's my daughter over there, the one whose brains are being fried. Hey, Zee, say hi to... what's your name again, kid?"

"Arran... Arran Jonas."

"Yeah, Arran. So okay, Arran, make yourself at home. We got you a room ready upstairs. You like to eat? In this house, we like to eat. By the way, before it slips my mind..."

Arran looks at him, not sure what he wants to say, then sees him snap his fingers as if waiting for something. All at once, she understands and retrieves her bag from the floor. In there is the same black plastic wrap that the lawyer, Delmar Franklin, brought to Calder, the one containing the money, but now it's less than half full. She hands it over to Leandros, who opens it up and peeks inside.

"It's all here?" he asks her.

"You can count it."

"Nah, you look honest enough."

What they're talking about is the twenty million that Calder Quinlan offered Peco Leandros on the phone this morning. For that sum, the agreement was for Leandros to help Arran secure a place at the U-Tech Institute and then make sure she gets there safely. Of course, Calder knew the sum would be just spare change for a man like Leandros, no more than a token, but Calder felt it necessary because that was the kind of relationship his father enjoyed with Peco Leandros. The two of them used to joke that it was "a business based on friendship and a friendship based on business" and both agreed they'd never take undue advantage of the other. It meant that when Calder called to make the request, Leandros was willing to do it for old time's sake but, paradoxically, he also insisted it had to be arranged as a deal. Only in that way, he said, could it be true respect for an entrepreneur like Grantham Quinlan.

"Zee, can you hear me? Earth to Zee..." This is Leandros talking to his daughter but she's still engaged in whatever game she's playing, so he reaches across and snaps his fingers again, this time in front of her face. "Zee, for Christ's sake... Zee!"

Finally, she removes the headpiece, annoyed at the interruption. "What?"

"Take our guest upstairs."

"Why me?"

"Because I'm asking you is why." Then Leandros looks over at Arran. "Hey, kid, smile. You know how to smile? Just relax, make yourself at home. Steak at seven. You like steak?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? What kind of an answer is that? Nah, nah, don't mind me, just teasing. But I guarantee you never tasted anything like it. You know what they do? They massage the cows with champagne. Really, I'm not joking. Just like in Japan where they do it with beer but here they do it with champagne, can you believe that? Okay, so go get yourself unpacked, take a whirlpool or whatever, and we'll see you later. Bring an appetite." Then, to his daughter: "Zee, for Christ's sake, will you get your ass in gear?"

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Thirty minutes later, Arran has unpacked her few things and is waiting for the in-suite spa to fill with mineralized water.

She's in a luxury room that's bigger than an entire floor of the Biblion ranch house but she sits in a small corner armchair, feeling like a waif who wandered in off the street. She's never felt so alone. She badly misses the mumbling eccentricity of her Uncle Wilmott and she misses, too, the silence with Calder Quinlan, even if it was sometimes strained. She wonders if she'll ever see either of them ever again.

Instinctively, she takes out her precious book and just holds it in her hands. If anything, it means even more to her now she knows that Calder's read it too.

Calder might also be feeling lonely but he has other things to worry about. At this moment, he's racing down fifty-five flights of metal stairs, trying not to trip over himself or anyone else in the rush to get out of the tower.

Just ten minutes earlier, he was waiting for his own taxi, his thoughts pretty much the same as Arran's. He was wondering about his friends from university, about his colleagues from the office and about his family, too, what might be left of it. And inevitably, his mind focused in on girls: not only his past relationships but also the others he never even had the nerve to ask out. It was just as he began contemplating how he felt about Arran that he heard a sizeable explosion, so close that it caused the building to tremble on its quakeproof foundations.

His first instinct was correct: yet another terrorist bomb. That's when he knew the taxi wouldn't be coming, not for a while anyways, and he also knew that if he heard the noise up here, cocooned inside the hidden loft, it was very possible that the entire complex would soon be under a state of emergency: standard procedure in such circumstances. Sure enough, within a minute, the alarm was sounding all over the building and a soothing female voice began issuing a taped announcement, repeating the ludicrous message over and over again: "Please hurry calmly, please hurry calmly."

His immediate reaction was to curse his misfortune, as if he hadn't had enough, but then it began to dawn on him that perhaps he could use the incident to his own advantage. If the building were indeed being emptied, then who would have time to notice an extra body on the stairs? Who in security would be paying attention, even if the scan was flashing? He grabbed his rucksack and ran, emerging from the secret doorway at the very top of the stairwell to join those lower down who were already stampeding out. For Calder, the experience was suddenly overwhelming after so many days of isolation and now, here he is, surrounded by the kind of downtown office workers he used to mix with all the

time, except that this time he's not one of them. He's a fugitive and he's once again on the run.

It takes a while to descend so many flights and, by the time he's reached the street, the First Response crew is already on the scene, shepherding everyone to the cordoned waiting area. Incidents like this happen often enough that the emergency procedure has become reasonably efficient – but not enough to prevent some onlookers from turning hostile.

Experts say this reaction is an inevitable result and they've even given it a name: Atrocity Rage Syndrome, or ARS, a psychiatric term that describes the instinctive tendency, built up over many years of stress, to vent massive anger when terror strikes. Sometimes, it's just backlash from ordinary individuals, people who feel the need to strike out at something, anything, to assuage their frustration. But there are also those with a specific agenda who prey on such pent-up emotion. These range from the reactionary neo-cons, who use such occasions to drum up funding, all the way through to the ethnic supremacists, who openly advocate extreme response. Perhaps even more bizarre are those who actually applaud the terrorist tactics. Among these are the "Slow World" proponents, who yearn for a complete return to an agrarian lifestyle. Also "People Without Borders," a movement whose mostly youthful proponents believe that every one of society's demographic subdivisions should be independent and free to govern itself, no matter how impractical that may seem, and that any authority which tries to prevent it is either imperialist, colonialist or fascist. Plus, there's a loosely defined "anti-Mammon" amalgamation of minimalists who are against the whole notion of finance and currency, believing that any accumulation of wealth is evil by definition. There's never been a shortage of people who use a crisis as an excuse to reinvent their world – and this crisis has been going on for almost a century and a half.

The result of such a volatile mix is that terror incidents frequently give rise to violent demonstrations right there at the scene, multiplying the problems. Occasionally, the situation remains relatively calm but, all too often, the shouting and chanting turns to pushing and shoving and, sometimes, even to a full-fledged street battle. So, while the harried emergency services are trying to secure public safety, law enforcement must don their riot gear in order to contain and, if necessary, to physically suppress the inevitable clashes.

In the midst of such chaos, it's not difficult for Calder to slip unnoticed through the crowds, edge his way along the street and disappear around the block. He's all too conscious of the fact that the city's bio-scanners are active all around him but even the most advanced systems are only as good as the humans who monitor them and he's counting on the current distraction to give him a fleeting chance. Nevertheless, he decides to avoid the more elaborate sensors of the mass transit network. Instead, he makes his escape on foot, negotiating both the arteries and the alleys as he makes his way across the city, his final destination unchanged, having been pre-arranged thanks, once again, to Delmar Franklin's phone.

• • •

Known locally as the Cash Mart, the Carrion Street district is on the southern edge of the downtown core, an area of mostly blue collar accommodations, discount malls, shabby offices and the like, where the majority of transactions are handled in straight cash, even now. As long as dollars are legal tender, there'll always be those who prefer to use them, ranging from the Hassidic gemstone dealers whose extended families patrol the Cash Mart area with the latest Uzi firepower, all the way down the economic spectrum to the migrant illegals, the hookers and dealers and credit scammers who must hand over everything they make to the pimplords who control them. Of course, like everywhere else in the city, law enforcement keeps a careful watch but as long as neither the vigilantes nor the entrepreneurs step too far out of line, city authorities tend to defer to an unofficial policy of acceptance. It's a dubious policy to be sure but it seems to work well enough, the rationalization being that there will always be such areas in any large municipality, so why not keep it all under reasonable control by confining it to one vicinity – especially when officialdom has its collective hands full just trying to cope with the kind of strategic terror threat that happened today.

As far as Calder is concerned, the Cash Mart district would not normally be on his list of city haunts. He doesn't know it too well, so when he arrives, he has to spend time searching for landmark street names, just so he can find his way through the rambling maze: rundown warehouses, brick tenements, food stalls, shelters. At one point, he turns a corner and bumps headlong into a young, gun-toting Hassid. The man is powerfully built with a thick brown beard, a broad brimmed hat and a stern gaze. For a moment, they stare each other down until Calder chooses to offer an apology and step aside. The exaggerated deference is perhaps unnecessary but it works and any potential problem is quickly deflated.

• • •

"Hey, sonny boy. Long time, no see."

The woman greeting him is tall and blond, mature and self-confident, managing to radiate a provocative sexuality without even trying. Her thick crown of hair gleams with crystalline dye as if its been irradiated and her silicon-treated skin glows with unnatural health. She always called Calder "sonny boy," a phrase that demeaned him in front of his father.

Wearing nothing but her usual dark satin, she welcomes him up to her office, a plush oasis carefully camouflaged inside a low-rent building that's common to the neighborhood. Beyond her, the door remains open to a superficially glamorous bedroom, complete with a canopy bed, although, these days, the implied invitation is just for effect since she no longer entertains on a personal basis. The real business is conducted on the other floors of the building, where private elevators whisk power guests from a secluded, guarded entrance to their choice of thirty deluxe chambers, guaranteed scan-free, each with its own programable moderator which can generate any of a dozen different fantasy themes.

Her trade name, appropriately enough, is Glitz and she's something of a legend in the Carrion Street area. For a long time, she was one of Quinlan's most

dependable franchisees, both as a recruiter of talent and a distributor of product. She was also, incidentally, the one who originally introduced Grantham Quinlan to a handsome young starlet called Myrla – and this is the main reason why Calder risked calling her.

“Hey, Glitz,” he replies. “How’re things?”

“Mine are fine, how’re yours?”

The breathy wisecrack is like an automated response, part of a well-worn routine, but it makes Calder blush anyway. He can’t help it. She’s older now but she’s always had that effect on him, ever since he can recall. Too much gloss, too much bosom, she’s the stereotype boyhood wet dream, and he looks around uncomfortably, deliberately trying to keep his eyes away from the cleavage. Whenever Grantham Quinlan would see her, he’d kiss her cheek, pat her rear and congratulate her on playing the professional role with such gusto, but the son hasn’t quite mastered the father’s stage of familiarity, so he just gets straight to business.

“Is he here?” Calder asks her. He’s inquiring about the man he came to meet.

“You have the cash?”

“First I want to see him.”

“No, first we’ll look at the cash.”

Calder can hardly argue since he’s the one in need. After a moment’s hesitation, he shrugs as if it’s of no concern, then takes the package from the rucksack he’s carrying: fifteen million, wrapped unceremoniously like a sandwich in anti-bacterial foil. He hands it over to her but, unlike Arran’s friendly host, Peco Leandros, this woman takes the time to count every last bill, examining each manually and then by molecular verification with a module she keeps in her desk drawer. When she’s satisfied, she walks casually over to another door, which reveals another office: far larger and far more utilitarian.

“In here,” she says simply.

Calder sidles delicately past those oversized breasts, expecting to find Vaareq in the room, the aging adventurer who used to make stealth runs for Glitz down to her offshore holdings in the Caribbean. An ex aeronautical engineer, he was once considered a leading expert in reflective technology, which makes a craft virtually invisible to predatory sensors. This had been Calder's plan of escape both for himself and for Arran – to buy his way through his father's old network, one bribe at a time. First, there was twenty million to Leandros to help Arran; then five as commission to Glitz for this arrangement; and finally, ten for Vaareq and his stealth transport to fly him out of the country. He knew it would leave him with just a fraction of the original amount but, if it worked, it would be worth every last dollar.

Facing him today, however, is not the aging Vaareq in his flyboy jacket but two official-looking men in synthetic suits: one sitting in an easy chair with a leg casually crossed over his knee, the other standing to one side, leaning against the built-in cabinet. To Calder, they look very much like law enforcement. He glances from one to the other, then over at Glitz, who's still standing by the door.

"You called them?" he says to her. "How could you call them?"

Her reply is both casual and dismissive. "Time to grow up, sonny boy." Then she leaves them to it and shuts the door behind her.

It's the man in the chair who seems to be the more senior. From his jacket pocket, he takes a badly scratched, standard-issue PDA and taps in a code with his stubby finger. "Fugitive SLI84/9820BB5/U6..." he says, reading from the screen with his flat police voice. "We have a warrant for your arrest on the following charges... Failure to report lost identity, assaulting an authorized officer, absconding with an official vehicle and suspicion of terrorism. You will be taken to a place of detention where you will await a hearing..."

"Wait a minute," says Calder. "Suspicion of terrorism? What's that all about?"

The detective glances at him, a measure of disinterest in his eyes. For him, picking up loser fugitives is a mundane task. "Were you, or were you not, recently at the Mercantile Exchange Plaza at 1270 3rd Boulevard?"

That's the official name and address of the building in which the Quinlan corporation has its headquarters, the building in which he just spent several days, holed up with Arran Jonas on the secret fifty-fifth floor: the same building that was just evacuated after a nearby detonation. Calder doesn't know how to respond. He tries to think but it's hard to believe they're going to blame him for that too. But from their point-of-view, he's a fugitive who was scanned in a targeted building, which thereby makes him a terrorist suspect. For Calder, it's a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time but how does he even begin to explain it?

The officer asks again: "Were you, or were you not, in that building?"

"Is that what the sensors show?"

"Answer the damn question!"

The officer waits but there's still no response, so he just nods to the other man, the bigger one who remained on his feet.

Calder immediately senses the presence of the man behind him, feels the warm breath on his neck. Then his arms are yanked back and he hears the electronic bracelets being fastened around his wrists. The connection slides into place with a sickening finality.

I/D: PART THREE
The Losers of Green Earth

Calder stands in the courtroom with twenty-six other detainees, male and female, as they wait for the judge to arrive. Ironically, he regards himself fortunate to be here instead of in criminal proceedings facing jail time.

After the Edifice PD took him into custody, he was provided with legal aid counsel: a lined, graying man, weary of the grind and cynical of the system. Yet, despite the attitude, the old lawyer had enough experience to get the three criminal charges dropped. As regards the suspicion of terrorism, Calder was persuaded to reveal the existence of the secret loft so that, fugitive or not, he was a de facto resident of the building and entitled to be there. For the assault charge, the lawyer researched all the way back to the originating FSC officer on the highway, who was honest enough to agree that it wasn't actually the fugitive who assaulted him but the panicked horse. The most troublesome accusation was that of stealing the vehicle, which was hard to deny. For this, the lawyer used his longstanding influence with the district attorney, pleading that here was a young man of obvious intellect and potential, so why turn him into a prison-hardened criminal and create another burden for the state, when he'll be taken out of circulation anyway as a Subject of Lost Identity?

So, finally, thanks to a tired old man who actually knew how to do his job, Calder Quinlan stands in the courtroom, along with all the rest of the so-called Losers. He's right back to where he started but he's realistic enough to understand that it could have been so much worse.

"All rise." The clerk of the court summons them to their feet "City of Edifice court now in session, Judge Hamilton-Kinney presiding"

A white-haired woman enters and takes her place behind the bench. Behind her, on the wall above, is the revised inscription as finally decided by the Supreme

Court, after years of passionate debate concerning the use of the word “God” and how it’s been degraded by the acts of terror carried out in His name:

IN FAITH WE TRUST

Calder stares at it, recalling the propaganda slogans in Arran’s book and wondering what she’s make of this one. But his attention is diverted by the judge tapping on her gavel. There’s no preliminary, no opening statements from prosecution or defense, because this isn’t a trial. It’s not even a hearing. It’s simply the announcement of an official court order and all she has to do is read out the standard form of words required at every such session:

“Ladies and gentlemen... You have been pronounced ‘Subjects of Lost Identity.’ We understand your misfortune but, according to federal act, it is the order of this court that you are hereby required to provide temporary salaried service until such time as your identity can be restored. You have been assigned to Green Earth Resources & Power and will be tenured under their direction in such capacity as they might see fit. You will be provided sustenance and accommodation sufficient to your needs and will be afforded all the rights, respect and dignity as outlined in the pertaining charter. Your terms of service will be reassessed when circumstances permit and you are to regard your situation as not binding but merely pending. I urge you to see this opportunity as a chance to give of yourself to the community and I can assure you that, in doing so, the community is most grateful. This court is adjourned.”

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The Green Earth Resources & Power Corporation, more commonly known by the acronym GERP, is a public-private joint venture which only came into being because of one major issue: energy – where to find it, how to pay for it and whether the planet can survive its usage. As a societal problem, it’s recognized as being bigger than terrorism, bigger than security, bigger than anything else, if only because nobody has yet found the ideal solution.

Fossil fuel is still being pumped from undersea wells and extracted from tar sands but it's expensive, it's a major pollutant and it's increasingly difficult to obtain. Coal is cheaper, just like it's always been, but it's been banned for industrial use on most continents, although there are still parts of Asia which refuse to give it up. As for alternative sources of power like wind, solar, hydro-electric, hydrogen, biomass and others, they all play their part to a greater or lesser extent but they're not enough to satisfy a technologically developed global population of nine billion, plus another four billion who'd like to be. There's still the option of nuclear fission but it's no safer than it ever was and impossible to sell to a well-informed public. That leaves the last great hope, fusion, a scientific dream ever since the dawn of the nuclear age. Serious development began as a multilateral experiment back in the century's first decade but it's only recently that it's been inaugurated on a commercial scale.

Unlike fission, nuclear fusion is a relatively clean source of fuel that works on the same principle as the sun. However, the difficulty lies in reaching and maintaining the astronomical temperatures needed to promote the chain reaction. This requires an abundant supply of cheap material to fuel the process and the most obvious large-scale resource is waste, ordinary refuse, the trillions of tons produced by human society every single day. This requires recycling on a continental scale and, in order not to affect the surface environment, the fusion conversion processes must be buried underground. Here in North America, that means nine major plants of varying capacity, all run by GERP: two for each coast, two in the south, plus three more in the mid-west.

While every effort has been made to automate these sites, there's always a certain requirement for manual labor and it's this need, for good or for ill, which has provided a ready-made answer to yet another societal problem: how to deal with an entire class of people that fall under the heading of "undocumented." This is a category which includes illegal aliens, unauthorized migrants and homeless squatters, as well as Subjects of Lost Identity, and for the hard-pressed Judiciary, the fusion plants have become something of a quick fix. When deportation is not politically feasible and incarceration is deemed excessive, a court order of salaried community labor becomes a handy tool. Legally, it's not a sentence and nor is there a fixed term. Instead, it's regarded as a temporary assignment until an individual's circumstances change and the order can be reviewed. There are

various occupation alternatives for the bench to select but the most pressing necessity is invariably at the Green Earth plants, so this is where the majority are sent – and this is where Calder has just been assigned.

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From the courtroom, the new group of detainees is marched down to the waiting transport, two floors below. As they reach the descending escalator, a short, stocky man with a thick neck and thinning hair stumbles, twisting his ankle in the process.

Fortunately, Calder is right behind him and manages to catch him before he falls headlong. “Whoa, steady. You okay?”

The man tries to walk but his leg seems painful, so he leans on Calder’s shoulder to rest for a moment. “Maybe not,” he replies.

“Should we get some help?”

“From these bastards? Nah, I’ll manage.” The man has a pronounced limp but he’s able to continue by holding on to Calder’s arm. “What’s your name, kid?”

“I don’t have one, that’s why I’m here.”

“Yeah, funny.”

“Calder... Calder Quinlan.”

“Quinlan? You any relation to Grantham Quinlan by any chance?”

Calder glances down at the little man hobbling next to him, wondering if there’s anyone in this town who didn’t know his father. “I’m his son.”

"No shit, you're Quinlan's kid?"

"I *was*. He died..."

"Oh, right, right. I heard about that. Yeah. Too bad. Rare breed, your old man. Don't make 'em like that no more, that's for damn sure. Hey, I'm Jadoslav Rolostrovich. He ever mention me?"

Calder reaches for the hand that's offered. "I don't think so, not to me, anyway."

"Good for him. Valuable asset, discretion."

That's when the marshal escorting them calls out: "Quiet! You, what's the problem?"

"No problem," replies Rolostrovich.

"Keep moving."

"Keep moving, *please*."

"Shut it."

Rolostrovich waves a friendly acknowledgment to the marshal, then in a whispered aside to Calder, he says: "Right there, see? That's your rights, respect and dignity."

Their assigned plant is located on the eastern side of the Rockies but there's not much to see from the air: just the giant curving sweep of multiple rail tracks as they converge into the base of the range. The long trains below look like the children's play sets of old as they approach and depart at slow speed, each one pausing inside just long enough to be offloaded. These are the well-known "waste wagons," owned and operated by a network run separately from GERP known as GR3: the General Resource & Recycling Rail Company. It's how the refuse material is brought out from conurbation waste warehousing to the great fusion reactor sheltered deep in the heart of the mountains, a minor sun encased in a dark void. Here the waste is converted from mass to equivalent energy, the basic tenet of relativity, then processed into electricity and diffused back across the country via an intricate grid of transformers, sub stations and power lines.

The basic process is taught to every high school student, so the only surprise to Calder, as he and the others are transferred from air to ground transport, is the sheer physical scale. From the air, the plant looked to have been well merged with the surrounding landscape but here on the ground, the perspective is different. Here the plant complex and its supporting infrastructure can be seen to be exactly what they are: a multi-quadrillion dollar investment in the future and possibly the last chance to keep a feasible civilization intact. This is where it begins, the source of daily life that's taken so much for granted: everything from the fundamentals of food preparation to the frivolity of the holoboards that, until very recently, Calder Quinlan designed for a living.

"Stick close, kid," says Rolostrovich, saving him a seat as they board the bus. "I got friends here."

He's about to explain further but the marshal passes along the aisle counting heads and Rolostovich is obliged to cut the conversation short by putting a finger to his lips. The gesture reminds Calder of when he and Arran snuck in to the

Biblion church to catch a glimpse of the euthanasia ceremony. He finds it a little disturbing that he occasionally has these flashes of Arran and he can't quite figure out if she means something to him, or if he just got used to being with her day after day.

The drive from the air terminal to the outer security zone takes just a few minutes. Once through the checkpoints, they exit the transport and are moved inside an air cooled structure the size of a hangar. Here they line up for retina scan, DNA registry – still used, despite its inherent flaws – and entry coding, a process which finishes with the infamous anklet being applied to each detainee. It's not heavy and metallic like they used to be but a nano-chip embedded into an ultra-light, ultra-thin morsel of transparent bio-plastic, which attaches itself at a molecular level to the hairless point where the ankle meets the foot. Unlike the bracelets the Edifice police used to fasten his wrists, Calder can't even feel this new device. Nevertheless, if he ever tried to remove it, the plant's security command center would know instantly and any such attempt would be considered a capital crime in and of itself. If convicted, detention becomes incarceration, salary is rescinded and the individual is transferred to a penitentiary with a fixed sentence just like any other common criminal.

As advised, Calder stays near his new best pal, Jadoslav Rolostovich, the result being that they're both assigned to the same unit and billeted in the same quarters. In truth, the accommodations are not as bad as he was expecting. Unlike prison, or even the army, he has his own room, or berth as it's called, with a single bed, a built-in locker and, mounted on one wall, a small screen like he had in the loft which doubles as both computer link and entertainment center. Beyond, a minuscule extension contains a toilet and shower unit. The only window looks out across a wide yard with synthetic turf. Bordering this area to the left is a large concrete structure which, he's told, houses an indoor recreation center. To the right is a glass-enclosed cafeteria known as the "Bistro," a large communal hall in which all meals are served. Directly ahead, on the other side of the yard, is a glowing digital board displaying the Green Earth logo plus a permanent message of encouragement to all workers:

THE COMMUNITY THANKS YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE

Calder gazes out at all this, as well as the few passers-by, and it occurs to him that all these facilities appear to be for male use only, which means women must have their own duplicate complex someplace else. But that thought just takes him back to Arran and he makes a conscious decision to get her out of his mind. He figures he'll probably never see her again anyway.

Bored with the view, he touches the screen to see if it works – it does – then slumps down on the cot and idly flicks at the remote to see what he can find. Lunch, he's been told, will be in half an hour. It could be worse, he thinks, but it's only to ward off the depression that's already beginning to set in; and he's only been here a few minutes.

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Security seems relaxed within the accommodation complex and Calder finds he can come and go with relative ease.

When he arrives at the Bistro, there are several dozen people there already, sitting in groups of six or seven at rectangular tables, most dressed in the standard uniform of earth green. Only a few, like Calder, are still dressed in their outside clothes. All seems normal, like any plant cafeteria, as they wait for the kitchen attendants to finish setting up the serving counter. Deep trays of food are being carried out and placed in line like some kind of buffet system. The smell wafts over and Calder discovers he's quite hungry as he looks for a place to sit.

"Hey kid, over here."

It's Rolostrovich, still wearing the sports jacket he wore in court, beckoning Calder over with a surprisingly cheerful smile on his face. He's with his own group and already seems well acquainted.

"Grab a seat, kid. So, how's the vacation so far? Just like Disneyland, whaddya think? No worries, no stress, everything laid on, what more do you want? We

got, let's see here... water, fizz, or some kinda juice... apple, I think. Only thing we don't got is beer. Just have to learn to dry out, right? So what'll it be?"

"Juice is fine."

"You got it. Now, look, I want you to meet the guys. Over there's Khechic..."

"How ya doing?" says a bear of a man. His hair has the consistency of steel wool.

"Next to him is Millard," says Rolostrovich, "then Gormon. And that handsome guy over there? That's the Chef. We call him that on account he's French and he likes to cook. And that one, there on the end, is Osteril. As you can tell a little bit, he was on the receiving end when the Lakes got hit."

Calder's glance takes in the overly smooth skin of a reconstituted face, a graft procedure which became all too familiar around the Great Lakes region after a small thermonuclear device, cleverly sensor-masked inside a cargo container, became the first WMD ever detonated inside the continental cordon. Over eighteen thousand died immediately, a quarter million more were burned by radiation and the freshwater tsunami destroyed entire communities. Forests and plains were charred and flooded. Flocks and herds were either broiled where they stood or drowned in the follow-up. And afterwards, fallout drifting on the prevailing winds caused the birth malformations in humans and animals alike, which are still occurring.

"And this, here," says Rolostrovich, finally placing a broad hand on Calder's arm. "This is the son of a good friend of ours who's not too long deceased. Tell 'em your name, kid."

"Calder Quinlan."

"Quinlan?" repeats the big man, Khechic.

"Yeah," laughs Rolostrovich. "Whaddya know, right? Some small world."

Calder sips his juice, not sure what to make of this sudden friendship club he's been invited to join. While Khechic seems to be the major physical presence, the

rest don't look like they'd be any slouches in a Carrion streetfight either – especially Osteril, whose dead eyes look as if he's just waiting for the right moment to reach down into some marshal's throat and quietly pull his liver out. And while Calder knows he'd be stupid not to welcome group protection in a place like this, where men are separated from women and the stress of forced confinement can erupt at any time, he can't help having the vague suspicion that nothing comes for free.

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After lunch, when Calder returns to his berth, he finds that his locker has been stacked with a full week's supply of clothing: work shirts, pants, socks and underwear, all in the same shade of earth green that everyone else was wearing. Everything seems to fit, including the black, thick-soled boots, although how they obtained information on his measurements, he has no idea. Probably one of the entry scans. Also in the locker but hanging in the vertical space next to the shelves is some kind of translucent anti-contamination suit, complete with hood, filtration mask and gloves. It looks like it comes from the wardrobe department of a science-fiction production but it's enough to remind him that, when all's said and done, this is still a nuclear plant.

Meanwhile, on his view screen is a communication informing him of his schedule. Apparently, he has the rest of the day free for recreation and acclimatization. The following day, he must shower and report for breakfast at 07:30 in order to be ready for site transportation promptly at 08:30. The standard shift is eight hours, with a one-hour period for lunch, plus a couple of ten-minute beverage and washroom breaks. All times will be demarcated by an audible beacon. The standard working week is 5.5 days, which can be arranged, if necessary, according to religious beliefs. There's a multi-denomination chapel on the premises. An addendum also informs him that external communication is allowed but restricted to certain times and continually monitored for security purposes.

There's nothing in any of this that would seem outlandish or unjust to any government oversight committee or media investigation. On the contrary, the conditions seem not only humane but actually quite pleasant. There's even a modest, tax-free salary, which is banked away safely for each individual in a numbered account. Indeed, in one web journal, existence here was described as the equivalent of working on a desalinization rig in the middle of the ocean and, since then, workers at the Green Earth plants have become commonly known as "riggers," an analogy the government does its best to encourage. It makes such community service sound adventurous and pioneering, almost noble. Yet, as every detainee is only too aware, the fact remains that being assigned here is essentially no different to detention without trial. What's more, the length of term is completely at the whim of a powerful judiciary, so despite the feel-good spin that an enlightened democracy requires in order to justify its actions, the simple reality is that someone like Calder could easily be held here for the rest of his life.

There's a soft rap on his door.

It turns out to be Jadoslav Rolostrovich, plus his heavy pal, Khechic, waving a flask of coffee and bars of chocolate, which they offer to share. Calder steps aside to allow them access, even though there's hardly enough sitting room for three. Rolostrovich finds a seat on a small folding chair, while Calder makes do by sitting on the bed. Khechik squats his great bulk down on the floor, a grizzly in placid mode.

"So how we doing?" says Rolostrovich, turning himself into the host for this little gathering. He hands around the goodies, then pours hot coffee into the three plastic cups that Khechic is holding. It's all very cozy and it only serves to make Calder even more apprehensive.

"Doing fine," he replies, before adding "so far."

"Yeah, know how you feel," agrees Rolostrovich. "Wait till the work starts, right?"

Calder attempts a smile, even though that's not what he meant at all.

"Listen kid, not to interrupt the dessert or nothing, what we were wondering, me and Khechic here and the other guys... how'd you like to join us? Whaddya say?"

"Join you?"

"Yeah."

"How do you mean?"

"Okay, so maybe I should explain a little, get things squared up, so to speak. See, we got what you might call an enterprise going here, not a big deal, you understand, but it's ours and it kind of makes life bearable, if you know what I mean."

Rolostrovich laughs again but Calder has no idea what he means, even now.

"Can you... I don't know... give me a few more details?"

"Sure, sure, kid, no problem. Have some more chocolate. All right, so what you got to appreciate is that, whatever they say, the life here... Let's say it can get... What's the word?" He looks down at Khechic but the big man has no suggestions, so he just continues. "Let's say... monotonous. High-priced word, right? I even impress myself sometimes. Anyway, what we do, the guys and me, is we try to relieve this a little, know what I'm saying?"

"Not really."

"No, well, okay. Let's try something else. Khechic, show him a sample of the merchandise."

At this, Khechic reaches into his top pocket and pulls out a tiny white capsule, which he holds up between his huge index finger and even larger thumb.

"There you go," says Rolostrovich easily, as if possessing drugs in this place is the most natural thing in the world. "That's what I'm talking about. Cloud Nine. Top-of-the-line. Get it now?"

Calder is not sure how to react. He's never heard of Cloud Nine. "What does it do?" he asks, very tentatively, even though he's almost afraid of the answer.

"What does it do? Kid, this little pill here is like magic, believe me."

"Is it addictive?"

A laugh. "Addictive... well, depends what you mean. But I want to answer your questions, kid, 'cause I'm a guy who believes in fair treatment. If you gonna join, you gotta know what we're doing and what you're getting yourself into. Is that fair or what? Now, look, let's be serious. This little pill here, you take this and for a week, sometimes longer, it's like you're floating on a cloud, that's how it got the name – but it just happens in a small part of your head, see? Just enough to fool the senses. Your body goes on like normal. You work, you talk, you eat, you sleep, everything like normal, right? Except you're not feeling nothing. Light as a feather, drifting along... like I said, on a cloud. Now you ask me, are they addictive and I'm gonna tell you no, not in the usual way, not like your usual hard shit, know what I'm saying? But this stuff, this Cloud Nine, once you've tried it, there's no other way you wanna be in this place, you get me now?"

Calder nods slowly, but it's only to show his comprehension, not necessarily his approval. "So... what? You sell these pills?"

"You hear that Khechic? Do we sell them? The kid's a riot." Both of them share another laugh before Rolostrovich goes on. "Well, we don't give 'em away, that's for sure."

"What I mean is, how do people pay?"

"How? They got salaries, don't they?"

"Yes, but..."

"But what?"

"That money goes directly into the bank."

"Okay, look, all that stuff... payment and so on. Don't you worry about that, okay, you hear what I'm saying? All that's taken care of. All you have to worry about... No, not worry, what am I saying? All you have to think about is... do you want to join us or not? It's a good opportunity, let me be frank about that. A good opportunity because we're not offering it to nobody else. It's just that we could use an additional hand and you being Grantham's son and all, we figure it may as well be someone we know as someone we don't. It's like fate, or destiny, or something, right? Us meeting like that. Who'd have figured?"

Calder really wants no part of this, none at all, but at the same time he knows that he needs to survive in here, first and foremost. "What would I have to do?" he asks. It's another way of dragging it out, of buying time until he has to commit to something.

"Not much, that's the beauty of it," says Rolostrovich. "You don't have to do much at all. No, really, I mean it."

"Can you give me some idea?"

"Yeah, yeah, no problem, sure. Want some more coffee? Okay, so tomorrow, when we start work, we'll be sent to unload the trains. That's one of the easy jobs, don't you worry about that. So all you have to do is pick up the packages from the waste wagons. Easy. You pick 'em up, you bring 'em out, you give 'em to me. How easy is that?"

"How do you know? I mean, how do you know we'll be sent to unload the trains?"

"How do I know, he says, how do I know? Because it's been arranged, kid, that's how I know, all right? Okay? That's another thing don't have to concern you. Just bring out the packages, that's all you have to do. You don't have to think about nothing else."

"Won't I be searched or something?"

"Searched? Why would they search you?"

"Well, I don't know..."

"Kid, this ain't no diamond mine. Let me remind you this is garbage comes in here. Trash. Refuse. Waste. What do they care? You could stuff your pockets with it, they wouldn't care, except for the mess it would make."

"And the smell," adds Khechic, the first time he's joined in.

"Yeah," laughs Rolostrovich. "And the smell."

Calder looks dubious. "I can't believe they haven't figured it out yet."

"Why would they figure it out?"

"They're not stupid."

"No? Well, that's what *you* say. Believe me, kid, they're stupid all right... apart from one or two who know when they're well off."

Calder understands what that means: marshals paid to look the other way, or perhaps even to give assistance. "Can I ask you something?"

"What? Like you haven't been asking already? Okay, just joking. Sure, kid, shoot."

"If I say yes..."

"Ah, then you'd be a very smart guy."

"No, what I mean is..."

"What's in it for you? Good question. Yeah, you're your father's son, all right. That's exactly the kind of question you should be asking, 'cause why do any of us do anything in this world, right? No, I mean it, that's a hell of a question. All right, what's in it for you? I'll tell you straight up. You get nothing for the first six months. No, what am I saying? You get our gratitude is what you get. And our protection. Believe me, that's worth a lot. You're one of us, nobody comes near

you, know what I'm saying? I mean nobody. Not the Asians, not the Hispanics, nobody."

"And after six months?"

"Ah, now, we're getting someplace. So after six months, here's what happens. We all take a vote, you know? And if it's unanimous, then you're one of us and we cut you in. Then you really start to make. Now listen, here's something else we'll do for you. If all goes well, we'll get you outa here. Whaddya say to that?"

He sits back proudly but Calder's not sure how to respond.

"How?" he says at last. He's been led to believe that getting out is next to impossible but he obviously doesn't live in the same world as people like Jadoslav Rolostrovich – or even his own father, come to that. Only now is he starting to realize how sheltered he must have been from all this. He knew what his father did all right, at least the basics, but he was shown nothing of the day-to-day: all the edges that had to be frayed, the billion shades of gray that exist between black and white.

"Never mind how," replies Rolostrovich, waving his hand dismissively. "Hey, you think we're gonna stay in here forever? Gimme a break. Yesterday, I was on the outside. Today, as you can see, I'm here. I didn't plan it like this but that's life, right? Tomorrow, who knows?"

"How long?"

"You mean for you? Depends how well you do."

"Can you give me some idea?"

Rolostrovich smiles knowingly. The fish on the hook. "Let's say... no promises... but let's say two years, we'll have you out. New identity. Fresh start. Maybe you'll even work with us on the outside, too, how about that? A real future, not like these other bozos stuck in here."

Calder considers it but he's finding it hard to deny the temptation. "And if I say no?" he asks. "What then?"

Rolostrovich breathes out long and hard, then just shrugs. "What can I say, kid? I just told you a whole bunch of stuff. If I thought you were going to say no, I wouldn't have told you, get my drift here?"

Calder gets his drift only too well. The whole thing feels like a bad screenplay and the man comes across like a villain from central casting – except that, for Calder, this is only too real. This is a corner and he's being backed into it. If he says yes, he immediately becomes a felon, a drug pusher, the worst of the worst. If he says no, he may just fall accidentally under the train wheels tomorrow. It's all painfully clear and he feels the stickiness of his armpits, the trickle forming beneath his hairline, just like when the government sent him that first message. "What you're saying is, I've got no real choice."

"Hey, hey, come on, don't be like that. Don't think of it that way. This here's an opportunity, just like I told you. Now look, let me be clear. If you say yes, it's gonna have to be with some enthusiasm, all right? I don't want nobody dragging their feet or nothing. You say yes, you're in, you're with us, okay? All the way. Now, if you say no... and you got that choice... if you say no, you're on your own... and I don't think you wanna be on your own in here, I really don't. Does he, Khechic?"

"No."

"No, that's right. None of us wants to be on our own in here."

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The rest of the afternoon Calder spends wandering around the complex, trying to get interested in something but failing miserably. There's pick-up basketball in the gym, matchgame headsets, all the popular entertainments, as well as classes

he can sign up for: everything from martial arts to foreign languages. Unfortunately, he's finding it difficult to focus attention on anything after what happened earlier this afternoon. All he can think about is what he's being asked to do.

Up to now, he was holding out the hope, if only subconsciously, that somehow this waking nightmare might soon be over; that despite the odds and despite his parents dying so suddenly, he would manage to get his life back and it would all be a memory. But all that seems to have changed. As of tomorrow, he'll have reached the point of no return and it's all he can think about. He'll have crossed over and there'll be no turning back. The moment he delivers his first shipment of Cloud Nine, he'll have become just another drug mule and his life, as he once knew it, will have disappeared: the career prospects, the gossip at the wine bar, the horses at his father's estate; all of it, gone.

He knows what he has to do. He has to get his head around it, to cope with it one problem at a time. Based on that logic, Rolostrovich is his best chance in the immediate future. In fact, as far as he can tell, it's his only chance. But it's difficult to accept and, right now, as he strolls aimlessly around this enormous facility, he just feels like giving up. Back in Biblion, Arran talked about suicide but only now does he begin to comprehend how appealing that option might be.

In the brief time she's been at the Leandros residence, Arran Jonas has done her best to make friends with Peco's daughter, Zee, but it doesn't seem to happen. They've talked a few times, but it's not really a conversation, nothing heart to heart. It's more like a probe here and there, just to see if there's anything in common. Sad to say, there usually isn't, because they're simply at opposite ends of the spectrum. Arran is naive, shy and modest; Zee is bold, aggressive and doesn't care about anything. Yet Arran has learned a great deal, just by watching, especially about the kind of things to which she never had access in Biblion: fashion, cosmetics, hygiene brands and a myriad of other specialized products. However, that's where the relationship ends. Zee goes out fairly often but she's never invited Arran and it seems to have caused some friction – not between the two girls, because Arran could never get into that kind of argument, but between Zee and her father.

This evening, when he arrives home at about seven as usual, he meets Zee by the door. She's just checking her purse as she gets ready to leave.

"Where the hell you going?" he demands.

"Out."

"What about dinner?"

"I'll eat out."

"You can't eat with us for once?"

"I told you I was going."

"You did not."

"I did too. You never listen."

That's when Leandros spots Arran in the large living room. "Why don't you take Arran with you?"

Zee looks over at Arran who's reading her book, trying hard not to get involved. "It's not her kind of thing."

"What's not?"

"Where I'm going." It's obvious she doesn't want to say any more, so after a moment's hesitation, she just says: "Don't wait up." Then she's gone, slamming the door shut behind her.

Leandros just shakes his head and walks through to the kitchen, his favorite room. There, he stands with the fridge door open, wondering what to take as a snack but it's clear he's still thinking about his daughter.

In a way, Arran feels sorry for him. She's not exactly fond of him but she can sympathize nonetheless. The situation is not dissimilar from that of her own upbringing with Uncle Wilmott, in that it's just the two of them, father and daughter, even though the circumstances are hardly the same. Wilmott's wife died after a long and joyous marriage. Peco, on the other hand, kicked his own wife out for having an affair with one of his associates and she was happy to leave; happy to leave Zee behind, too. That was four years ago and the minor exchange that took place this evening seems to be just a continuation of how it's been ever since – a constant running battle between father and daughter, a low-level fight that never completely erupts but never actually subsides either.

Arran closes her book and goes into the kitchen just to keep him company. He's at the table, watching a video on a floating screen with a half-eaten meat sandwich in his hand. Usually, a Greek lady comes in at about five to prepare the Leandros meals but she's late tonight for some reason. Hence the sandwich.

"You want something to eat?" he asks her.

"No thanks."

"You're not hungry? How come you're never hungry? Oh wait, yeah, I almost forgot... I got some news about that friend of yours, the Quinlan boy."

Her eyes come alive. "Calder?"

"Heard he got caught, sent to one of the plants. I guess that's it for him now. Tough break."

Arran slumps down in a chair and puts her head in her hands. This is exactly the news she didn't want. She's been thinking of Calder non-stop since she arrived here, not sure if it's love or guilt, and not even sure if she wants to go to U-Tech if it means never seeing him again.

"Can you get him out?" she says to Leandros.

"What's that?"

"Calder... Can you get him out?"

He finally registers what she's saying but he still doesn't take it seriously. "Sure, why not? I'll just snap my fingers."

"No, I mean it. Is there anything you can do?"

"What makes you think I can do anything?"

"I don't know. You have connections, influence. You were his father's partner."

"Yeah, so what?" Then he looks at her, aware that this is maybe something he should deal with instead of just dismissing. "Look... I like you, all right? You're nice, polite, no trouble. Kind of an antidote to my own offspring, if you know what I mean. But I can't help you on that score. It's out of my league. And anyway, I got enough trouble trying to get my receivables from Quinlan's estate, I don't need to go chasing around after his son."

Arran thinks she knows what that means. "You mean if he gets out, he might stop you getting your share?"

This time, Leandros just glares at her. "I'll pretend you didn't say that. Now look, unlike some I could name, I'm a man of my word. I'll get you to this science place you want to go and I'll even try to get you in, because I agreed to do it. That was the deal, but that's it, that's all there is. Nothing else, kapish?"

Arran doesn't say anything. She's having a hard time admitting, even to herself, that she may not even want to go any more. Ambition or not, how can she study science while Calder's shut away, suffering who knows what kind of degradation?

"When?" she asks. She needs a sense of timing.

"When what?"

"When do you think I'd be able to go?"

Leandros doesn't bother to hide his impatience. "I'm working on it, all right?" Then he gives a shrug that could be interpreted as a semi-apology. "To be honest, what happened, I put a guy on it but he's kinda busy. I'll check on it tomorrow, let you know."

As promised, Calder Quinlan has been assigned to an easy day-shift, unloading the GR3 recycling trains, which arrive 24/7.

This is one of the prime jobs on the site, a model occupation to which visiting dignitaries are shown. Here, all he has to do is stand and wait in his anti-contamination suit for the hydraulic wagons to unload automatically, then he enters with a power nozzle to blow out whatever refuse remains so that the trains can later be sprayed and disinfected. It's a simple task, the greatest benefit being that it's located here on the surface. Elsewhere, workers have to spend their lives underground, toiling in the concrete tunnels. The vast conduits are well lit and climate-controlled but there's always the nagging fear that if there's any problem with the reactor system, any problem at all, those tunnels will become transformed into an instant inferno.

It's happened before but few outside ever hear of any accidents. There's invariably an internal board of inquiry to deal with key issues but absolutely no responsibility on their part to report the occurrence. Since the riggers have no identity, then legally they have no next-of-kin, which means no lawsuits, no compensation, no media circus; in short, no management culpability at all. Whatever's left of the dead is incinerated, the ashes are scattered, their files are erased and no official record remains. Loved ones may still have memories, images and private communications but, as far as the state is concerned, these people never even existed.

Calder's been told many times by Jadoslav Rolostrovich that he should count himself lucky to have the job he's got and all he has to do to keep it is to continue collecting the tiny plastic bags that are hooked to the inside panels of certain marked wagons. Once he locates them, he must tuck them surreptitiously inside the zippered pocket of his a/c suit. It's not a difficult task, because there's no immediate surveillance, either human or remote, and unless shift supervisors

actually stop and peer in to each wagon, there's no way to see exactly what the worker inside is doing. As long as the wagon emerges free of trash and ready for cleansing, his job is done. Even more convenient is the fact that the supervisors themselves are also loser detainees: usually those who are older, or not as physically able. This includes Rolostrovich, who's managed to get himself assigned to Calder's shift.

For three days, it all goes reasonably smoothly. On the fourth day, however, Rolostrovich doesn't show up, his place having been taken by an elderly man with Asian ethnicity. Based on the warnings, Calder can't help but be concerned, based on nothing more than rudimentary racial suspicions. Yet all he can do is get on with the job at hand because the trains don't wait.

The entire process of emptying the wagons is timed by a series of buzzers and lights. Red means wait, green means move fast and, at that point, the worker has exactly two minutes to complete his task. Then, a loud warning tone and a flashing yellow light means he has twenty seconds to exit the wagon before the train moves on.

It's just after ten when they appear: three of them, also in a/c suits, with standard masks covering their faces. Calder is already inside the wagon, collecting the small parcel of Cloud Nine before aiming the power nozzle at whatever's left of the debris along the angles and in the corners. When he sees the intruders, he stops work but they're already moving in towards him, spreading out so they can approach from different angles, covering all means of escape.

"Who the hell are you?" he says but they don't reply, they just keep coming.

Calder backs away until he reaches the far side of the wagon and he's got nowhere left to go. He's still got the blower in his hand but it's useless as a weapon, so he drops it and tries to ready himself.

"What do you want?"

At a nod from the one in the center, all three launch in on him and immediately Calder is submerged by a rain of sharp blows, a non-stop assault on his body from neck to waist. They're not thrown like a streetfighter, or jabbed like a boxer,

but come at him fast and straight, with a karate twist at the end to magnify the effect. Calder tries to defend himself, countering the blows as best he can, and even manages to get a couple of punches on target but he has no real resistance to offer and collapses under the overwhelming force of the attack, his torso a burning, throbbing mass. Finally, when he's on the floor, no longer able to raise his arms, one of the assailants kneels down next to him and leans over to whisper in his ear.

"Friendly warning," says the man quietly. Then he and his two friends retreat, leaving the wagon just before the green light turns yellow.

Calder has no idea what the message means but they obviously want him to pass it on to his people. So much for Caucasian protection, he thinks. Meanwhile, he can't move, can't yell, can't do anything, and he just lies there, semi-conscious, as the train starts to move, carrying him towards the disinfection bay.

Fortunately, the automated system reacts in time, having been programed to avoid a situation such as this. If, for some reason, a worker fails to respond to the yellow exit signal and gets trapped, sensors shut down the procedure, a klaxon sounds and the slow-moving train grinds to a stop. All this happens yet, still, Calder remains motionless. Inside his chest is a fiery pain. He doesn't know it but three of his ribs are broken and one of them has pierced his bio-tech heart. His eyes close and he slips into unconsciousness, his life gradually ebbing away.

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The plant can boast a comprehensive ER unit with first rate expertise in the field of radiation poisoning – but it's neither staffed, nor equipped, to conduct major restorative surgery on a bio-tech heart transplant. They do, however, manage to control the hemorrhaging and stabilize Calder's condition, at least enough to have him airlifted out, sending him to the nearest facility with the required capability. This happens to be in the city of Edifice, at the self-same specialist hospital where the transplant operation was originally carried out.

It's not the same medical staff but the case notes are still in the database, even if it the legal protocol is something of a gray area. After all, if the patient doesn't technically have an identity, how can they access his files? These are, however, medical practitioners, not lawyers, and until such time as Justice issues a clarification, they decide to proceed with their best judgment. In this case, the senior surgeon recognizes that the procedure was probably done at this establishment and, in the absence of a name, takes a sample of DNA in order to search the records for a match. The detective work pays off and the information obtained gives him valuable insight into how the heart was fitted and exact details of the procedure. As a result, Calder undergoes eleven hours of emergency surgery at government expense, even though it circumvents their own laws.

When he wakes up a day later, he finds himself in a white-walled room, not unlike the one in Biblion. But here there's no Dr. Jonas, no Sister Clareth and no sign on the wall telling him to "Keep the Promise." Instead, there's just a pleasant nurse who allows him a sip of water and informs him that, although she's not permitted to offer a prognosis, they're all very encouraged.

By the time the doctor arrives for an examination, Calder is ready with a barrage of questions, the most important being whether he'll have to go back. He still wears the Green Earth anklet and its presence is a constant reminder that his life is no longer his own.

"He's back." This is the news that Peco Leandros delivers as he steps through the door.

Neither Arran nor his own daughter, Zee, know what he's talking about.

It's Zee who replies. "Who's back?"

"Quinlan's son. Heard he's back now."

"He's back here?" says Arran, suddenly taking notice. "In the city?"

"What I said."

"Where?"

"Hospital, I would think. Got hurt in some fight, had to be evacuated for treatment, something like that."

"Is he hurt badly?"

"His heart or something. Must be bad, if they had to send him here. Never heard of that before."

"How bad? Will he be all right? Will they send him back afterwards?"

"Hey, easy.... What am I, the six o' clock news?"

"You think I could see him?"

"Doubt it. I'm sure there's security from here to Tuesday."

Zee smirks and jabs her thumb in Arran's direction. Her voice is mocking.
"Sounds like someone's got a mega crush."

Her father laughs. "I'll say."

Arran looks down, trying to hide her blush. "What I meant was..."

"We know what you meant," says Zee, still teasing.

"Another thing," her father says to Arran. "About that science place. I'll need your qualifications."

"What kind of qualifications?" asks Arran.

"I dunno, you tell me. Grades, transcripts, endorsements... whatever you got."

"Is there a problem?"

"Nah, academic bullshit. We'll sort it out." He sniffs at the aroma coming from the kitchen and continues on through to check what his Greek housekeeper is preparing. "Zee, you gonna eat with us for once?" he calls back.

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After dinner, Arran retreats into her room for a whirlpool, as depressed as she's ever been. Somewhere close by, Calder's fighting for his life and all she can do is pour bubble bath. She's already undressed when there's a knock on the door. She pulls on a toweling robe and finds Zee at the door.

"Can I come in?"

It's unusual for her to visit and Arran's not quite sure what to say, so she just nods slightly and steps back to let her in.

"Listen," says Zee, "about before, you know, making fun and stuff. Nobody meant anything by it."

"Did your father send you?"

Zee smiles her confession. "Sort of. Mind if we sit down?"

Arran's bedroom is large, like the rest of the house and there are two easy chairs by the dresser, one of them an old-style rocker where Arran often sits to read. Zee takes the other chair, opposite, but she doesn't continue immediately and, for a moment, the atmosphere is a little awkward.

"What I want to say..." she begins eventually. "What I mean is... I know it was different where you were and I know... I know it's, like, really strange for you being here but..." She pauses, as if still not certain how to put it all into words. "What I'm trying to say is that here you gotta be tough. I know you asked my dad for help but it doesn't work like that. You want something, you just have to go do it for yourself, you know?"

Arran just sits there, rocking back and forth while she looks down at her hands.

Zee stops talking for the moment, not too sure if anything is really getting through. She decides to try another approach, maybe something more direct.

"This guy," she says, "you really like him, don't you?" Again, no response.

"Anyway, if you do, you gotta help him, know what I'm saying?"

Finally, a response. "Help him?" says Arran quietly.

"Far as I can tell, he's got nobody else. No parents, no brothers or sisters. He's got nothing, so if you don't help him, who will?"

"How? How can I help him? What can I do?"

"How should I know? It's you who's gotta think of something."

"Like what?"

"I told you, I don't know. What's important is you try."

"I don't even know where to begin."

"Sure you do. You just haven't thought of it yet. Hey, you got a brain, you ain't no dummy. Do some research. Find out stuff. You can do that, can't you?"

The idea of research is something Arran can understand. Yes, she knows how to do that. "I guess," she says tentatively.

"Absolutely, now we're talking. Do what you gotta do. If nothing else, it'll make you feel better."

Arran's expression shows she's already started to think about it, so Zee decides to leave her to it. She gets up quietly and walks over to the door.

"Thanks," says Arran belatedly.

"Didn't do anything," Zee replies.

Arran goes to take her bath, long and hot, and tries to let the steam permeate her brain. She needs to get it working again, to get it back up to speed. She has to imagine this is just another project, with an objective and a methodology and a desired result. By the time she's dried herself off, she has a basic direction sketched out. She's not at all sure she can pull it off but at least Zee was right in one respect. Doing something feels a lot better than doing nothing.

The mission Arran's given herself has a profound effect on her psyche. Her intensity returns and she moves from the zombie-like stupor back to her more natural character, a driving force of willpower and logic. In her mind, she calls it "Operation Calder" because he's undergoing an operation and that makes the phrase cute.

Her first step is to call all the major hospitals in turn to find out where he's located. Since, as Peco says, security will be extremely tight, she realizes they'll be reluctant to give out any information if asked directly. She therefore pretends to be writing a college thesis about the psychology of bio-tech heart replacement and would like to interview any current patients. After several fruitless calls, she eventually finds a helpful receptionist at the Hope Hospital who comes up with an answer: a government registered patient listed as SLI84/9820BB5/U6. However, calls to that extension are restricted, so no direct connection is possible. But at least Arran now possesses information she didn't have before. She now knows the hospital's name as well as Calder's official number. It's a start.

The next call she makes is to Biblion, dialing through in video mode just so she can see the face at the other end.

"Hi, Uncle Wilmott," she says softly, when he appears. It's the first time she's called back since she left.

"Arran? For goodness sake! I thought you'd forgotten all about your old uncle. It's so good to see you. How are you? What have you been doing? Talk to me."

To Arran, he looks a little more lined, a little more gray. She wonders how he coped with her departure and how he's now managing with the loneliness. He must have taken it hard and she feels bad. She couldn't contact him from the loft but she could have certainly called him since she's been here at the Leandros

house. Yet she didn't, basically because she's been just too wrapped up thinking about Calder.

"It's been... difficult," she says, wondering how much to elaborate.

"I've no doubt," he replies. "But you're all right?"

"Yes... yes, I'm all right. I'm staying with one of Quinlan's business partners. He's the one helping me get to U-Tech." She says this because she knows it's what her uncle wants to hear, how she's fulfilling her ambitions. "The family's very nice," she adds.

"Glad to hear it."

"How are you, Uncle Wilmott? How are you feeling?"

"Me, oh well, you know me. I'm fine. I go to the clinic, I go to the council meetings, I go to the university. Same routine. Nothing much changes in Biblion."

"No," she agrees and, just for the moment, her thoughts are filled with images of her life there; almost nostalgic in a way.

But he's far more interested in talking about her. "You said it's been difficult."

She nods. "More for Calder than for me. You know, he got caught."

"No, I didn't know."

"They sent him away, to the nuclear plant, but something happened. Some kind of fight. He got hurt. He lost his mother too... an accident."

"Really? I'm sorry to hear that. First his father, then his mother. Poor boy. And a fight, you say? Is he all right?"

"Well, that's just it, I don't know. They won't tell me. Actually, that's why I'm calling... Well, one of the reasons anyway. Since he was one of your patients, I

was wondering if you could, you know, call the hospital for me. I mean, with your credentials and everything. Maybe you could find out how he is."

"Yes... yes, I suppose that might be possible, if that's what you want."

"If you wouldn't mind. I've got all the information right here. Just a minute..." She reads her prepared notes to him, making sure he takes all the details down correctly, but he already knows of the Hope Hospital. Apparently, it has a fine reputation. Lastly, she gives him the Leandros number too, so he can call her back.

Wilmott looks at her with a steady gaze, peering across as if from another dimension. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine, really."

"When do you leave? For the institute?"

"It's not definite yet. They're working on my application. But first I need to know how Calder is. I can't go without knowing."

"Arran, tell me something, are you and he... No, no, that's none of my business. Forget I said anything. Just an old fool being too nosy."

She looks at him and feels she owes him an answer, even if she's not sure why. "I care about him," she replies.

"As you should, as you should. All right, well, I'll do what I can."

"I'll wait for your call." She's about to hang up when she says: "Uncle Wilmott?"

"I'm still here."

"It's really good to talk to you."

She sees a brief smile from him, just before the screen goes black. Then she breathes long and deep; but there are no tears, not now. She's beyond all that

and, besides, she has a lot more work to do tonight, not on the phone but at the terminal.

This is where her learning phase at the loft starts to pay dividends and she finds she can negotiate the complexities of search and research fairly rapidly to find what she's looking for.

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Early the following morning, she takes a very deep breath, then punches in the private number of Manitel Benitez, setting the phone on audio mode only. The last time she saw him, Myrla Quinlan had just been blown apart and Arran doesn't want to scare him off by a sudden visual reminder of that occurrence.

"Benitez residence," says his housekeeper.

"Is he there? It's very urgent."

"May I say who is speaking?"

"I'm a friend of his. It's a personal matter."

The woman hesitates. "You have a name?"

"He won't remember it. Please, it's very urgent."

"Hold on."

Nothing happens for some time and Arran starts to think she's lost the call. She's about ready to hang up and re-enter when he comes through.

"Yeah..." says Benitez. His tone suggests he's been interrupted.

"Yes, hi, I'm Arran Jonas. I was there with Calder Quinlan's mother on the day she... well, you know."

"Oh, right..." he says cautiously.

"Sorry to disturb you but there's something we need to talk about."

"Well, I'm pretty busy right now. Why don't you call my office, make an appointment, okay?"

"I'm afraid it's far too urgent for that." There's a pause and she can feel he's torn between his usual dismissive demeanor and the need to find out what this might be about. Time, she thinks, to launch into her prepared strategy. "If you make me call your office, I'll have to be very explicit," she says, trying to inject some menace, "and I really don't think you want that."

"Are you kidding me?" He affects a laugh. "What is this, a shakedown?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because that's what it sounds like. Now if you don't mind..."

"You're a smart guy but it wouldn't be very smart to hang up on me right now. I'm in a position to save you a lot of trouble."

"Are you indeed? And what kind of trouble might that be?"

"Legal trouble."

"Gimme a break."

"I think we should meet."

"Impossible."

He says it with some finality but she has a distinct dislike for that word "impossible." Even back in Biblion, it always sounded more like a challenge than

a negative. If she'd accepted it back then, she'd never even have thought about leaving.

"And the next call after your office will be the EPD, tell them what I didn't tell them before." Again, a pause, this time longer. This time she's sure she has his attention.

"You're a lot tougher than you look, aren't you?"

"Not hard when you look like a farm girl."

Benitez can't help another short laugh. "You said it, not me. All right, you wanna meet, we'll meet... I'll be downtown later today. Be at the Lizard at six... No, make that six-thirty, you got that?"

"The Lizard?" She has no clue what or where that might be but it's too late. He's already gone and the connection's dead. It doesn't matter, she thinks, she'll find it if she must.

Then she sits back in her rocking chair and allows herself a sigh. She wasn't sure she could do something like that, wasn't sure she even had it in her, but now she's congratulating herself for this newly discovered show of bravado. Back in Biblion, they'd think such behavior crude but Zee was right. This is what seems to work in the city. No wonder men like Grantham Quinlan and Peco Leandros thrive here, she thinks, to say nothing of Manitel Benitez.

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The name on the door is difficult to spot, the minimal signage meant as an cool understatement:

THE LIZARD'S TONGUE CLUB
BAR, GRILL & SPEAKEASY

Arran was afraid it might be some kind of sleazy strip joint, or maybe worse; but to her surprise, she finds it's nothing more raunchy than an upscale city sports bar. By six-thirty, happy hour, it's full of office clientele: smart young go-getters in expensive casual-chic, consuming their cocktails and catching up on the day's chatter. Later, when the game starts on the wall-sized screen, they'll be replaced by the chicken-wing and beer crowd.

When she arrives, she spots him over at a table surrounded by half a dozen of his friends and acolytes. They seem to be slick and worldly and, for a moment, she feels intimidated; some of the "Biblion" Arran returning. Then she reminds herself that she's here for Calder and that thought reinforces her determination.

"Good evening, Mr. Benitez."

She says it firmly, interrupting a lithe, auburn haired young woman in the middle of some hilarious story.

He looks up at her, as they all do, then checks his watch. "Oh, right..." he says, but it's more of an apology to the group around him. He gets up reluctantly and lazily, as if he doesn't see the need and really can't be bothered. The auburn girl whispers something in his ear and, in reponse, he lifts her chin and kisses her, full mouth-to-mouth, before leading Arran over to an empty table in the back corner.

"Can we talk freely here?" asks Arran, glancing around.

"That's why it's called a speakeasy. Look, any chance we can make this quick?" He sounds like he's already bored.

"Quick as you like," she replies. "All you have to do is agree."

"Agree? Agree to what?"

"Agree to help Calder."

"All right, now look, let's get one thing straight. I agreed to see his mother because she inherited a substantial enterprise but she's gone now and I don't really see why..."

Arran jumps in. "She's gone now? *She's gone now*? Is that what you just said? A woman gets ripped to shreds in your own front yard and all you can say is 'she's gone now'?"

He looks at her, a momentary reassessment. "Is there a point to this?"

"The point is..." She has to lower her voice as one of Manitel's male friends passes the table on the way to the washroom. The guy offers Arran an easy smile, which she doesn't return. "The point is," she repeats quietly, "you may be faced with legal charges in the near future... and I believe I can help you avoid them."

"Yeah, I knew it. I was right, this *is* a shakedown."

"No, I told you..."

"Let's cut the crap, shall we? You've got exactly one minute to say what you want, so I'd advise you to get on with it."

"All right," she agrees. "I believe Myrla Quinlan wasn't killed by a landmine but an *airmine*. And as I'm sure you're aware, those are illegal."

He glares at her. "That's a serious accusation. You're lucky this is a private conversation because if you ever said something like that in public..."

"You know," she says, interrupting him, "it kept nagging at me why I didn't die too. I mean, I know what you said to the police... that when I left the house, the system was down but that in the time it took for Myrla to follow me, it had timed-out and rearmed. But there's one thing your story doesn't explain."

"What's that?"

"Why I didn't die when the blast knocked me over. I was sprawled full length. Surely I would've hit at least one other mine, wouldn't I? Wouldn't I? But you

didn't say that to the police, did you? And they didn't ask, because by the time they arrived, I was already on my feet and standing outside the gate. To them, your account made sense, but not to me. Naturally, I was a bit shaken up at the time, a state of shock, but I'm over it now. And you know what? I still can't figure out why I didn't die. Unless, of course, we examine the alternative theory."

"This is ridiculous."

He says it but he doesn't mean it. Nor does he get up to leave.

"Ridiculous?" she repeats. "Really? What you should know is I've been doing some homework. Amazing what you can find if you really look, don't you think? Does the name 'Starburst' mean anything to you? In case you're thinking of denying it, you *are* listed as one of the project's major contributors."

"That's classified information."

"No, it's not. The design and specifications are classified but the registration and financial structure of any public company must be available as a matter of law. I only found that out today. So must the list of company officers, by the way."

"Doesn't prove a thing."

"No? What I discovered was that you're one of the principals in the outsourced development of a military project, codename 'Starburst', a consortium which operates under the trade name of Capital Home Defense Industries. Your main product... as far as I can tell, your *only* product... is an airmine for domestic use, as yet unlicensed but now in a phase of beta testing."

"So what? The chain of evidence comes directly from the autopsy, which found the cause of death consistent with a landmine detonation."

"Consistent, yes, and you know why? Very simple. Because the airmine was flying low when the impact with Myrla Quinlan occurred. That would make the injuries consistent with a landmine, wouldn't you say?"

"Pure speculation."

"Not when there's a witness."

Now, for the first time, Benitez begins to take her seriously. "The driver," he says flatly.

It's a guess on his part and a bluff on hers. In fact, she hasn't even contacted the driver and doesn't really know what he may or may not have seen. So instead of answering, she just pushes on.

"And while we're about it, let's speculate some more, shall we? Let's speculate on the criminal charges for illegal use of a classified airmine. It was illegal right? You're not authorized to conduct beta testing on your own, are you?" She waits but he doesn't reply. "I thought not. So I'd say that's good for about fifteen years. Then, of course, there's the manslaughter charge that would accompany it. And after that, there's the civil suit for wrongful death, which I estimate would have to be somewhere in the thirty billion dollar range. Isn't that how much Myrla Quinlan was worth when she died? There's a corporate lawyer called Franklin might be especially interested in that aspect."

Manitel Benitez holds back until his buddy to pass on his return from the washroom. Finally, he rubs his hand over his face and sits back in his chair. "What's the deal here?" he says in a weary voice. "What the hell do you want from me?"

"I told you, I need your help."

"So you keep saying. But you haven't said what kind of help. Be specific."

"I want you to get Calder's identity back."

"You want what?"

"That's what we came to see you about in the first place, his mother and me. Nothing's changed."

"I can't do that. Nobody can."

"So what *can* you do?"

"You really are a piece of work, you know that?"

"I'm not the one fooling around with airmines."

"You know, farm girl, it strikes me the real accident was that she died and you didn't... but we can correct that."

The intensity in Arran's gray-green eyes seems to increase exponentially with her anger but she manages to restrain herself. "Do you seriously think I wasn't expecting that? Let me tell you something, Mr. Benitez, just in case you really do have the wrong idea about me. Everything I know has been recorded and placed in safekeeping, to be forwarded to the EPD in case of injury or death... so it really would be counter-productive on your part to let anything happen to me." She's wound up tight by this point, nerves on the point of fraying, but she forces herself to ease back, even managing a fake smile. "Wouldn't it all be so much easier if we could just be friends? I'm not really asking that much."

"I told you, I can't get his identity back."

"I heard you. That's why I asked you to tell me what you *can* do."

Benitez gives out with a major sigh as he tries to get his head around this, attempting to save what's left of his ego, while recognizing the obvious need to be pragmatic. Eventually, it's the latter that wins out. "Where is he now?" he asks her. "Still at the plant?"

"No, he was sent back. He's here, in Edifice, in a hospital."

"Is that right?" A shrug. "Okay, okay... so maybe we can make use of that."

Arran is not so much encouraged as immensely relieved but she tries not to show what she's feeling. "Go on."

"There are two issues here but maybe we can fix both at the same time. First, I can't restore his identity. Like I said, that can't be done, but I can wipe it clean."

"It's already been wiped clean."

"No, actually it hasn't. The way it works is that when something happens to an identity profile, the government just replaces it in their system with a new one. It's just a file number and because there's no file history, the subject is classed as suspicious. But that number he's given is still technically an identity. What *I'm* proposing is to wipe that one clean, too, so he's got nothing at all. Erase his existence right off the grid."

"Does that mean he wouldn't have a police record?"

"He wouldn't have any record at all. He wouldn't exist in any capacity, except for taking up physical space."

"But if he's off the grid, that means the scans, the sensors..."

"Right, they're all blind as far as he's concerned. Nothing can pick him up because there'll be nothing at all in the central database to make a match. He'll have biological life-signs but the system won't make any connection so it'll tune him out, just like it would for an animal... a raccoon, a coyote, a mouse. They're not listed either."

"But it'll register that he's human."

"Only on each individual field vector and, even then, only if someone bothers to go back to the raw input and manually check the patterns."

"Couldn't they track bio-scans like that away from the hospital? Manually?"

Another shrug. "I suppose they could, in theory. If they notice he's gone and move fast enough. But the longer they leave it, the wider the radius they'd have to search. They'd have to examine every log from every vector in some kind of exponential pattern and I doubt they'd do that. They just don't have the manpower. Plus, a search like that would eventually cut across jurisdictions, so

the EPD would have to access the federal terminal and then coordinate with other agencies, probably the FSC, and there's no love lost there, I can assure you."

"So what does all that mean?"

"What it means is that they probably wouldn't bother."

"They'll just pretend he doesn't exist?"

"No, you're not listening. That's what I'm trying to tell you. They won't have to pretend because he *won't* exist."

"You're saying he'll just vanish into thin air?"

"Effectively."

"That's incredible."

"Yeah, well, don't get too excited. It won't be a pleasant reality, not for him. It'll just be..."

"It'll just be what?"

"It'll just be moderately better than what he's got now."

"He won't be locked away though."

"No, that's true. Unless he happens to commit an obvious crime and gets caught red-handed. Or, I guess, if he's picked up on some minor charge, like... I don't know... jaywalking. But if he's smart and keeps a low profile, there's no reason he should have any problems. Of course, he'll never be able to get back on the grid again."

"Never?"

"No way it can be done."

She nods slowly, deep in thought, trying to imagine how that would be: an entire lifetime of invisibility. "How about the second thing? You said there were two issues."

"Yeah... The other one is the anklet. Everybody consigned to a plant has to wear one. But if I can lose the official identity, then..."

"Then the link will be gone. He can just tear it off."

"Probably."

"Probably?"

"I don't know the current technology. Not my field. If it's on a differential system, it might just trigger some local vector alert. The point is, we won't know until it's taken off."

"Not very reassuring."

"Best I can do. Take it or leave it."

"How about getting out of the hospital?"

"Shouldn't be a problem. If he's off the grid, all payments will freeze and the hospital database will reject him. My guess is, he'll just be turned out on the street."

She takes another moment to weigh it all up but she knows there's nothing to think about. Her decision has already been made. "Okay," she says with finality, "when do we start?"

"We don't start anything. I do this myself, in my own way. I'll call you when I'm done."

"When will that be?"

"I'll try to find an hour tomorrow."

"An hour? That's all it takes?"

A brief smile at his own immodesty. "Maybe less, we'll see."

"Why? You have federal access codes? You do, don't you? Or at least you know how to get them."

"Now why do you need to know something like that?"

"No... No, you're right, I don't."

"Like I said, I'll inform you when it's done. But no calls, no messages, okay? You agree to that?"

"You just want me to wait? How do I know you'll do it?"

"Because I told you I would. But I need to make one thing very clear. If I do this and you go back on your word... if you suddenly regain your memory... then I'll have nothing to lose and that threat I made before will become a certainty, you follow me?" When she doesn't respond immediately, he adds: "Yes or no?"

"I'm not an idiot."

"I hope not, for both our sakes. Now, if there's nothing else, I've got people waiting."

He stands up and goes back to his friends, leaving her sitting there alone, a waif-like figure in the back of the noisy room.

Over on the other side, the screen has now come alive for the pre-game show, the entire wall transformed into a stadium view. The sightline is perfect, right on the center line, just above the players' bench. In front of the camera, the life-size anchor is giving out the latest team news while behind him, the arena is beginning to fill. But Arran has zero interest in sports and, after a short time, she pulls herself together enough to walk out of the bar. The confrontation took everything she had and she's starting to feel weak from the effort, as if her legs

are made of rubber. The last thing she wants to do now is lose her nerve and collapse.

Once she's into a cab, however, her mood changes to one of elation. She can't believe she did it. She actually faced down that lowlife and blackmailed him into doing what she wanted. What would Uncle Wilmott say if he knew, she wonders to herself? Worse, what would Nolan Seward say? No doubt he'd hand down stern warnings about the judgment of the flames but all that seems so irrelevant to her now. Strange to look back and recall how, as a sensitive child, that vision used to terrify her as it played on her mind, an effect not unlike the holoscreen in the bar. It even kept her awake at nights, because once she closed her eyes, the fires seemed to roar to life in front of her. She could actually feel the heat and hear the screams of the lost souls. If she's being honest with herself, she knows that's probably the core reason she turned to science in the first place, as a way to ground herself, a means to combat that illogical, illusory fear.

That same night, there's an attempt on Calder Quinlan's life.

It happens at some time close to 2 a.m. during what used to be known as the graveyard shift. That's when a technician arrives on the eighteenth floor of the Hope Hospital to fix a monitor malfunction at the nursing station. Such servicing is often done at this hour in order to cause minimum disruption to the daily schedule and, anyway, the man is a familiar figure to the night staff, always ready with a friendly smile and a pleasant word. What they don't know, however, is that he's heavily in debt to the syndicate to which Jadoslav Rolostrovich is connected. This is the same Rolostrovich who's still at the GERP fusion plant and whose current concern is that the Quinlan kid might well be tempted to use information about the Cloud Nine trafficking business as some kind of bargaining chip.

As for Calder himself, he's really in no shape to do anything of the kind because he suffered a post-operational relapse. His condition has been stabilized but he's in a sedative-induced sleep when the door to his room is cracked open.

The interior is dark, the only light coming from the corridor. In the technician's hand is a small syringe which contains a colorless compound of ethylene glycol, commonly used as an ingredient in anti-freeze, and easy enough to obtain on the open market. It's not a difficult task to administer a dose like that, even for an amateur, and so far it's all going to plan. No problem with access to the floor, no problem with entry to the room. But nobody can predict the random nature of events, especially in a busy urban hospital.

Just before the man can step over to the bed, an alarm buzzer begins to emanate from the next room, where the patient happens to be a member of the mayor's cabinet. Suddenly, the corridor is filled with activity: nurses and orderlies, followed soon after by a gaggle of interns and finally a couple of specialists. The

technician remains in the shadows behind the door, breathing hard and not daring to move. He hasn't yet given the injection but, by this time, his nerves are on edge and all he wants to do is get out unnoticed. He figures he can always return the following night to complete the job.

He remains stationary for almost thirty minutes until some of the initial fuss has died down and he thinks he can make an escape. His timing, however, is not opportune. His idea is to slip out of the room, act normally, and pace along to the fire exit as if he's just another employee doing his job. But the very moment he tries to do so is when hospital security chooses to reinforce its presence – not to guard Calder but for the sake of the politician. Three uniformed men with badges and sidearms emerge from the elevator and step around the corner, just as the figure tries to exit the corridor. A rapid question, a furtive response... and, in quick order, the technician is taken down. He's thrown heavily on to the floor and frisked, an efficient search which soon reveals the syringe, still full of the lethal liquid.

Mistakenly, they believe the danger was to the politician and the man can't believe his bad luck. He's led away while, back in the room, the heavy slumber of his real target remains undisturbed.

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Arran's plan was to go to the hospital and try to talk her way in to seeing Calder, or, failing that, at least to make some inquiries.

But in the morning, when she opens up her terminal to catch the local news, the lead item on the bulletin is an attempted homicide at that very same facility and she sits with her eyes fixed on the screen to find out what's going on. As the anchor reports in his lead-in, the current working assumption is that the mayor's cabinet colleague was the victim of an assassination attempt but nobody is really sure of what happened and police are still trying to piece the story together. When the network switches for a live update, the scene shows the EPD out in

force, with heavily armed personnel manning newly installed entry scans in the lobby. Out front, an eager journalist speaks breathlessly to the camera with her latest revelations. Apparently she's been informed by unofficial sources that the assailant was hiding in the next room to the politician, waiting for his chance to strike, but she can't confirm because authorities are enforcing a communications blackout until they've investigated further. As yet, she adds, no group or organization has stepped forward to claim responsibility.

At no time does anyone mention anything about a fugitive with a bio-tech heart, so Arran's not even aware that Calder was involved. Nevertheless, it's all too evident that however hard her task was going to be, it's that much worse now and she goes over to sit in her favorite rocker to think it all through. Whatever happened in there, the fact is that the Hope Hospital is now locked down like a fortress and there'll be no way for her to get in and see him.

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At the hospital, two detectives of the EPD homicide division arrive to interrogate Calder Quinlan, who they only know as fugitive #SLI84/9820BB5/U6.

The more senior is a woman in her fifties, a tough-looking type with broad shoulders and bleached hair who acts like she's seen it all. She has little patience for Calder's condition and apparently fails to understand how a political assassin could be stationed in his room for half an hour without his knowledge, even after several members of the nursing staff have confirmed that the patient was on heavy medication.

The interview doesn't last long. There are only so many times and so many ways that Calder can say: "I'm sorry, I was asleep."

Despite his constant denial, the woman remains suspicious. In part, the caution is due to intense pressure on the division coming from the mayor's office; and, in part, because the man in custody, the hospital technician, has so far refused to say

anything on the advice of his syndicate-sponsored lawyer. As of now, the main theory still cites the politician as the target but, since Calder is a fugitive and a former terrorist suspect who just happens to have been in the next room, they can't yet rule him out as a possible accomplice, whether he was asleep or not.

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By the time Uncle Wilmott calls back at midday, Arran is still no closer to deciding what her next step should be and she's starting to lose a little of that rampant confidence she'd managed to build up. It's not that she's entirely reverted to her previous state, that "little girl lost" persona she'd somehow fallen into since arriving here, but she's certainly beginning to learn that an agile brain and a strong will are not necessarily enough; that the city's infinite potential for chaos can still overwhelm any attitude, no matter how determined. Sometimes it takes more than carefully reasoned logic, it takes sheer dumb luck to succeed here and she's not at all sure how to generate that commodity.

"What's wrong?" says her uncle, the moment he sees her on screen. He knows her well enough to be able to diagnose her moods, even from long distance.

"Oh, not much. Just everything."

"Can't be that bad."

"Really?"

"Feel like talking about it?"

She does but she can't, not on an open line like this. Calder taught her that much, at least. "Did you manage to call the hospital?"

"Sure, but they wouldn't let me talk to him. Some big kerfuffle going on, or so I understand.

"I know. Did they tell you his condition at least?"

"They didn't tell me much of anything, except he's doing as well as can be expected. What's it all about down there? Do you know?"

"Nobody's sure. Apparently there's some bigwig in there been targeted or something, but they're keeping it all under wraps. Listen, Uncle Wilmott, I was thinking... How'd you like to take a trip?"

"A trip? Where?"

"Here."

"You mean to the city?"

"Have you ever been?"

"Once, many years ago, but I'm sure it's all changed..."

"Great, I'll show you around. We'll do the sights. I'd really like to see you."

"Arran, what's going on?"

"Nothing."

"Arran..."

"Well, almost nothing."

"I thought so."

"It's just... I really need your help with something. Will you come?"

"What kind of something?"

"I'll tell you when you get here."

"Now hold on, I didn't say I was coming."

"You will, won't you?"

"When?"

"Soon as you can. Today, if possible."

"Today? I've got a lecture this afternoon."

"At the university? Great. They've got shuttle flights to Edifice, don't they? Can't you book yourself on one of those? I'll meet you at the heliport."

"Just a minute, it's not that easy. I think you've forgotten. First I need to apply to the council..."

"No you don't. Just tell them you're coming here to see a patient."

"I am?"

Arran realizes she may have said too much. "Tell them anything you like but I really need you to get here, okay? Will you do that? Please? For me?"

As always, Wilmott Jonas finds it hard to refuse her when she's in this kind of mood. He's by no means certain the council will permit such a trip, or that he even wants to go to a crazy place like Edifice after all these years of quiet living, but he nods his agreement anyway. "I'll do what I can," he assures her.

While Arran waits for confirmation from her uncle, she receives another call. This one's from Manitel Benitez and his matter-of-fact statement stuns her.

"It's done," he says simply.

"You mean..."

"Don't say it."

"And?"

"As I described."

It's difficult to believe and she can't seem to get her mind around it. It's done, just like that. An identity wiped, a person erased: almost too easy. "Thank you," she says, for want of something better.

"Don't thank me. Just remember your side of the deal. Not a word about anything."

"No, I wouldn't, there's no reason..."

He cuts her off but it's just as well, she thinks. She can't stand him anyway.

She sits back, trying to imagine what this development actually means. If it really has worked as Benitez says, then Calder's no longer a part of the grid, or *any* grid, and in theory, he could just walk out of the hospital any time he wants, except for the inconvenient fact that he doesn't yet know about it. As far as he's concerned, he's still a government detainee, still a Subject of Lost Identity and he's still wearing the anklet, even if it no longer serves any purpose. Somehow,

she has to get that information to him – and that’s when Uncle Wilmott calls back on video mode.

“I’ll be there at seven,” he tells her. “That soon enough for you?”

“Today?” Her face lights up. “That’s amazing. Wonderful. I’ll come and meet you.”

“I should hope so. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a course to give.”

“See you later.”

She hangs up in a much better frame of mind. Now all she has to do is convince Peco Leandros and his daughter, Zee, to put up yet another house guest but she doesn’t think that will present too much of a problem. In the relatively short time she’s been here, she’s made it her business to get along with them and, anyway, it’s not like they don’t have the room.

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When Arran picks up her Uncle from the domestic terminal at the heliport, she feels as if she’s the one who’s the veteran and he’s the neophyte.

As she leads him out to the municipal taxi pad, he can’t help looking around in awe, exactly the way she did herself when she first arrived. The city seems to be so much bigger and more vibrant than anyone from outside ever expects. Above them, the brand logos beam out into the evening sky, while all around them, the streets are bright as day. New offerings and special discounts from each retailer are digitally beamed to private mobiles as they pass and many eyes are focused not on the store windows but on their own tiny screens. Along the busy sidewalks, it seems like order and chaos at the same time but this is typical urban living and those with sufficient credit seem to enjoy the experience well enough.

Contrary to terrorist intentions, the fear of attack doesn't drive people to huddle indoors and batten down, it makes them relish life even more. The prevailing attitude is one of defiance: to shop, to eat out, to browse, to seek entertainment, or to indulge in what the inhabitants of Biblion might refer to as "sinful" activity, with enough choice to satiate most tastes.

"You like all this?" Jonas asks her, as they wait in line for an air-cab.

"I'm getting used to it."

He nods, a gesture that brings a certain amount of worldliness to his wonder.

"Yes, well, don't get *too* used to it," he says, reverting to his familiar parental tone.

"You left home to study, no other reason."

"I haven't forgotten."

"Just see that you don't."

She smiles and tucks her arm into his. Even with his old-fashioned ways, it's good to have him here and she decides she's going to try to make the most of it.

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Dinner's ready when they arrive at the Leandros mansion and they're welcomed warmly by both father and daughter.

Of course, there's far too much rich food for the doctor's spartan tastes but he seems to enjoy their boisterous company and listens with amusement to their jokes, their repartee and their anecdotes of life in the city, even if he is a little taken aback by Zee's somewhat radical hair and dress. In return, he tells them a little about Biblion, but not too much, and chooses to focus instead on childhood stories of Arran, embarrassing her no end.

After a pleasant enough evening, Arran escorts her guest up to his room, which is right next to hers. For a moment, he stands gaping in the doorway. "This is bigger than my entire house," he mutters.

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The following morning, after breakfast, Arran takes her Uncle Wilmott to the Hope Hospital, where the police presence is still very visible. In front, a newly installed sign offers an apology of sorts:

OUR SECURITY IS YOUR SECURITY

As legitimate citizens, both are processed through the building's newly installed scans without any problem, their status registering totally clean on the database access. Only when they reach the central lobby does progress become more difficult. When they activate the information panel, the live assistant who appears on screen, a doughy faced man, politely informs Arran that there is no patient listed under the file number: SLI84/9820BB5/U6.

Of course, she thinks. It's already been erased. "Try yesterday's file," she suggests.

"I'm sorry, I'm not at liberty to access non-current files."

For Arran, it's frustrating but she was the one who organized his erasure and the price to pay from now on will be complete bureaucratic denial. That's when she feels her uncle's hand on her shoulder.

"Let me try," he says calmly. Then, to the face on screen, he says: "My name's Jonas, Wilmott Jonas. You should have my details."

The inquiry assistant takes a second to call up the information, as registered a few moments previously by the entry scan. "Would that be Dr. Wilmott Jonas from Biblion?"

"Yes, it would."

"How may I help you today, Doctor?"

"Would you be so good as to transfer me to the Medical Directorate?"

"Certainly. Just a moment, please."

A few seconds later, a new face appears, this time a serious-looking woman wearing a white coat. "Dr. Jonas... Welcome to the Medical Directorate. How can I help you today?"

"Yes, well, I'm inquiring about an emergency surgical procedure that would have been carried out sometime during the past week. Cardiac injury to an existing bio-tech insertion. I don't have any more details but the patient was a young male.

Eventually, after searching her records, the woman nods and says: "Yes, my records show such a procedure completed four days ago."

Arran is thrilled and surreptitiously squeezes her uncle's arm to offer her silent congratulations.

"Thank you," says Wilmott. "And the surgeon's name?"

"Let me see, that would have been Dr. Weisser."

"I'd like to talk to him, if I may."

"I'll check if he's available."

When they're put on hold, Arran whispers to her Uncle. "I'm very impressed."

In response, he informs her that he might be better off alone with this Dr. Weisser, a doctor-to-doctor discussion to make it appear more professional. Arran is reluctant but it's an idea they already agreed in advance might be necessary, so all she can do is ask if he'll be all right on his own, if he's prepared for all eventualities.

"I may be an old fool," he replies, "but I'm not entirely incompetent. Now go, will you? Scram. Vamoose."

She grins and leaves him to it, happy to see that he's still the same ol' Uncle Wilmott.

In hospital administration, they're well aware there's some kind of system glitch and their process diagnostic is now underway.

The problem seems to be a patient occupying a room who's no longer listed on either their internal database or the federal grid. They know he's a fugitive, or at least that he *was*, and that he's being questioned by the police about the recent incident but their automated system can no longer find any record. It means the computer can't update the billing and, without billing, all efforts on behalf of that patient must be held in abeyance.

By midday, Calder has already been turfed out. With nowhere to put him, he's now sitting in the staff cafeteria, drinking weak coffee and eating a tasteless organic sandwich, courtesy of hospital security. These surroundings remind him a little of the Green Earth facility, except that here he doesn't have the dubious company of Jadoslav Rolostrovich. Instead, his companion is the junior assigned to watch him, a lanky youth who plays club basketball and can't seem to talk about anything else. Adding to the monotony is the fact that Calder has no idea why he's here, other than some vague assurance that this is an anomalous situation, that administration is investigating and that they'll get back to him just as soon as they know more.

From the perspective of memory, members of the medical team know perfectly well that the young man arrived here from the Green Earth plant, a Subject of Lost Identity with a serious knife wound who required surgery on his bio-tech heart: an organ that had been originally implanted at this very establishment. Yet the fact remains that without any official record, he doesn't officially exist, an unprecedented circumstance for which they have no prescribed protocol and therefore no ready answer.

Meanwhile, in the cafeteria, the hours drift by slowly.

Much to Calder's relief, the basketball player soon runs out of conversation and they both sit there on uncomfortable chairs, straining their necks to watch the endless celebrity talk shows on the high-mounted monitor. Calder knows he could always yell and scream and demand attention to his plight but, because he's not yet been made aware of his negative status, he's still under the impression that if he makes too much noise, he'll be shipped directly back to the plant. As boring as his current predicament might be, it's infinitely better than cleaning out refuse trains while acting as a drug pusher and waiting for the next knife attack.

• • •

"Hello, Calder."

Calder Quinlan turns in his chair, a little surprised that someone would be using his real name. Standing there is the last person he expected to see. "Doctor Jonas? My God! What the hell are you doing here?"

"We can dispense with the blasphemy, if you don't mind. I may be in the big city but I haven't changed my values."

Next to Wilmott Jonas is Calder's surgeon, Dr. Weisser, a broad man with thick eyebrows, shadowy jowls but, in complete contrast to his appearance, a charmingly mild demeanor. With them are two others who Calder doesn't know, both female. One is the hyper-stressed Ms. Fealey, one of the administrative supervisors, and next to her is the elegant Ms. Anghelhoff, the Hope Hospital ombudsman. It's Ms. Fealey who decides to take charge by asking the tall security youth if he wouldn't mind fetching a few more chairs so that all those present can sit around the same table.

Calder has no clue what this is all about but it seems as if this impromptu gathering will take place right here in the cafeteria.

"Now then," says Ms. Fealey, once they're all settled, "if nobody minds, we'll place this meeting on record." She places a palm-sized device in the center of the table, a small translucent sphere able to capture a virtual 360° recording. "Thank you all for coming," she says. "We're here to discuss the situation concerning this young man, whose identity has apparently been erased from the database."

Calder is still not up to speed with recent events, so he attempts to correct what he perceives to be an error. "Strictly speaking, my original identity was replaced by a government identity. My number is..."

"Thank you," she interjects, "but that's no longer the case. As of now, you have no identity at all, so for this meeting we'll call you Patient X. We'd be calling you John Doe, except we usually reserve that for dead people." The last part is meant to be light-hearted but only Dr. Weisser smiles and only out of politeness.

As for Calder, he just can't seem to get his head around what's happening. "I'm sorry, I don't follow."

"Please," she says, "you're here as a courtesy. It will all be explained to you but, right now, we need to make this brief. Dr. Weisser, how long do you have?"

"I'm due at a pre-op in half an hour," he says.

"And I, myself, am already late for a meeting, so let's begin, shall we? Dr. Jonas, for the record, your status if you don't mind."

"All right, let's see... My name is Wilmott Nathaniel Jonas, I'm Chief Medical Officer and Senior Warden of the Samaritan Clinic at the Special Community of Biblion. I'm also Professor of Physiology at Light of the Lord University. What else would you like to know?"

"You're in Edifice for what reason?"

"Actually, I'm here for two reasons. One is to see my niece who recently moved here. The other is to visit my former patient to see how he's getting along."

"Let the record show that the former patient is the young man we're calling Patient X. Explain the circumstances if you would."

"Well, now, a few weeks ago, he arrived at Biblion as some kind of fugitive, what they call a Subject of Lost Identity. He was injured and he claimed sanctuary, which is his right under our constitution. The community council approved his request on a temporary basis."

"Injured how?"

"He had a mild concussion and a scratched cornea, plus superficial lacerations and bruising elsewhere on his anatomy, all commensurate with his explanation that he fell from a horse."

"A horse?"

"When someone claims sanctuary, we consider the case on its charitable merits. We don't conduct an investigation into how it happened."

"I see. Please continue."

Wilmott tries to choose his words carefully. He really doesn't want to get into that entire standoff situation, preferring instead to stick to the medical history. "Well, there's not much else to tell. I treated his wounds, which healed in a satisfactory and timely manner. By the time his father came to collect him, I was able to release him from my clinic."

"His biological father?"

"Yes."

"But if memory serves, that man is now deceased."

"Yes, his mother too. Both in tragic circumstances, I'm sorry to say."

"Could you elaborate?"

"His father... That was a bad business. Accidental weapon exchange. I was there myself, saw it happen. Terrible misunderstanding. As for his mother, that happened here in the city. My niece was a witness and, according to her, that was an accident, too. Some kind of home defense mine, I believe. I'm not really sure of the details."

"All right, that's sufficient, thank you. Now, Dr. Weisser, his current condition... in layman's terms, if you please."

"In layman's terms... The surgery was successful, in that we were able to re-establish bio-mechanical function and replenish his heart capacity. After sufficient recuperation, he should be able to resume previous levels of activity. He did suffer a minor post-operative relapse, which is not unusual, but he's young and has a strong constitution. I see no reason to change my prognosis."

"Is he fit enough to be released from immediate medical supervision?"

"It's not ideal but, I suppose, given certain conditions..."

"What kind of conditions?"

"Oh, you know, usual doctor's orders. No work, no strenuous activity, plenty of home rest, good nutrition. Basic common sense."

"Excuse me," says Ms. Anghelhoff, her first contribution to the meeting. "That's all very well but as far as we can make out, he has no home to go to. That's the problem we're facing."

"I'm afraid I have to disagree," replies Fealey.

"You mean he does have a home?"

"No, I mean it's not a problem. His private circumstances are not the concern of the hospital."

"They are if he suffers another relapse."

Fealey chooses not to acknowledge the comment. "Dr. Jonas, as I understand it, you're volunteering to assume responsibility for Patient X?"

"I said I'd take care of his medical needs for the time being."

"Is it your intention to take him back to your clinic in Biblion?"

"Oh, gracious no, I can't do that." Wilmott looks across at Calder. "Plus, I don't think he'd come. No, I'll just stay here for a while, monitor his progress."

"For a while?"

"I'm sorry, I can't be more specific than that. Like Dr. Weisser said, he's strong, he's fit... and I have my own commitments."

"So after you return to your community, what happens?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to speak for my niece but I assume she'll take care of him."

"And her name for the record..."

"Arran... Arran Jonas."

"Forgive the question, Doctor, but do you trust your niece in this capacity?"

"Arran? Oh, sure. Bright girl, you know. She'll make an excellent scientist some day."

"Medical?" asks Dr. Weisser.

"I'd like to think so," replies Jonas.

It's Ms. Fealey who brings the meeting back to order. "Gentlemen, please. All right, so the motion on the table appears to be as follows... Do we agree to release the patient we call X to the care and welfare of Dr. Jonas. Your opinions, please, very briefly. Dr. Weisser?"

"I can't think of any other course which wouldn't endanger him more... short of keeping him here, of course."

"Which is not a valid option. Ms. Anghelhoff? Your thoughts?"

"I have no objection, as long as the patient himself is in agreement."

"We'll get to that in a moment. I'd like it noted that I, myself, am in favor of the motion, as long as there's an authorized agreement absolving the Hope Hospital from any further responsibility, either medically or socially, and as long as the said agreement is co-signed by hospital security."

On hearing this, the lanky youth feels he's required to participate and sits a little straighter in his chair. "I'd have to talk to my boss," he says tentatively.

"Thank you, that won't be necessary," says Fealey, brusquely. "We'll be going through official channels. I'll talk to the Director of Security myself and he will talk to the police. Now, the final word goes to Patient X. Your response, if you please, young man."

Calder is understandably lost with all this. He has so many questions, he doesn't even know which to ask first. "You said I have no identity at all?"

Fealey looks at her watch. "That's correct."

"How did that happen?"

"We don't know."

"Was it an error, or what?"

"Like I said, we don't know. As of now, the government won't pay your bills and won't even acknowledge your presence."

"How about this damn anklet I'm wearing?"

It's Wilmott Jonas who answers. "I'm told you don't have to worry about that."

"What's that supposed to mean? I can remove it?"

"That's what I understand."

For Calder, it's hard to believe. It's all so sudden. "So what you're saying... I won't be going back to Green Earth?"

This time, Fealey has to jump in, just to keep the meeting on track. "The motion on the table is whether or not to release you into the care of Dr. Jonas. Nothing else. What the government chooses to do is their business, not ours. So the question is simple. Do you agree to this or not?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You can say yes or no," says the attractive Ms. Anghelhoff, placing a beautifully manicured hand on Calder's forearm. She's trying to be useful, trying her best to accommodate both sides, as befits her job description.

"And if it's no?" he says, turning to her. From this close, he can catch the subtle scent of her cologne.

"Then it becomes a little more difficult. But it really is up to you."

"What do you mean, difficult?"

A slightly hesitant smile. "We're not sure. This is kind of a first for us. But, believe me, I'll do everything in my power to make sure you're given fair treatment."

Calder keeps staring at her, trying to glean some hint in those turquoise eyes, but it's just not there. She seems to mean well but, as far as he can tell, she has no clue what to do or how to guarantee any treatment, fair or otherwise. In the meantime, they're all waiting for his answer, with Fealey once again glancing at her watch, just to add even more pressure.

Eventually, he just shrugs. "Fine, I'll go with Doc Jonas." There's an almost audible relief from all around the table.

"Let the record show," says Fealey, "that the individual who, for purposes of this hearing, has been assigned the name of Patient X, has given his consent to the aforesaid motion. I hereby recommend that the agreement be drawn up consigning him into the physical care and welfare of Dr. Jonas and, before the end of this day, signed by all relevant parties. This meeting is adjourned. Thank you, everyone."

They all begin to get up from the table – all except for Calder who's still not entirely sure what just happened. Around him, other hospital staff are still arriving, leaving, or wandering around with trays in their hands, looking for a place to sit with their soup and salad. It all seems highly surreal. But then, he has to admit, so has this entire odyssey from the moment his computer screen went blank.

"Calder? shall we go."

This is Wilmott Jonas, who's waiting for him along with Ms. Fealey and the lanky youth. The polite Dr. Weisser and the svelte Ms. Anghelhoff have already gone their separate ways.

Calder just gazes at them. "What would have happened?" he says, addressing the question directly to Ms. Fealey. "What would have happened if Dr. Jonas hadn't shown up?"

She considers the question. She could tell him that the hospital would have thrown him out on to the street, that it would then have been up to the police, that his entire future would have been in doubt, but she doesn't admit to any of that. Instead, her face softens a little, for once allowing a ray of humanity to break through that efficient bureaucratic shell. "I've no idea," she says quietly.

Night has already fallen by the time the taxi deposits them at the Leandros house. For Wilmott Jonas especially, it's been a long day.

Arran rushes out to hug Calder, fussing all over him, before turning her attention to her uncle. She hugs him too, so exhilarated she can hardly talk. She can't believe that an aging country doctor, who hasn't been in the city for twenty years, could have been so successful in so short a time. Even before they're completely inside, she demands to know what happened, every single detail of what took place.

"Slow down," Wilmott says to her. "Give us a chance to get in."

Calder, too, is a little overwhelmed by it all: the size of the house, the enthusiasm of the greeting, but mostly by the fact that he's here at all. His own questions are far more profound. What's his status? What's his identity? How could he simply be erased from the grid? Who was responsible for that? And even more importantly, what happens now?

He and the Doctor are led through to the large kitchen area. Here's where most of the Leandros family life seems to take place but neither father nor daughter are home at the present time. Zee went out early and her father left this morning for a two-day trip, so Arran takes it upon herself to play host.

"What can I offer you?" she says as she opens up the giant refrigerator. "There's cold meat, cheese, coleslaw... You prefer bread or rolls? Or maybe you prefer something hot? It's the cook's night off but I think she left some stuff these containers..." In her excitement, she's bubbling, falling over herself to be of service.

Her uncle helps as best he can, setting out plates and utensils, while Calder just sits at the table and watches, still bemused. It's as if he's in another temporal zone, moving in slo-mo while everyone else is zipping around like cartoon characters.

Only once they're eating can he even begin to talk: about life at the Green Earth plant, what it was like, how he survived. He doesn't tell them everything, of course, especially not the part about the drugs. What he does say is that he sort of "fell in" with a certain crowd that had some longstanding enemies and that's how he got injured, in a fight between the two groups. It's a whitewashed version of events but what good would it serve to tell them the real truth? Then, over an iced dessert, he starts to ask a few questions of his own. Jonas has already told him that it was Arran who engineered his release but he wants to know exactly how she managed it. That's when he hears about the involuntary role played by Manitel Benitez, alias the Baseman.

"You blackmailed him?" Calder asks her. There's more than a little incredulity in his voice; not just that she was able to do it but that Benitez would actually succumb.

"I wouldn't call it blackmail," she says, slightly embarrassed in front of her uncle. "I just gave him a choice, that's all."

Such a response would no doubt be humorous to some previous Calder, a Calder who was still living in a normal time and space. But this particular Calder is in no mood for joviality, especially when he learns the details.

"You mean I can never get back on the grid? Never?"

"Well, never's a long time," she replies, trying to be encouraging.

"How could you agree to that?"

"I didn't agree to it. That's just how it works."

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't." She really can't see why he's getting so upset. "Do you understand you're not a fugitive any more? You don't have to go back."

"Oh, I understand all right."

"Calder..."

"What?"

"Well, you could at least say thank you. We... I mean, Uncle Wilmott and I, we went through a lot. You think it was easy what we did? Do you? You're free now."

"Free to do what? I've got no job, no home... I'm a complete blank. There's nothing left and no chance of doing anything."

"I don't know what you're so upset about."

"You took it upon yourself to decide my entire life, my entire future."

"I had to decide. I had no choice."

"You had no right." He knows he's over-reacting, that it's the pent-up trauma being released, but he can't help himself and just shakes his head in frustration.

Fortunately, Arran seems to appreciate the strain he's under. She looks at her uncle for help but he seems to want to stay out of it, so she has to find her own words. "Look, Calder... All I know is, you're here and you're safe."

"Right. And how about tomorrow? What do I do then? And the day after that? Did you think about that? Did it even occur to you that I might already have a plan to get myself out?"

"You did?"

"Of course I did. Those people I met at the plant..."

He's thinking of Rolostrovich and the offer the man made but, for some reason, he still can't bring himself to talk about it. Inside, he's all too aware that he was just another expendable recruit in the ongoing drug wars of Green Earth; also that the promise of a new identity was just a delusion, nothing more than a way to get him to work for them. But he's not ready to admit any of that yet, even to himself. Why? He doesn't know. Maybe to fool himself into believing he still had some control over his own destiny.

Whatever the reason, all that's gone now and he tries to pull himself together as the seconds tick by. But it's too hard. It requires too much effort and he just doesn't have the energy to cope.

"Damn it," he says very softly, "damn it all to hell."

Then he looks at Dr. Jonas and thinks about apologizing for the blasphemy. But that doesn't come either, so instead he just gets up and leaves. He doesn't storm out like Arran at the Benitez house, he simply walks down the long hallway and out the front door, which he closes quietly behind him. He doesn't even look back.

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He's got nowhere to go, no family, no friends and no money, so he just starts walking, uncaring, through the dark, empty streets. His still-bandaged wounds are beginning to hurt and, as a further addition to his discomfort, it's starting to snow.

The abnormal weather is yet another variation in climate patterns, as the unceasing destruction of the forests continues to deplete the oxygen supply and the centuries-long build-up of carbon emissions causes ever more heat to be trapped within the atmosphere. Apart from the steady eradication of wildlife and its habitat, symptoms include more frequent hurricanes, tornadoes and flooding; major undersea quakes with their resulting tsunamis; the renewed eruption of

long-dormant volcanoes; the increased areas of drought and desertification which have led to widespread crop failures; the retreat and often total disappearance of rivers, lakes and glaciers; and all this while, paradoxically, the ice caps melt, the permafrost thaws and the ocean levels rise, devastating many low-lying coastlines. On every continent, currents and jetstreams are being permanently displaced, which in turn are causing all kinds of extreme weather patterns – like this unexpected snowfall right here in late spring.

Calder doesn't know where he's going but neither does he care. He just continues to march on, irrespective, and the weather be damned. He's thinking of the horse, the pinto mare he rode across the mountain landscape, and he wishes he had her with him right now so he could make some real distance. That seems like a long time ago and he's almost nostalgic for the thrill of adventure – escaping the FSC, driving away in the cruiser, claiming sanctuary. He may have been a loser back then but at least he was alive. Right now, he feels like the waking dead. Should he steal another vehicle? Should he descend into a life of larceny just to survive? Or maybe suicide is the best option, after all. He thought about it at the Green Earth plant but here the notion seems to be staring him down, like a hobgoblin dancing in front of his eyes, making faces and daring him to do it.

He finds himself walking amongst tall trees, a park of some kind. The thick limbs arch overhead, clawing across the snow-filled sky, strangely menacing. The chill is beginning to get to him too, creeping inside his outerwear so that he feels hot and cold at the same time. His legs feel like they're weakening but he tries to keep going, even if he doesn't know why. For some reason, he just has to keep going.

Ahead of him is a small pond where children play in the summer but now it's just an irregular black shape, a patch of frigid water. In his mind, he's thinking he'd like to reach that water in order to let the horse drink. She's thirsty and needs to rest and he tries to lead her over towards it but his head becomes dizzy and he doesn't make it. His knees buckle and his body crumples down, the flat of his cheek coming to rest in the soft snow.

Through half closed eyes, he thinks he can see a squirrel sitting up, its tail high and ruffled, and he smiles at it, happy to see a sign of life, glad that such innocence can still exist. The squirrel needs no identity, so why should he? It's a

profound question, too deep for him to answer, and he's still trying to think it through even as his brain shuts down and he slips into unconsciousness.

It's late when Peco Leandros arrives home from his trip and finds he has yet another guest under his magnificent roof. Not only is he housing two members of the Jonas family but also a chilled and exhausted Calder Quinlan, who was lucky he didn't suffer severe frostbite while slumped in the park.

It was Arran and her Uncle Wilmott who found him after following his footprints, not a difficult task in the fresh snow. In fact, it was easier finding him than trying to carry him back, neither of them having the requisite body strength to lift him easily. When they finally got him into the house, they lay him down, wrapped him in a duvet and, on Wilmott's prescription, fed him a double dose of sleep inducer in a steaming glass of hot milk and honey. Sometimes, old-fashioned remedies are still the best.

In the end, they probably saved his life, only to find that Peco Leandros is far from happy at having this one-time fugitive under his roof.

"He's untraceable," Arran explains for the umpteenth time.

"So you keep saying. But how do you know they're not trying? How do you know they're not launching an investigation even as we speak?"

"It doesn't work like that," she replies.

"You don't know that."

"He's been wiped from every database, so how can they launch an investigation?"

"Because they can, that's all. And if they do, I'll be accused of hiding him here."

Arran tries hard to keep her emotions in check. "You're not hiding him," she says slowly. "The hospital officially released him into my uncle's care and my uncle happens to be staying here. You don't have to worry."

He gives an empty laugh. "I don't have to worry, I don;t have to worry. Are you kidding me? Listen, it's nothing personal. I like you guys, all of you, you're good people... but he can't stay here and that's that."

"Who can't stay?" This fresh voice belongs to Zee, who's just coming through the door after her evening out. She looks a little flushed, as if she's been partying too much, but that's not unusual. "Somebody going to answer me?"

"Calder's here," Arran tells her.

"Really? You sprung him loose? Cool! So why's my dad so pissed off?"

"Because he's worried. He thinks the feds are going to break down the door."

"And are they?"

"No, it's all legit, like I told him. The hospital released him to us."

"So what's the problem?"

"I don't know, ask your dad."

"What's the problem, Dad?"

Leandros turns to his daughter, impatient with a conversation that's being carried on as if he weren't present. "The problem is, I don't want him here. Is that clear enough?"

"Okay, so it's simple," says Zee. "As soon as he's okay, he leaves."

"And goes where?" says Arran.

Zee looks at her as if the solution's obvious. "With you, smartass, where else?"

"With me? You mean to U-Tech?"

"Sure. He can't stay here and he's sure as hell not going back to the boonies."

"Do you mind?" says Wilmott Jonas.

"Okay, so it's not the boonies."

"That's not what I meant."

He's referring to her swearing but it goes right past her.

"Whatever. But you got to agree, it's the only answer, right? Hey, Dad, whaddya say? Am I right, or am I right? When you take Arran to this science place, wherever it is, you take her boyfriend too. You drop 'em both off and that's it, you never have to see 'em again. What's the problem?"

They all gaze at her but she's already got her head in the fridge, searching for something sweet and syrupy. It's her regular ritual after drinking too much.

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It's Calder himself who settles the matter. He's still bleary-eyed and still very much the worse for wear but after Arran comes into his room to explain the awkward situation, he asks if he can see Peco Leandros alone.

When the man arrives, he says: "Mr. Leandros, I know you don't want me here."

"It's not that I don't want you."

"But I'm a liability and a threat. It's okay, I understand. So let me come straight to the point, if I may."

"Say what you gotta say."

"I need cash and you need to get rid of me, so here's what I suggest. Give me back five million of the twenty I gave you and I'll be out of here tomorrow. Do we have a deal?"

"You want me to pay you to leave?"

"It's a business proposition. I thought you'd appreciate that."

Leandros rubs a hand over his face. "Like father, like son, huh? Strange, your dad told me you don't have a head for this kind of thing."

"He was wrong. I just never wanted to use it, that's all."

Leandros nods slowly. "Five?"

"In cash, same as I paid you."

"Sure, what the hell all. Done."

"Plus a lift to U-Tech."

"Don't push it."

"We'd be out of here first thing."

"Yeah, yeah... Okay, fine, but first thing. Any delay, the whole thing's off and I kick you out anyway."

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Exactly twelve hours after the deal is struck, the Leandros company's private VTOL is ready and waiting on the mansion's front pad.

First stop on the route is the community of Biblion to drop off the Doctor, then on to the U-Tech Institute, situated high in the Pacific northwest. The goodbyes are neither long nor complicated. Finally, the three guests climb aboard, the doors are closed and the pilot makes his final preparations for take-off.

For the passengers, there's little excitement and even less conversation. All seem lost in their own thoughts, a mixture of anticipation and foreboding.

While Arran has the prospect of an interview and possible entry into an academic course, Calder has nothing at all to which he can look forward and the very best he can do is try to keep body and soul together, to make the money stretch out as long as he can and to hope for the kind of miracle they only believe in at Biblion.

As for Wilmott Jonas, he knows he's going home to face perhaps the saddest, loneliest year of his life. His wife is deceased, he may never see Arran again and, at the end, there's the certainty of termination without any equivalent belief in his mind that there's something beyond. It's not that he lacks faith but that he's torn. He really wants to believe. But as someone who's devoted his whole life to the sensible reality of medical science, he's simply not sure. The Heavenly Afterlife? The Angelic Spirit? The Savior Himself? It's not that he has doubts as much as questions. And it's the questions which provoke the qualms. All he really knows for certain is that he gave his word to "Keep the Promise" and he must now fulfill that vow. Whatever else he may be, he's a man of principle and that means his own personal doubts can play no part in his decision.

At one point during the flight, he exchanges a glance with Calder and, for the briefest moment, there's a tinge of recognition, of mutual understanding of the other's hopeless situation. The result is nothing more than a minimal nod of acceptance before each turns inward again, back to the battleground of his own thoughts.

I/D: PART FOUR
The Genetics of U-Tech

From the altitude of the approaching craft, the acclaimed architecture of the U-Tech Institute appears as a series of alternating black and white cubes on a green hillside overlooking the ocean, thus giving rise to its common nickname, “Chess.”

On closer inspection, however, a visitor would find that the striking concept has been somewhat marred by a plethora of extensions, out-buildings, residencies and other functional additions – a tangible analogy of how the organization itself has expanded beyond the simple grandeur of its original vision, as stated in its official charter:

A CATALYST FOR SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENT

The Insititute began as a pioneer project when the prohibitive cost of advanced science and technology caused several of the leading research universities to pool their resources, instead of the escalating waste of duplication and competition. From this cooperative concept, U-Tech has today progressed to become almost a central clearing house for all manner of developmental projects: a complex and often intertwined combination of government, military and privately-funded ventures. Many of the departments, like nano-tech, bio medics and quantum computing, are based on campus but others, such as the particle accelerator and the space launch facility, are too vast and must be based elsewhere.

Inevitably, most of the work is of the highest security, so not only has a secretive culture emerged but also a widely circulating series of myths, rumors and conspiracy theories about what actually goes on behind those tinted glass walls. To help counter such stories, the strategic decision was taken early that the most highly visible face of U-Tech would be the Tranquility station for experimental research, a lunar-based laboratory for astronomy, solar climatology, communications, zero gravity and a whole spectrum of other studies. As a

deliberate policy, the rotating corps of astronauts and engineers which serve this permanent mission have been publicized to the point of celebrity status, just like in the old days of Gemini and Apollo, except that in the present era, the PR effect is beyond anything that Glenn or Armstrong could have possibly imagined. These days, sophisticated webcams beam live lunar images to every child's laptop; upscale tourists can stay at an adjacent lunar hotel; and brand sponsorships are emblazoned on astronaut uniforms, just like professional athletes.

Despite all of this intense growth, however, the U-Tech Institute continues to maintain its tradition as a place of academic study and its mandate includes the enrollment each year of several thousand of the most elite post-graduates to fill out its complement. For Arran Jonas to be accepted would therefore be more than a triumph, it would be a major coup, and even though Peco Leandros scored a significant victory in securing her a first interview, it remains to be seen whether she can obtain a full-fledged scholarship seat. She's well aware of the barriers that lie ahead but she simply refuses to conceive the possibility of failure. As the VTOL descends to the main entry pad, her eyes gleam like lasers and, although she still feels considerable nervous trepidation, she can hardly wait to clamber out and get going. Calder has never seen her like this and all he can do is follow along, trailing after her self-propelled determination.

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Their idea is for Arran to present herself at the institute's welcome center, since she's the only one who would pass the entry scan, while Calder takes a transport into the small neighboring town of Highcliff to find accommodations for the two of them: perhaps some kind of small hotel for a couple of weeks, during which time he can seek out a more permanent place to live.

Beyond that immediate goal, he's thinking he might be able to find some kind of cash-based job to sustain the funds he brought with him. He understands well enough that such employment would no doubt be menial but, at this stage, it's as

much as he can expect to achieve and even that would be a major step forward based on his recent experience. After that, who knows? Everything depends on whether Arran is accepted into the academic program. If so, then they'll have to pay for school fees as well. If not, it's back to square one for both of them. As a fall back, there's always Biblion, of course, where at least they'd be accepted without question and they wouldn't starve – but they've agreed they don't even want to think about that option; at least, not until every other possibility is exhausted.

As discouraging as the prospects appear to be, however, and despite his black mood while flying up here, Calder is starting to feel strangely upbeat as he strolls alone along the quaint, small-town sidewalks of Highcliff. There's a warm sun on his forehead from a relatively unpolluted sky and he takes the time to savor the enticing smell of fresh bread that emanates from a bakery's street-side emitters, followed by the waft of espresso from the coffee emporium next door. At one point, he's even surprised to find himself actually humming some long-forgotten tune. The biggest change, of course, is that he's actually *free* to stroll. This is the first time he's enjoyed any kind of liberation since this whole thing started and not only is he invulnerable to the omnipresent sensor scans, he's starting to appreciate that he also has nothing else to worry about either. He lost his parents, it's true, but that also means no domineering, unscrupulous father or uncaring, materialist mother to complicate his existence. He has no career either but, then again, he has no deadlines, no stress, no timesheets to fill out and no office politics with which to contend. And although he's still suffering a few after-effects from his surgery, not to mention his more recent exposure to frostbite, he chooses to ignore the hurt in order to relish the simple joy of having survived. Against significant odds, he's somehow managed not to die, either from violence or surgery or suicide, and that, he thinks, must surely rank as some kind of achievement.

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"Amazing," says Arran. "I had the most amazing day."

As she steps off the transport from U-Tech, she throws her arms around him.

"How about you? Did you have a good day? Where are we going? Did you find some place to stay?"

"Okay, which question you want me to answer?"

"First, tell me about you."

"Me? Well, you know..."

"No, I don't know. You've got to tell me."

He looks at her, then takes her hand as they start walking. "You like pasta?"

"Sure, I had it with Zee. How can you not like pasta?"

"Good, because I found this little place..."

"But how was your day?"

He looks at her. "Great," he says definitively. "I had a great day."

"Why, what did you do? I want to know everything."

"There's nothing to know."

"What did you do?"

"I found a pretty good hotel, not too expensive. Well, maybe not a hotel, more like a bed and breakfast, but it's clean... I think you'll like it."

"Of course I'll like it. And?"

"And what?"

"And why do you feel great? What happened?"

"Nothing, I told you. That's the point. Absolutely nothing happened. I just walked around. I didn't get chased, I didn't get arrested, I didn't get attacked and it didn't snow. Not one flake. I can sincerely say I had a great day."

She laughs because she's in a laughing mood and then links her arm in his so she can pull him closer. "And how about me? Aren't you going to ask what kind of a day I had?"

"I don't need to ask. I can see. How did your interview go?"

"Well, I don't want to tempt fate..."

"Why not? There's nothing fate can do to us that we haven't already been through."

"Maybe, but still."

"When do you get to know?"

"Tomorrow. That's when they tell me if I can sit the scholarship test."

"There's a scholarship? That'd be useful."

"They have to decide whether I'm eligible first. But they said it looked promising. That was the word they used."

"So it went well?"

"There was this big room but only one man came in. His name was Freigh, Professor Freigh. Big brown beard, very serious. The first thing he told me was that it's mid-term and they don't usually take anybody mid-term, so it didn't start too well. Then he told me that he'd been asked to give me the interview because somebody I knew had some influence, which he didn't appreciate. He wanted me to know that."

"Who'd he mean? Leandros?"

"He didn't say but I assume so. What he did say was that he'd have refused, influence or not, if it hadn't been for my grades."

"So what was the interview about? What did you have to do?"

"Basically, I had to answer questions, dozens of questions... about me, about my life, my goals, that sort of thing... but every so often, he'd throw in something tricky, physics or math, like he was trying to catch me out."

"And did he?"

"Not a chance. Why, you think I don't know my stuff?" She punches him on the arm, which makes him wince. "Shame on you," she says.

"So what does a scholarship mean exactly? They pay everything?"

"Well, no, not everything. They pay tuition but not living expenses. That I have to find for myself."

"Okay, we can fund that."

"Sure, but I didn't want to tell him that. Anyway, when I told him it might be a problem, you know what he said? He said he might be able to find me a position as a research assistant."

"Really? That's fantastic!"

"Wait, wait... It doesn't mean anything yet. I still have to take the test."

"And this position, research assistant. It would mean extra work, on top of your studies?"

"Some, I guess."

He pretends to think about it. "You know, I think I'm starting to like it. You get to study, you earn the money, and me, I'll just laze around, become a bum. Or a playboy. Or a gigolo, how about that? Good pay, all cash, no questions asked."

Another punch on the arm. "Keep talking like that," she says, "I'll put a knife in your heart myself."

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They enjoy a thick minestrone, followed by tortellini with a Bolognese sauce, and sip their slow way through a glass of wine, although they have to be careful. Neither are very used to alcohol.

Then they go back to the small hotel that Calder found and, after all the chatter, they become silent.

As he told her, it's a modest place with small rooms and a homespun décor. It's simple but it's theirs – and they wrap their arms around each other, just thankful for everything. It's a natural progression to the first real kiss since the morning they vacated the loft and they hold it, eyes closed and lips glued together, for a long time. To Calder, it's not a sensual kiss, it's more like a sugary, prom-date kind of kiss, but that's the way she is and he tries to respect that.

"Did I ever thank you?" he says quietly.

"Thank me for what?"

"For everything."

"No, you didn't. At least..."

"At least what?"

Her voice becomes whispery. "At least, not in the way I want to be thanked."

Slowly and deliberately, she turns off the light and then, very tentatively, they start to undress each other. They continue until they're both completely naked and, for a moment or two, they just stand there gazing at each other in the near darkness. Only then do their bodies touch. He feels her shudder and, from that point, they're all over each other, their limbs intertwining, their tongues searching, and they fall easily into the bed that's waiting. The sheets are cold and she wraps herself around him even tighter. And whether it's real and permanent, or just the combination of positive circumstances, she doesn't seem to care. It's her first time but it's not painful as she feared. It's gentle and peaceful and exquisite, perhaps all the more so because it's been such long time in coming. Very carefully, he inserts his way into her, fraction by fraction, moment by moment, as she becomes more moist and her breathing becomes more shallow. But still he waits, right on the edge, trying to control it until she can be with him. It's not easy and he has to hold back until her urgency builds. She wants him to accelerate but he does the opposite. He slows down, obliging her to demand more of him with her body, the desperation growing inside her to the point that she's silently pleading. By this time, he too is aching, longing for release. The rhythm grows and surges and when the moment finally arrives, it's like an emotion that just explodes out of them. They don't scream but their backs arch, the intake of air stops – and then, only then, gradually do they collapse down, bound together by the heat and the sweat into the radiance of the afterglow.

Permission for Arran to take the test is granted and, three days later, she finds herself alone in a windowless room with only an touchscreen for company. There's a database but it's limited to certain reference material only, nothing that can really help with the problems they set her.

It's an all-day exam split into a number of segments, starting with advanced calculus and continuing with various aspects of nano mechanics, genetic analysis, fusion practicality and other primary areas of study; plus of course, basic quantum theory, a requirement for all entrants given the institute's reputation in this field. She thinks she's done well but when she receives the results, she surprises even herself. Not only has she aced most of the segments but she even found an attached notation from Freigh on her particle paper with the single word "commendable."

That evening, they celebrate over home-made tacos at the new duplex apartment that Calder has found, a modest one-bedroom affair, situated not far from the Highcliff mall. Since they don't possess a private vehicle, the nearby transit is especially convenient. Afterwards, they stroll along to a western style bar and Calder shows his worth in a jam session, laying down some fairly wild riffs on the synth. He first learned the keyboard, like so many rich kids, with classical piano lessons but switched to metal at college where it became like a late-night stress reliever, pounding his problems away, experimenting with sounds that only played inside his headphones.

"Where'd you learn that stuff?" the bar's manager asks him.

"School, mostly. You know, just fooling around."

"Yeah? Well, you got an interesting touch, that's for sure. You ever think about taking that up, you let me know."

“Taking it up?”

“Yeah, I might be able to arrange a gig or two.”

“Here?”

“Here and there. Sometimes an act comes in, they don’t have no backup, so we do our best with what’s local. You don’t mind accompaniment?”

“Not at all. I could use the work.”

“Good, good. What’s your name, young fella?”

For the first time in a long time, there’s no hesitation. “Calder... My name’s Calder.”

“Okay, Calder, I’ll let you know.”

And so it turns out; not much at first, but gradually the opportunities begin to present themselves and he tries to make the most of them. One time he’s the sole instrumentalist for an older woman with a haggard face and a cowboy hat who’s trying to make a comeback. Another occasion, he sits in as a full-fledged member of a young band whose keyboard player just got himself arrested. The pay is minimal but it’s cash and nobody asks any further questions.

Eventually, almost without even realizing it, Calder and Arran find themselves settling into an entirely new life and they’re as grateful as any refugees who finally emerge from despair. He has his music and she has her equations; and while they have to cope with all the usual chores just like any young couple – shopping, cooking, cleaning, laundry and so forth – they’re finally living out the happy-ever-after scenario that Arran, in particular, has always dreamed about. She even calls her Uncle Wilmott to tell him how well it’s all going. In many ways it’s like a respite, a time to forget the difficulties and the hardships and dive headlong into the simple joy of normality.

But it doesn't last, because such idyllic situations seldom do. Nature's own process is called entropy, the tendency of all things to descend towards chaos, and for Calder and Arran, it occurs a great deal quicker than they would have liked.

• • •

It all starts with Arran, not through her chosen field of study which concerns the mind-warping properties of quantum flux behavior, but with the after-hours employment that Professor Freigh organized for her.

This side job is not exactly what she expected when he talked about her being a research assistant. In reality, it's far more mundane. Instead of working in a lab or a library, she's assigned to the HR department where she's required to find anecdotes and testimonials for recruitment propaganda, a task that by any measure is well below her capabilities. On the positive side, however, the rate of pay is sufficient to help with her upkeep and, in addition, she also gets to meet all kinds of students and faculty in various corners of the institute.

For these interview expeditions, she's been issued a low-grade security classification, not enough to provide access to the most restricted areas but more than the average graduate is permitted, and this allows her some insight into the netherworld of U-Tech academia.

It's on one of these forays that she accidentally catches sight of something she's really not meant to see. It happens when she's sent to meet a noted alumnus of the genetics laboratories. As she enters a small conference room, she finds two academics she's never seen before gazing through what appears to be a two-way mirror. Beyond is some kind of physical activity area, with exercise machines just like a commercial gym, except that the people training are wired up so that their reactions can be monitored. There are four of them, all young men, stripped to the waist and facing the other way. From a distance, they could easily be a team of athletes, or perhaps military recruits; nothing at all out of the ordinary. Arran

doesn't want to interrupt and she remains politely near the door until the two observers realize her presence.

"Who are you?" scowls the older of the two, a pudgy figure, balding with just a horseshoe of gray hair.

"Sorry," she says, "I'm looking for a Mr. Haas..."

"That would be me," says the other one, his voice easier. He's taller, with tufty hair like steel wool. "May I help you?" he asks her.

Meanwhile, his shorter colleague fingers a panel on a small console to adjust the polarization and make the mirror opaque. But it's not quickly enough and, as Arran approaches, she manages to catch a closer glimpse of one of the subjects on the treadmill just as he turns around. When she sees his face, she's stunned into silence.

"Excuse me... may I help you?" says Haas again.

"No... thank you," she replies, then blinks for a moment before changing her mind. "That is, yes, I think so."

"Perhaps you'd be good enough to make up your mind."

"Yes, I was sent over... I'm here to interview you. We have an appointment, I think..."

"Oh, right, from the HR office. They sent you in here, just like that?"

"Yes... well, no. That is, the woman outside said you'd be here."

At this, the balding man becomes even more outraged. "Dammit, she had no right to do that." Then he powers out, evidently to check on how such a breach of security could have possibly occurred.

Haas smiles briefly. "I think he's a little upset."

"Yes, I'm sorry. I'll come back, you know, some other time."

That's when she turns to go, suddenly anxious to get out of there. He tries to speak to her but she's already out the door, totally overwhelmed by what she wasn't supposed to see.

"Nice meeting you," he says to the empty space.

• • •

Later, Arran gets back to the apartment to find that Calder's not there, which only gives her even more cause for concern. When he finally gets in, at some time close to midnight, she asks him in a very direct manner where he was today.

"Today?" he replies casually. "Well, let's see, today I went for a run, then I had a tuna sandwich, then I made a couple of calls, then..."

"No, I mean this evening."

"Why? You getting jealous already?"

"I'm serious. Please, just tell me, okay?"

He shrugs. "I was at the studio. I told you I was going."

"The studio? What time?"

"What time?"

"What time were you there?"

"I guess I showed up around six, maybe a little later. Why? What's this about?"

She looks at him, considering how to phrase it, but then she wonders why she doesn't just address the issue directly. "Have you ever been in the genetics lab?"

"The genetics lab? You mean at the institute? You know I can't get in there."

"So you weren't there this evening?"

"Arran, what's going on?"

"I saw you."

"You saw me? Where?"

"In the lab."

"Whoa, slow down. Let me get this straight. You saw *me*? In the genetics lab?"

"On a treadmill."

He laughs. "On a treadmill? Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course I'm sure. It was like I wasn't meant to see it. You know, the kind of stuff they usually keep classified. But I kind of barged in and... and there you were, on a treadmill all wired up. I saw you through the glass."

"On a treadmill."

"Yes."

"Well, okay, you caught me. I'm working out for the Olympics. I was going to surprise you..."

"Calder, stop. I saw you, I swear I did."

"People from Biblion don't swear."

"Don't make fun. I know what I saw."

"Sure. You saw someone who kind of looks like me."

"No, it *was* you."

"Well, it couldn't have been, because I wasn't there."

"I'm telling you..."

"All right, all right... Let's examine this logically, shall we? How long did you see me for? A minute? An hour?"

"Maybe a second or two," she says quietly.

"A second or two? And you're convinced it was me?"

"Yes."

"Your honor, by her own admission, the witness was there for a second or two. Yes, that's right, a mere second or two, it was through a glass and yet she says she's convinced, absolutely convinced, she saw me. I put it to this court..."

"Will you stop."

"I will if you will."

"It doesn't bother you?" she asks him bluntly.

"Bother me? Why should it bother me? It didn't happen. Are you *sure* you weren't mistaken?"

"Yes, how many more times?"

"So why don't you just ask them?"

"Ask them? Ask them what?"

"How should I know? What it's all about, I guess. I mean, why don't you just tell them you think you saw a friend of yours in there and see what they say?"

"I couldn't do that. I mean I don't think I was meant to see it. They'll just say it's classified."

"They might. But you won't know unless you ask."

"You think I should?"

"Up to you."

"Might get me into trouble."

"Then don't do anything."

"But it's bugging me. You were at the studio the whole time?"

"I just got back."

"No, what I mean is, you didn't fall asleep or pass out or something?"

"Oh, you mean maybe I was abducted? You think I'm being trained as a secret agent without my knowledge?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

"This is a really silly conversation."

"Calder! There has to be some explanation."

"I've got it. Maybe it's an experiment. It's the genetics lab, right? So maybe they're turning me into a fly. A mutant superhero."

"Calder!"

"What?"

"I saw you there."

"Yes, I know, on a treadmill."

"All right, all right, fine. Don't believe me."

He steps forward and puts his arms around her. "It's not that I don't believe you. I do. I believe you *think* you saw me but I wasn't there, I was at Shale's studio. I didn't fall asleep, I didn't pass out and I wasn't secretly transported, either by telekinesis or by city transit. I was there all the time, playing my bio-tech heart out for five hours and there are over a dozen witnesses who can testify to my presence. Ergo, it couldn't have been me, right? Does that amazing scientific brain of yours recognize these simple facts?" He waits but this time, she simply doesn't answer, so he says: "Good. Now can we please get some sleep? I'm wiped."

• • •

In the morning, however, it's Calder who speaks the words they're both thinking. He doesn't even have to re-introduce the topic. He just says it quietly while pouring milk on his cereal. "It could have been a clone."

She looks at him across the small kitchen table. "I know, I had the same idea."

He picks up a spoon and starts to eat while she digs in to her customary yogurt. But neither of them say any more because their heads are too full of the notion, each of them only too aware that while this answer may be logical, it's also the most outlandish.

After the first human infant was cloned at a clandestine lab in Korea, the media had a field day and the international community was finally forced into taking action, effectively banning the practice via a strongly worded treaty signed by

every member of the United Nations. It came to be known as the Seoul Accord. Yet that doesn't mean it doesn't still happen. The methodology exists, the genie's out of the bottle and, inevitably, the netlink is alive with gossip and innuendo. The standing theory seems to be that if such activity were indeed taking place, it would most likely be within the laboratories of a government-authorized, closed-door establishment. And if it were indeed happening like that on this continent, then the most obvious place would be U-Tech. Where else, they say, would they have both the skills and the necessary funding? It's a reasonable argument; but, as yet, it's merely circumstantial. The fact is that nobody has stepped forward to name names and, more to the point, nobody has ever produced evidence that such experiments even exist.

"What do you think?" says Arran eventually.

Calder sits back and sips his coffee. "I think it's got a chance."

Arran looks at him. "What does?"

"The track we cut last night. If the whole album's as good as that, we may just have something."

"I was talking about the clone thing."

"Yeah, I know," he replies, giving her one of his juvenile grins.

"Seriously... what if it's true?"

"And what if we're getting paranoid?"

"I just know what I saw."

"Here we go again. So okay, Ms. Detective. Let's assume you've seen something you shouldn't have. What're you going to do about it? Email the feds? 'Hey guys, by the way, do you happen to be doing a bit of human cloning over at U-Tech?'"

"I don't know."

"Arran, look... Do me a favor. You worked all your life for this chance and you're there now, you made it. Don't blow it, all right?"

"I won't blow it."

"You might. And if you do, it won't be pretty, believe me. I know what I'm talking about."

"I can't just do nothing."

"Sure you can."

"No, I can't."

"Arran, we're happy. I'm happy, you're happy. What's so wrong with that?"

"How can you be happy? You're a non-person. You don't exist."

"Didn't I just make you breakfast?"

"And now we find out you've got a clone."

"We haven't found out anything of the sort."

"You sound like you don't care."

"Yeah, well, if you ask me, caring is over-rated."

"You know," she says thoughtfully, "even if your album does succeed, it won't have your name on it."

"Yeah, I know, I thought of that. I'll invent something. How about Master Keys?"

"Talk about making a name for yourself."

"That's funny."

"Just don't call yourself 'the one and only' because you won't be."

"That's even funnier."

"The point is, the more successful you become, the more certain people will want to look into your background."

"So let them look. I'll cope with it. Price of fame."

"You don't understand. I'm not talking about talk shows and hotlines. I'm talking about whoever developed that clone. You don't think they have an investment to protect? You don't think they'll come looking for the original if he starts making a spectacle of himself?"

There's a long, penetrating silence as he digests the implications. Then, not without some bitterness, he says: "You're a real killjoy, you know that?" But his frustration is not really directed at her. She just happens to be the nearest person. "All right, fine. Let's assume it's true, just for the moment. Why me? Why did they choose me out of all the humans on the planet? Can you answer me that?"

"They had to choose somebody, so why couldn't it be you?"

"Yeah? You really believe that? That's like a thirteen billion to one shot. And another thing... How do they produce an exact replica of me as I am now? I mean, they can't just clone a fully adult human, right? It's not a manufacturing process. They'd have had to start from scratch. So what did they do? Steal my parents' DNA? Replicate me the very same moment I was born? Come on, it doesn't make any sense."

"No, but there's another theory."

"What's that?"

"A process of elimination."

"I don't understand."

"All right, imagine this. They begin with many samples of DNA. Easy enough to obtain. Then they induce birth and produce a crèche of cloned children, which they watch closely. Which is of average size and weight? Which develops the most common features... hair color, shape of face, measurements and so forth? Meanwhile these clones are growing... being taught, or trained, or whatever you want to call it. Then, when they're mature, their handlers select the most promising from an appearance point-of-view and search the database for someone with similar features."

"Like me."

"Well, you have to admit, in a physical sense, you're almost perfectly average."

"Thanks a lot."

"Then, once they have the right features, all they have to do is some fine-tuning on the clone to make it look identical. A little plastic surgery, a small nip-and-tuck here and there. And bingo, before you know it, they've got the perfect Calder Quinlan look-alike. After that, they steal your identity and educate the clone. They can't give it your memories and experience but they know all the basic facts of your background. They know your skills. They know your likes and dislikes. They can even replicate your speech patterns. What else is there?"

Calder just stares at her, astounded at how rational it all sounds. And he has to acknowledge that if they were indeed going to do it, that would no doubt be the way. "How'd you come up with all this?"

"I'm a scientist, Calder. I know how they think."

"You're scary, you know that?"

"It's not me who's scary."

"But what possible use could I be to them? Okay, so I get to inherit the corporation but what do they want with real estate and pornography?"

“My guess? You’re just a test. If it works with you, they can go on to bigger and better things.”

“Like what?”

“Like anything. How about replicating some head of government? Or some figurehead? What happens if one of the terrorist big-shots suddenly changes his mind and says our civilization is not the devil’s creation after all? What if he stands up and says we’re his best friends? There’s no end to the possibilities.”

The mental images are overwhelming and Calder has to refocus just to steady himself. In mere minutes, she’s managed to think it all through and figure it all out. It makes no sense, he keeps telling himself. It’s more than ridiculous, it’s ludicrous.

But no matter how much he tries to convince himself, there’s still some tiny nagging doubt, due in no small part to his trust in Arran’s rapidly developing intellect.

• • •

As a follow up, the first thing Arran does is swallow her own fear and contact campus HR in order rearrange her interview with Haas, the taller of the two men she met briefly in genetics. He’s not a current member of the faculty, just an outsider with close ties, but he seemed nice enough and she’s thinking that with a little guile, she might be able to pry loose some information about what goes on in that lab.

It doesn’t quite work out like that. After half an hour with him in the library, she realizes that all he wants to do is talk about himself and his accomplishments in the genetics of fish farming. There’s no mention of human cloning, not even remotely, so she has to circle around a little just to bring it up.

"About yesterday," she says, "I just wanted to say I'm sorry for skipping out like that."

"That's okay."

"It's just that I suddenly remembered something, you know, that I'd forgotten to do."

"No problem at all."

"You still take an interest in what goes on in the department here?"

"Not really. I follow developments, of course, but to say I take an interest would be an exaggeration."

"Was that some kind of experiment you were watching?"

"Experiment? No, no, just a few tests. Fairly boring but Dr. Vandenburg does like to talk, I'm afraid. Went to see him for a few minutes, just say hello, he insisted on giving me the whole guided tour." Haas gives an easy laugh.

"Can you tell me what they were about? The tests you were watching? Just for background. A sense of reality."

"No, to be honest, I don't think I can. I hate to say it but I wasn't really listening. No, wait, don't put that in your article." Another laugh.

Arran smiles dutifully, then looks down at her notes as if thinking about the next question. She starting to doubt everything this guy says but she's not sufficiently skilled as a journalist to probe any further and, failing any instant brainwaves, she's reluctantly obliged to bring the interview to a close. But at least she's discovered the name of the older man who was there with him, Dr. Vandenburg, and she considers that to be the next lead she should follow.

That doesn't work, either. His department informs her that they're sorry but he's just too busy to take any appointments at the present time and they refuse to suggest when he might possibly be free.

Frustrated, she opens up a terminal screen right there in the library and begins an on-line search for anything related to U-Tech genetics but, of course, that throws up nothing relevant either. It was a vain hope anyway. If cloning is so super-secret, they're hardly likely to advertise the latest developments on their netlink.

She sits back in her chair and sighs. She's out of luck and out of ideas – and that's when she sees him again.

He's right there, near the library reception counter, and he's looking directly at her. He even waves as he heads across towards her. It's creepy and she's on the verge of panic. Her skin starts to crawl and she's not sure whether to just sit there and face down the target of all her detective work, or to get up and run while she still can. She looks around to see if there's any help she can summon but she doesn't know anyone in here and, besides, no one seems to be noticing anything strange. They're all just going about their business, part of their normal working day. Meanwhile he's getting closer. Fight or flight? She has no idea what to do.

"Hey," he says, as he sits down casually at her table. "Boy, you're hard to find."

Her throat feels hoarse. "You've been looking for me?"

"You really think I'm him, don't you?" He laughs out loud. "It's me, you idiot."

She stares at him. "Calder?"

"I knew this would happen." He reaches into his jacket pocket. "Here," he says, bringing out her dog-eared book, her favorite one from Biblion. "This is yours."

"But how... Where did you get this?"

"I brought it from home so you'd know it's me. You should see your face."

She's not sure whether to believe him or not. He certainly looks and sounds like Calder. She tries to think fast but it's difficult. "Okay," she says, "okay, if you're

Calder, tell me this. That night in Biblion when we snuck out of the clinic, where did we go?"

"To the cathedral to see a friend of your Uncle Wilmott keep the promise. Are you satisfied now?"

She still can't believe it. "But how did you get in here?"

"Shh, keep your voice down." He looks around, concerned that someone may have overheard. Then he jerks his head towards the exit, encouraging her to get up and follow him outside.

They emerge from the building into bright sunlight and he leads her to a small grassy quadrangle with a quiet path across its diagonal. A few evergreens provide shade and they find a bench under one of them. They sit down and Calder looks around. "Are there sensors?" he whispers, hardly daring to move his lips.

"I don't know."

"Probably visual only. I doubt they'd monitor conversations. No work would ever get done. Let's just avoid key words, all right?"

"Like what?"

"Like the one beginning with 'c'... You with me?"

She nods, even if she's still a little uncertain, even now.

"Okay, so after you left this morning, I had an idea and I wanted to check it out."

"What kind of idea?"

"I thought I'd simply arrive at the gate, tell them my name and see if the scan would let me through. And it did, just like that. I mean, hell, can you believe it?"

"You shouldn't have done that. What would have happened if it hadn't worked?"

“Not much. I had some mumbo-jumbo prepared about an appointment mix-up. I would have just apologized and walked away. But they actually let me in. You know what that means? It means I’m registered here, my name’s in the database.”

“So they’re not only making...”

“Don’t say it,” he reminds her. He pauses as a small group of students pass them on the pathway. They’re speaking Spanish, some South American dialect, but they’re so deep into their conversation, they hardly notice Calder and Arran.

Once they’re far enough out of earshot, she continues. “They’re not only making ‘c’ things, they’re also providing them with ‘i’ things which they get by stealing them. It’s unbelievable.”

“Criminal was the word I had in mind.” He sits back and gazes up at the bright sky but there’s no blue today, just a bland shade of gray-beige. Around them are the large black and white cubes of the Chess, with esthetically designed spaces in between: some with covered walkways, others with open grassy areas like this. On the surface, there’s nothing untoward about any of it.

“So what do we do now?” she asks him.

“I don’t have a clue. You?”

“We’ve got to do something.”

“Agreed, but what?”

“Well, I’d say the first thing is for you to get out of here. You don’t want to meet him by accident... or somebody who knows him.”

“It,” says Calder, correcting her. “He’s an ‘it’.”

“Okay, whatever, but you should go anyway.”

He looks at her, comes to a decision and nods. "Okay, you're right. Tell you what, why don't we both think about it and we'll talk when you get back tonight."

He leans over to give her a quick kiss, then gets to his feet, but she holds on to his arm, the way she did when they parted at the loft.

"Calder..."

"What?"

"Nothing. Be careful."

She watches him pace away, still a little affected by her earlier fear, and she clutches her precious novel tightly just for something solid to hold on to, a combination of familiarity and nostalgia. With all his prodigious imagination, Orwell never predicted human clones in "Nineteen Eighty-Four." It took another two centuries to realize that particular concept.

Calder and Arran huddle in their modest kitchen, eating take-out sushi with plastic chopsticks and drinking local beer from the bottle.

They're trying to work out a strategy, a battle plan, but so far they've come up with nothing except a recap of events so far, all based on a series of dubious assumptions... Assumption One: U-Tech appears to be into human cloning, which is against both federal law and international treaty but that's based only on Arran's two-second glimpse. Assumption Two: Calder is registered on the U-Tech database which, based on Assumption One, may possibly indicate that they organized his original identity theft in order to furnish the clone with credentials. Assumption Three: Actually, there is no Assumption Three. That's all they've got so far and they have no idea what to do with it.

"Let's just expose them," says Calder.

She take a moment to reply because her mouth is burning from too much wasabi. She's still not used to such food. "Expose them how?" she asks. "Online?"

"Nah, nobody believes that stuff. You can say the sky is green and find a million people who'll argue the case.

"How about one of those... What do they call it, like the mayor of Edifice always has when he wants to make an announcement. Yoiu know...

"You mean a media conference? What proof do we have?"

"Why do we need proof? They report stuff all the time without proof."

"You think they just listen to anyone who calls them with a story?"

She acknowledges the point. "You have any other ideas?" she asks him.

"We could call up just one journalist. If we get him interested, he may help us find the proof. What they call investigative journalism."

Arran thinks about it. "That might work," she agrees. "I know someone who works for the *Herald*."

"You mean *The Biblion Weekly Herald*?" He can't help smiling. "Why? You think cloning's against Christian principles? 'Thou shalt not copy thy neighbor.'"

"You're making fun again. I hate it when you do that."

"Sorry."

As a matter of fact, he's starting to change his mind about that. Going to the *Weekly Herald* may not be such a bad idea, after all. Once a small paper picks up a major story, the big boys can dive in because it doesn't have to be authentic, it just has to be out there. They start with: "Christian paper reports tales of human cloning." Then they follow up with: "U-Tech denies reports of human cloning." So far, so good, but then what? What happens after that? So it makes news for a couple of days. So what? How does a flat-out government denial help them?"

Then, in thinking about the government, something else occurs to him. "Wait a minute. What was the name of that lawyer? Franklin, right? Delmar Franklin."

"I didn't like him."

"No, me either, but he could be useful."

"How?"

"Why don't we just sue them?"

"Sue who?"

"I don't know. The institute, the feds... whoever cooked up this whole scheme."

"Can that be done?"

"Why not?"

"Nobody sues the government."

"Sure they do."

"Not people like us."

"So, it'll be a first."

"Calder... Come back to earth, will you? How are you going to pay a guy like Franklin, even if he does accept to do it? And besides..." She comes to a stop.

"Besides, what?" He sees that she's a little hesitant to respond. "What?" he insists.

"Even if it works... even if we win... Benitez said you could never get your identity back, no matter what."

"What if he's wrong? If we sue the government and win, they'll have to correct the error, won't they?"

"Calder... You're dreaming."

He's about to protest but he can't because he knows she's right, so he just takes a slug of his beer. It's a turn of events, he's thinking, that he's now the dreamer and she's the one who's the pragmatist.

"You know," she says with a wistful voice, "sometimes I think you and I... we can conquer the world. Other times, I don't know, I think we're just blown away by any tiny breeze that happens to come along."

"Yeah," he replies quietly, "I know."

"Maybe you're right, maybe we *are* happy. Maybe we should just leave well enough alone."

"Even with my clone wandering around in there?"

"Maybe."

Calder shrugs and picks up the last of the sushi. Then he puts it back down, uneaten. "Let's go out, get some dessert. This is depressing."

• • •

Later, as they're getting undressed, with Calder in the bedroom and Arran still in the bathroom, he has a sudden thought.

"You know, I didn't just get into U-Tech, I also got out."

"What's that?" she calls out through the half-closed door.

He waits until she emerges, fresh faced from her bath and looking cute in her panda-bear pj's. For a moment, he's distracted. "I said I didn't just get into U-Tech, I also got out."

"Which means?"

"Which means there's nothing to indicate that the person they've got registered as Calder Quinlan is a clone. No code, no number, nothing. This project is so secret they can't even afford to let institute security know about it."

"So?"

"Don't you see? That means the government database and the U-Tech database don't match. Everybody at U-Tech should be registered with the feds by

definition but this proves they're not. I can be Calder Quinlan when I'm in there but when I leave, I'm nothing again."

"How can that help us?"

"I'm not sure... but what if we could find a way to correlate the two?"

"You mean transfer the U-Tech info onto the government database?"

"Exactly."

"You're right! Then Calder Quinlan could exist in the outside world, too." She's beginning to get excited about this idea. "The question is, which Calder Quinlan?"

"How do you mean?"

"If they're training the clone to be you, maybe they're also training it to reappear... as you."

"You mean on the outside? Jesus, you're right! That damn thing could just walk out and take over my life... or what used to be my life. Hell, I never thought of that. It could just restart and continue from where I left off. My God!"

"If you stop swearing, I have another idea."

"What kind of idea?"

"Promise you'll stop swearing?"

"How about I keep swearing until you tell me?"

"How about I hit you upside the head with a pillow?"

He stares at her. "Who are you?" he says. "Sometimes you're a genius and sometimes..."

"Sometimes what?"

"I already told you one time."

She moves closer until their bodies are touching. "Tell me again." She's learned that with enough provocation, she can actually make him flush.

"Sometimes," he whispers, "it's like being back at high school."

"Does that mean you slept with all the girls at high school?"

"No... Well, not all of them."

She pulls his hair down until he's flat on his back and she's on top of him.

"What's your idea?" he asks her.

"Later. You can't talk and be erect at the same time."

"Whatever you say."

"You mean I'm the boss?"

"You are right now."

Two days later, Calder is back in Edifice, waiting to meet Manitel Benitez at a speakeasy. It's not the Lizard this time but the Sneak Thief, another of the man's über-chic haunts.

Once again, it was Arran who called Benitez to set it up. Based on their last encounter, he wasn't too happy to hear from her but she'd prepared herself and managed to engage his interest with the very first sentence she uttered. It came in the form of a question: "How'd you like a large stake in a porn business?"

As Calder waits, he sips a premium imported water whose logo shows a European glacier that no longer exists, and bides his time by humming gently to the soft jazz, imagining the riffs he'd either add or subtract. Meanwhile, his eyes take in the customers as they come and go, recognizing them as the kind of people he once had to deal with in his upwardly mobile career: people who live according to their personal anti-aging programs, change their eye color every week, and who tend to feel superior simply because they can actually afford such narcissism. They greet each other extravagantly and react as if every phrase spoken is either deeply profound or shatteringly funny. Manitel Benitez is very much a part of this world and Calder can easily see how he'd feel at home here.

The Baseman himself enters half an hour late and takes an adjacent chair, close enough that they can talk quietly. He offers an almost imperceptible nod but doesn't say anything, evidently not comfortable meeting like this.

"I'm told I should thank you for my current situation," Calder begins, "but since I know your good deed wasn't exactly voluntary..."

"Cut the crap."

A genetically blond Asian waitress arrives to take the order and looks meaningfully at Calder. Does that mean she's available, he wonders, or is it just the usual slinky tease for a better tip? He can't really tell but it doesn't matter anyway. Not only is he completely uninterested but such things have become trivial to him now. After all he's been through, he finds it hard to believe how painfully hip he once tried to be.

"What's the deal?" says Benitez once she's gone.

"The deal?"

"Let's not screw around, okay? Your valkyrie said the magic word 'porn' and your old man had a porn empire. That means you need me to help you get your I/D back in return for which, you're offering me a piece of the action. Am I right?"

"You said I could never get my identity back."

"You've obviously got something in mind or we wouldn't be here. How much?"

"Sorry?"

Benitez looks at him coldly. "How much?" he repeats. "What's the offer? How big a slice?"

"Ten percent."

"Wrong."

"You have another number in mind?"

"Twenty-five. Say no and I walk. If you even sputter, I walk. Decide now."

Calder doesn't give a damn about the porn business. As far as he's concerned, the demand could just as easily have been for fifty or even a hundred percent. It wouldn't have mattered to him. "Okay."

“Okay what?”

“Okay, it’s a deal.”

“It’s firm?”

“I just said so, didn’t I?”

“As long as we understand each other. Plus you get the girl off my back. Whatever she does to me, I do to you to the power of ten. Make sure she understands that.”

“Okay.”

“You say that a lot.”

“That’s because I’m going to ask for a lot.”

The beer arrives and Benitez remains expressionless until the waitress has left the pricey beer he ordered and disappeared. “So what’s the story?” he says.

Calder glances around, trying hard not to look like an amateur spy. He knows this is a reasonably safe place to talk but he still doesn’t feel totally secure. Perhaps he never will again.

“Don’t worry, they’re not reading our lips,” says Benitez.

His tone is sufficiently mocking that it forces Calder to sit back and put his anxiety on hold. Then, slowly at first, he begins to tell the tale of U-Tech and what might be happening there. When he first brings up the notion of cloning, he does so tentatively, pausing for some reaction, some glimmer of incredulity, but sees none. It’s as if the revelation is no surprise at all and Calder has to ask himself if there’s anything this guy doesn’t know.

“Is that it?” says Benitez.

“Isn’t that enough?”

Benitez stares at his beer for some time, deep in thought. Then, very softly, he says: "I heard about that program a while back."

"You did?"

"I just didn't know it had gotten so far."

"We think it's possible they were training the clone to take my place."

"To take over the company?"

"Apparently my father's estate is still in probate. Nothing's been settled yet."

"Okay, so that just means it's all set up. They develop the clone, they steal a legitimate identity... The next phase has to be the match-up, the proof of concept."

"Our thought too," says Calder, "so we were wondering..."

"I got it. They have to transfer the I/D on to the central grid and you were wondering if I could somehow attach that to you instead of the clone."

"Right."

"The answer's no."

"No? Just like that?"

"Can't be done. Do the math. There's one identity and two of you. You're identical from every point of view. Same DNA, same molecules, same everything."

"Arran thinks we might be different at a quantum level."

"Can anyone test for that?"

"Not yet."

"So who gives a shit? To all intents and purposes, you're the same. Two into one won't go."

"Which means?"

"Which means, whoever's physically in position becomes the real one." Benitez takes a long pull of his beer, almost draining the glass in the process. "You want to do this, there's only one way."

"I'm listening."

"We do it together. But I've got the easy part. All I have to do is watch to see when they transfer the U-Tech file out onto the central grid. That's when I know they're ready to move."

"And then?"

"And then comes the hard part."

"Which is?"

"As soon as the clone emerges, you have to take its place."

Calder looks at him. "Take its place? How?"

"Easy. You kill it."

"What?"

"The only way."

"Wait a minute... You want me to walk up to that thing, whatever it is, and just kill it? Just like that?"

"Hey, listen, *I* don't want anything... except a piece of the Quinlan business. It's you who wants your life back. What's the problem? You don't like to get your hands dirty? Besides, it's not like bumping off a real person."

"It's still flesh and blood."

"No, it's not. It's fake, artificial, just a facsimile. If it makes you feel any better, there's actually no law against killing it."

"There isn't?"

"How can they legislate against something that doesn't officially exist? And if it's not a crime, you can't be prosecuted. And that's even assuming you get caught. If you're smart, you won't. You'll just do it, dump the physical remains and no one will be any the wiser."

Meanwhile, Calder's just shaking his head. It's just too convoluted to imagine.

"No one will be the wiser? How about the genetics people at U-Tech? Won't they be following the clone, checking on it? They're not going to invest in a project like this and then just let it go."

"Stop worrying so much. Think it through. Once it's done, it becomes fait accompli, right? You'll have your identity, you'll have your corporation and nobody will know the difference. That's the beauty of it."

"You mean they'll think I'm still the clone?"

"Probably."

"It's twisted."

"It's a riot. Where's your sense of humor? Maybe I'll write a script, sell it to Holowood."

"Yeah, well, there's just one small problem."

"What's that?"

"I don't know if I can do it."

"Sure you can."

"How? With a weapon? With my bare hands? How do I do it?"

"You'll figure something. Push the damn thing out the window."

"I can't do that. If somebody sees the body, it's all over."

"Fair point. Okay, you'll have to do it quietly. Plan the perfect non-murder."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Best fun I've had in a while." He looks at his timepiece. "All right, look, you need a weapon? I'll get you a weapon."

"What kind of weapon?"

"One that'll work."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Trust me."

"Trust you, right. And how much will it cost me, this weapon?"

"Another twenty percent."

"Must be some weapon."

"I'm in the weapons business. Yes or no?"

"I... I don't know yet."

"Make up your mind." That's Benitez places his glass on the table and get to his feet.

“You’re leaving?”

“I got things to do. I’ll call you in one hour about the weapon. I’ll just ask yes or no. If you say yes, stay in town, I’ll organize delivery. If no, it’s all off and thanks for the laugh.”

Without waiting for a response, he walks out, leaving Calder to sit there alone, just staring after him.

It’s insane, Calder tells himself, the whole thing. Worse than insane, it’s impossible. He’d have to get back inside the institute, find his way to the genetics lab, single out his own clone, face it down, maneuver it to some dark corner and then shoot it, or explode it, or pierce it through the heart, depending on the weapon. Then he’d have to carry the bloody remains out of the campus in order to bury it in some lonely spot where they’d never find it, just like in those old Mafia flicks. Maybe Benitez is right, he’s thinking, and it’s all just an elaborate plot for a potential screenplay.

• • •

Exactly sixty minutes later, Calder is wandering the streets of downtown Edifice when the Baseman calls, good as his word.

“So... yes or no?” he asks.

Calder is by no means certain and hesitates just a moment longer. “Yes,” he says, as firmly as he can, simply because if he’d said no, all hope would have been gone. At least, this way, he gets to keep his options open.

Meanwhile, Benitez is all business, his voice reduced to staccato. “Tomorrow, same place, same time. Get a haircut and wear a suit. You need to look conservative.”

“Why?”

“Do it.”

“I don’t have a suit.”

“Buy one.”

The line goes dead.

For a moment, Calder just stands there among the crowds of evening shoppers. He sees himself in a store reflection and doesn’t even recognize who he is any more: from wanted fugitive to vehicle thief to syndicate drug pusher to – no other way to describe it – cold-blooded assassin. The fact that the target’s a clone is, for him, just a technicality. Equally, the fact that it’s not a crime is simply a legal nicety. Whatever that other Calder is, it’s a living, breathing organism. It may not have a soul but it certainly has flesh and blood and, obviously, a working brain; and killing it will feel real, no matter what the rationalization.

• • •

That evening, he finds himself a budget traveler’s hotel: just a basic room with a good shower. When he calls Arran, he’d love to pour out the whole story of what happened and what he’s agreed to do but he can’t risk it. He may be off the grid but the phone’s not. Instead, he just tells her that things are fine and he’s been obliged to stay over, just like any rep on a business trip. Fortunately she’s alert and doesn’t ask any direct questions.

Not so very long ago, he recalls, she wouldn’t have had such discipline. She’d have fallen apart under the stress, reduced to a fearful timidity; but not only has she rapidly developed a real-world mindset, she seems to have discovered a

streak of toughness that even she didn't know she had. Actually, he finds that very sexy and he's still thinking about her as he drifts off into a welcome sleep.

• • •

The following day, it's back to the Sneak Thief for a rerun, except this time Calder's wearing the suit that Manitel Benitez demanded: a dark pinstripe which came made-to-measure inside two hours. From the same mall, he purchased an old-fashioned shirt and necktie, then went to the salon in the same complex and had his hair cropped, gelled and brushed back. Now that he's all dressed up, he looks as prim as a bank trainee – but feels considerably older.

This time, it's only a couple of minutes before Manitel Benitez arrives, sliding on to a chair as if the act of sitting was an inconvenience. He doesn't bother to comment on Calder's new look.

"Thirty minutes from now," he says, launching straight into it, "a representative of the Chinese Foreign Trade Commission is going to walk in and leave a package on the table. He won't say anything and nor will you, understand? You will act nonchalant..."

"Nonchalant?" repeats Calder, a certain amount of mockery in his voice.

Benitez remains expressionless. "What's the matter, you don't know what it means?" Unlike the previous day's meeting, there's little of the self-amused arrogance. Instead, it's like a continuation of the call, abrupt and succinct. "Like I said, you act nonchalant, like it's of no consequence. You're a professional. You're used to it. You're wide awake but you're bored at the same time. Can you do that?"

"Who am I meant to be?"

"Does it matter?"

"Might help."

"Okay, you wanna play-act? Let's say you're in the procurement department of a security organization. How does that sound? As far as the Chinese are concerned, they're providing the weapon as a courtesy demo."

"Is that normal?"

"Jesus Christ... You think I'm setting you up? Of course it's goddam normal, happens all the time. You know, you worry me doing this, you really do."

"Yeah? Well if you get too worried, try closing your eyes and counting all those porn dollars. That should help you relax."

"Can you do what I'm telling you, yes or no?"

"Maybe, maybe not," he says. Then he can't help adding: "Was that nonchalant enough for you?"

Benitez ignores the barb. "Why don't you ask me what'll be in the package?"

"Presumably, the weapon."

"It's a power discharge. You know what that is?"

"I think so."

"This model's not yet on the market, this is just a demonstrator. That means no serial number."

"Like the airmine that killed my mother?" says Calder pointedly.

Benitez chooses to ignore the remark. Instead, he moves into sales mode, listing the advantages of the discharge smoothly and automatically, like bullet points on a chart. "Narrow wave, high voltage, accurate up to four meters. Micro-dimension for purposes of concealment. Israeli design, on license to China.

Super-stealth fabrication... as far as we know, undetectable by current methodology."

"As far as you know?"

"The world doesn't stand still."

"What if you're wrong?"

The slightest of shrugs. "Then I'm wrong."

Calder's not sure he appreciates such a casual assessment but that's the price of doing business with Manitel Benitez. "How will you contact me when the clone's identity..." He corrects himself. "When *my* identity is transferred to the central grid?"

"I'll call. The code will be the single word 'transferred.' That's all I'll say. We clear?" He waits for Calder to nod. "Okay, we're done. Your contact will be here in... twenty-three minutes."

"Wait, how do I use this thing? What's its energy source?"

"Don't worry about it. The Israelis like things simple. There's a safety switch on the base. Release it and it's ready for use. Squeeze the trigger gently. There's almost no recoil, nothing to spoil your aim. You'll have enough charge for a six second release at the range I specified."

"Six seconds? Will that be enough?"

"You're not taking out an army."

"How will I practice?"

"You won't. But like I said, it's simple. Point and shoot. Even you can do it. Afterwards, just drop it in some lake, preferably at night. By the way, if you're caught, you won't make it to trial. The Chinese will see to that. My advice? Don't get caught. Good luck."

He doesn't offer any chance for Calder to argue or even to respond. He just leaves at a brisk pace, still no expression on his face.

Calder watches him go, then sits back to wait for the Chinese to show up. Now, it seems, he can also add gun-runner to his rap sheet.

Calder catches an early flight back to Highcliff. When he arrives, he finds Arran still in the apartment, drinking coffee and watching the morning news. After all those years of plain water, she's now hooked on caffeine like everyone else.

"Anything interesting?" he asks her as he removes his jacket.

"Not much. Another kidnapping, another beheading. You'd think they'd come up with something more original."

"I guess they go with what works."

"You think that works?"

Calder doesn't respond. He's thinking about how simple it would be if he could just manage to be as ruthless as the terror networks. Meet the clone, slice off its head, quick and easy. Maybe even do it on camera just to scare the geneticists.

She touches the mute and turns deliberately towards him "What did Benitez say?"

There's a pause and Calder's not even sure he can bring himself to answer.

"What?" she demands.

"He said I should do the math. Two beings with one I/D doesn't work."

"Makes sense to me."

"Which means the only way to solve the problem..."

"Go on."

He takes a breath. "The only way to solve it is for me to..."

"To what? Calder!"

"Kill the clone and take its place."

He waits for her reaction but she hasn't even flinched.

"That makes sense too," she replies.

He can't believe what he's hearing and it proves to him once again that he never really knows what she's going to say or do at any given moment. "You think I should do it?"

"I don't know. That's up to you. I just said it makes sense."

"What happened to 'Thou shalt not kill?'"

"That only refers to humans."

"But this thing looks human. It acts human. You said so yourself."

"Yes, but it's *not* human."

"I thought you, of all people..." He doesn't finish the sentence. He just sits back, not sure he can even trust his instincts any more. "You know, you sound just like him."

"Who?"

"Baseman. That's exactly what he said. It's not real, so what's the big deal?"

"He's right."

“Yeah? Well, all I know is that when that thing’s writhing in agony on the floor, it’ll seem real enough.”

At this, she nods slowly, as if conjuring up the image. “You intend to make it writhe in agony?”

“He found me a weapon. Came courtesy of the Israelis by way of the Chinese.”

“What kind of weapon?”

Calder reaches into his inside pocket and brings out the discharge. It’s a miniature device, made of a composite with smooth edges and no angles. It fits comfortably inside the palm of his hand and he’s able to conceal it completely just by closing his fist. For a long time, they both stare at it in silence, while on the monitor screen in front of them, the news anchor continues his mute bulletin.

With some effort, Calder manages a wry smile. “You know what the funniest thing is?”

“What’s that?”

“When that clone finally leaves the lab, it will actually be more me than me.”

She looks at him. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Why not? It’s true. It’ll have my appearance, my DNA, my identity...”

“But it won’t have your memories or your experiences. Or your personality. They might be able to clone you but they can never replace you.”

He leans over and kisses her cheek. “Nice speech,” he says softly.

• • •

It takes seventeen days of tension and sleeplessness before the call comes through. The single word: "Transferred." When it happens, it's almost a relief.

The long period of waiting has at least given Calder the chance to think about his various options and come up with some semblance of a plan. He's also talked it over endlessly with Arran, often into the small hours of the morning, to the stage where neither of them can even think straight any more. And, meanwhile, she's been trying to continue her studies and her out-of-hours work as if there's nothing going on.

One course of action involves Calder going back into U-Tech and catching the clone before it leaves but he can't solve the problem he spoke about with Benitez: what to do about the remains. Another method would be to catch the clone en route to Edifice but that's equally impractical. What method of transportation would it use? How many staff would be escorting it? How much security? Calder doesn't know and that's the problem. Finally, he narrowed in on the only way that offered some possibility of success – and even with this approach, there are so many things that could go wrong, it's difficult even to list them, never mind solve them.

Perhaps for a professional hit-man, this would be one of the easier assignments but, for Calder, just thinking about it makes him break out into a mild sweat and the doubts continue to multiply in his head. He tries to show Arran that he's calm and in control but not only does he make a lousy assassin, he's not even a very good actor.

The morning he leaves for Edifice, he hugs Arran goodbye, more conscious than ever that this might be the last time he ever sees her, because it's finally occurred to him that if things go disastrously wrong, it could actually be the clone which ends up killing *him*. In fact, at one point, he considered a fourth option, which was to do nothing at all, to go on as they are, clone or no clone. But it wouldn't work. It couldn't. How could he have any peace as long as he knew that some artificial entity was living his life for him? How could he and Arran just settle down and be happy? How could they even think about having kids? It would be impossible, so he kept the notion to himself and never brought it up.

"Take care of yourself," he tells her, doing his best to be cheerful; or, as Baseman said, nonchalant.

For her part, she tries to smile back but too finds it hard. "I think I should be saying that to you," she replies.

He nods, then hauls his rucksack on to his shoulder and leaves before he loses his nerve completely.

Back in Edifice, he takes a room at the same small hotel as last time, simply because it's convenient.. He grabs a bite of lunch, then lies on the bed fully clothed and closes his eyes. His frayed nerves have left him exhausted but sleep doesn't come.

For some reason, his mind is churning with thoughts of his parents and the images tumble around like laundry in a dryer. There's his father, typically throwing his weight around to get exactly what he wants until he finishes up with nothing at all. Then he sees his mother, the dominatrix turned socialite, blown to pieces in an uncaring suburbia. Up to this moment, he hasn't shed a tear for either of them. Will he be next in line to die? Is that what's about to happen? Maybe that's what they call karma.

When his alarm finally sounds at five in the afternoon, he's thinking about Arran because, in the final analysis, she's all he's got.

• • •

At five-thirty, the Calder Quinlan who once *was* places a call to Quinlan Enterprises and asks to be put through to the Calder Quinlan who now *is*.

"Connecting you to his office," says a young female voice.

Most companies have an automated response system but Grantham Quinlan always preferred lots of real people around him, doing his bidding. Some saw it as a homespun eccentricity but Calder always recognized it for the outsized

egomania that it was. That's why there's now a second live voice in the chief executive's suite, also female but more mature than the first. "Mr. Quinlan's office, how can I help you?"

"Yes, is Calder Quinlan there please?"

"He's engaged at present. May I take a message?"

"Is it possible to get him out of whatever he's in? I'll only keep him a minute, I promise."

"I'm sorry, that would be difficult. If you could tell me what it's about?"

"No, it's a personal matter. Extremely urgent."

A pause. "Let me see what I can do, Mister...?"

"Quinlan. It's my name too."

"A member of the family? Well, why didn't you say so? Hold the line, please."

A couple of minutes later, the voice comes on the line.

"Quinlan here."

It's uncanny, just like hearing his own voice, and Calder has to shake himself into coherence just to remember his prepared speech. "Yeah, hi Calder. Guess who?"

"Who is this?"

"Who do you think? Your long lost brother, dummy."

There's a long hesitation as Calder guessed there would be. This is something for which it hasn't been programmed.

"I don't have a brother," the clone replies.

“Yeah, right, I love you too. Listen up, bro, seriously. We gotta talk, you and me. Let’s just say I’m in a bit of trouble and, for all I know, you might be too.”

The clone is clearly confused but its brain has been designed to be adaptive. Whenever in any doubt, it’s trained to gather information until the scenario is clarified. “Trouble? What kind of trouble?”

“Yeah, well that’s just it. I can’t tell you, not like this. We gotta meet.”

“Meet? Where? When?”

“Today. This evening. I don’t know where yet. I’m kind of in transit right now. Give me your mobile number and I’ll let you know.”

“My number?”

“Come on, man, don’t repeat everything I say. I’m in a hurry, gimme your damn number.” The clone has no real choice but to comply and Calder notes down the number. “All right, good. Keep your phone close by, I’ll call you back soon, okay, bro? Hey, I said, okay?”

“Okay.”

Calder hangs up, hopefully leaving the clone in a state of bewilderment.

• • •

At seven, Calder climbs into an air taxi and asks to be taken downtown towards the financial district. Then he pushes a button to raise the partition between himself and the driver. For what he’s about to do, he needs a little privacy.

Once they’re airborne, he slips out his audio phone and enters the number he’s been given. He knows that if, as expected, the clone reported the earlier call to his

security handlers, any new contact might be intercepted. But Calder has a couple of advantages going for him. The first is that no technology is ever perfect. At this time of day, there's so much interference from the grid – surveillance, security sensors, traffic control, commercial electronics and other major systems – that the relay towers and bay stations can't always hand off efficiently. This makes any kind of positioning triangulation difficult, especially when movement and altitude are factored in, which is why he's chosen to do this in an air cab. His other advantage, of course, is that he's not recognized by the federal database, so even if Quinlan Corporation security does intercept the call, they still won't have any identification with which to follow up. Sure, it's an optimistic assessment on his part but if he'd been thinking rationally, he wouldn't even have attempted any of this.

He hears the dial tone and the connection. Then the clone's voice: again, a muffled version of his own.

"Quinlan here."

"Yeah, me again, bro. We need to meet. Alone."

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Quit joking around, I don't have time."

"We checked. My parents never had any other children."

Calder's prepared for this reaction and moves into the next phase without any delay. "You're serious, aren't you? What happened? You sick? You lost your memory or something?"

"We checked. You're not my brother."

"Okay, enough fooling. I need to see you. Like I told you, I'm in some trouble and I'm damn sure you are too, so I think we should get our heads together, you know? All that brotherly love shit... Yeah, okay, okay, half-brothers."

"Half-brothers?"

"You really are sick, aren't you? You know they used to have this disease, Alzheimer's, or something like that, where people lost their memory. Maybe that's what you've got but there's a cure now. If you want, we can..."

"Is that with the same father or the same mother?"

"What?"

"You said half brothers. With the same father or mother?"

"God Almighty. You should get yourself to damn hospital."

"Please answer the question."

"Same father, idiot. Duh. That's why we got the same name. Alzheimer's or not, I think you could have worked that out."

"Who was your mother?"

"Where've you been the last twenty years?"

There's another break in the conversation and Calder can't help smiling to himself at the confusion he must be causing. This is easier than he thought. Of course, there's no brother or even half-brother on record but life on the grid has a way of falling through the cracks and all kinds of accidents can happen. There's no way that either the clone or its genetic masters could ever know if the story true or not – not for certain – and Calder's gambling they'll have to string along in order to find out.

"Just tell me," says the clone. "Who was your mother?"

"We've been through all this a million times."

"Can you tell me or not?"

“No, dammit, once and for all, I’ve got no idea who she was. You think Myrla was the only whore the bastard slept with?”

It’s a deliberate, calculated insult but there’s no reaction, none at all, and that, too, offers a vital clue as to the clone’s parameters. It’s obvious the geneticists have done an outstanding job, a remarkable feat of human engineering, and it might fool a lot of people a lot of the time but it’s far from perfect.

“Why do you want to meet me?” asks the clone.

The tone hasn’t changed, still as flat and even as it was before. Does it possess any emotions at all? Calder finds it difficult to tell.

“Like I told you, it’s in both our interests. Now listen to what I’m telling you. Walk out of that fancy office, go downstairs and take the first air cab that comes along. I’ll meet you at the airport in twenty minutes. Domestic terminal, departure level concourse by the information hub. Got that? And don’t bring any of your company goon squad. We gotta do this alone, okay? Don’t tell anyone, don’t make any calls, just get up and go, right now.”

Calder hangs up, then lowers the partition and tells the driver to descend to street level and wait outside the Quinlan building.

Exactly twenty minutes later, the clone emerges. For Calder, this is the moment when the full force hits him. It’s like seeing himself, or at least as he was not too long ago: young, ambitious, a poster child for the young business elite.

“Hey,” says the cab driver, suddenly noticing. “You’re like twins.”

“Yeah, just like twins,” replies Calder, “Let’s pick him up before the idiot takes another cab.”

The taxi glides in and the door opens right in front of the clone. That’s when it sees who’s inside and, for several seconds, it remains motionless, staring at what appears to be its own double.

"Get in," says Calder. Then he repeats the instruction loudly, more like an order.
"I said, get in. Now!"

The clone does as it's told but it can't seem to stop that glassy eyed fixation.

By this point, Calder is also a little numb from the shock but he can't allow himself to lose control of the situation, or it's all over. He tries to pull himself together and turns to the driver. "Let's go. You know River Edge Park?"

"Sure."

"How long to get there?"

"This time of night? Maybe ten, twelve minutes."

"Okay, quick as you can." Calder raises the partition.

"I thought we were going to the airport," says the clone.

"Yeah, well, we're not."

"I don't want to go to the park."

"Why not? It's where we used to go, or don't you remember that either? Sure you do. Hey, remember the time you hit a double and clipped that guy's knee at first as you ran past? Huge son-of-a-bitch. I thought he was gonna hammer you."

"Are you talking about baseball? We never played baseball. *I* never played baseball."

"You know, I think there really is something wrong with you."

"No, I'm fine. I just don't know what's going on."

Flat voice, even temper, confused look: the clone just can't seem to respond to the fast-changing situation.

“Okay, okay don’t worry,” says Calder. “Just relax, it’ll sort itself out. Too much stress, if you ask me. Maybe the park will bring back some memories.”

He tries to look calm and reassuring but he can’t help glancing behind every so often just to see if they’re being followed. So far, there are no signs of anyone. If there is indeed some kind of a trap being set, either by Quinlan security or by some federal agency, he can only assume they decided to mount it at the airport. It’s a strategic error on their part and Calder can take some small comfort from having outsmarted them so far.

• • •

It’s fully dark by the time they reach the park and, without any ground lights, the driver needs his full radius beams to set down on the dedicated pad near the entrance. “Want me to wait?” he says, as his passengers exit.

“Nah,” says Calder. “That’s okay. We’ll call if we need a lift back.”

“You sure you’ll be all right? Don’t know how safe it is at this hour.”

“We’ll be fine. Thanks.”

Calder pays the driver in cash, the craft ascends and they’re left alone. There’s no one about and the only illumination come from the distant practice diamond where some little league game is just winding up.

The clone glances around. “Why are we here?”

“I told you, we’ve got some things to talk about.”

“What things?”

“All in good time. Come on, we’ll keep warmer if we walk.”

"I don't want to walk."

This is it, the moment Calder's been dreading, but he knows he has no choice. He pulls the discharge from his pocket and points it at the clone. "You know what this is?"

The clone looks at it. "A weapon."

"That's right, a weapon. Now I suggest we walk."

The clone doesn't move. "You're not my brother at all, are you? You're my prototype."

"Your prototype?" Calder allows himself a laugh at the reverse perspective. "No, I'm not your damn prototype. It's you who's my clone."

"They told me about you. But they said you wouldn't be able to emerge from where you are."

"Surprise, surprise. Now, are you going to walk or not?"

"I have the capacity to disarm you."

"And I have the capacity to fry you before you can even move a muscle." With his thumb, Calder disengages the safety release, just as the Baseman told him. "So what's it to be, bro?"

"I believe it's in my best interests to remain where I am."

"Is that right? Well, I'm afraid it's a bit late for that. It was in your best interests not to get out of the cab. And before that, it was in your best interests not to leave the building. You know, I'm not sure they did such a great job programming you after all."

"What do you want?"

"That's easy. I'm trying to work up enough courage to use this thing."

"Why?"

"Why? Because you stole my life and I want it back."

"I didn't steal your life. I was created to replicate it."

"No, you were created to hijack it. Now you have five seconds to start walking or die where you stand. One, two, three..."

The clone looks down at the discharge weapon and seems to come to a decision.
"Which direction?"

"That's better." Calder nods to indicate a path, which, he recalls, leads directly to the park's artificial lake. It was here that Yoyo, the family housekeeper, used to bring him when he was young; and then, later in life, it became a favorite make-out spot for dating. In fact, it was on one summer night when he was fourteen that he actually lost his virginity not far from here with Vylene Jacks. She was two grades higher and a great deal more experienced but his panicky, premature ejaculation ruined the thrill and he had to go home, sticky and embarrassed.

It doesn't take long before they're at the water's edge and Calder can hear the faint lapping against the rocks. The baseball diamond is out of sight but the skies have partially cleared and there's a bright three-quarter moon.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" asks the clone.

To Calder, that's a strange question but, then again, this whole thing feels weirdly surreal anyway, like an outlandish dream. "What's that to you?" he replies.

"They trained me in matters of procreation but I don't yet have a girlfriend."

Calder gazes at this thing in front of him, this live robot, and wonders how anyone could possibly imagine it having a girlfriend – unless of course, the girl in question is also a clone. Then it might work. There might even be a whole new generation of clones, all biologically self-replicating, a vast new population to

take the place of obsolete humans. Sounds like yet another script idea for the Baseman.

“By the way, I cannot get sick,” the clone is saying.

“What?”

“You said I’m sick but I cannot get sick.”

“Sure you can. Except you’ll call it a malfunction.”

“You seem emotionally negative towards me.”

“Whatever gave you that idea?” replies Calder, but the sarcasm gets lost in the space between them.

“You must realize that I cannot allow myself to die.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re a real hotshot. Now shut up and give me your mobile.”

“You want my phone?”

“That’s the idea. Hand it over. Slowly”

Obediently, the clone reaches into his inside pocket and draws out the handset – but then sees the opportunity and hurls it at Calder’s face. While Calder is momentarily distracted, the clone lunges for the discharge but it’s a clumsy move and Calder has no difficulty avoiding it with a simple sidestep. The mobile falls to the ground. Then, once again, the clone tries the same move and, once again, Calder easily counters it.

“That the best you can do?” says Calder.

He’s still holding the weapon but what he can’t seem to figure out is why he hasn’t fired it yet. He’s had two perfect excuses to do so but each time he failed to activate the discharge and, with that sudden realization, all the obsessive doubts

come back. Maybe, he's thinking, he really doesn't have the cojones to do it, after all.

And that's when it happens.

This time, the attack is more successful and the clone succeeds in grabbing his arm. Calder refuses to let go of the discharge and, with some of the heft from his former athletic days, he manages to push the clone away. But it comes straight back at him, mindlessly aggressive, and before Calder knows it, he's squeezing the trigger, just the way he imagined a thousand times. The megavolt wave hits true, right at the center of the clone's chest and burns its way instantly through the fabric of its suit and then the raw flesh of its genetically reproduced body. For Calder, it's like shooting at a mirror, an act of both homicide and suicide at the same time, but he doesn't stop until he's exhausted the energy pack. And when he's done, he sees the clone on the ground, no more than a smoking ruin. The smell of roasted flesh is nauseous and Calder falls to his knees, choking on his own vomit.

When he finally finishes coughing it all up, all he wants to do is to run, to get away from this place, but he doesn't. He has to calm himself and follow his own plan.

First, he begins gathering some of the rocks from around the lake's shoreline and places them inside the clone's suit, or what's left of it. Then, with some effort, he rolls the corpse to the water's edge and with a final push, heaves it over. It lands with a low splash and then, very slowly, it begins to bubble and sink out of sight. Next on the list, he tosses the weapon far out into the lake. Finally, he picks up the clone's mobile from the ground nearby, flicks it on and searches the menu for a priority speed dial. When he finds it, he touches the screen and hopes for the best.

A man's voice answers. "Where are you?"

"Everything is fine," replies Calder, deliberately adopting the flat tonality of the clone.

"What happened?" says the voice.

"The cab I took contained the individual."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know. I never found out."

"Why didn't you show up at the airport?"

"I had no choice. I was forced to go to River Edge Park, where he made me change clothes with him."

"Change clothes? Why?"

"I don't know. I think he was trying to impersonate me but I managed to injure him with his own weapon."

"Injure him? How badly? Is he dead?"

"I don't know. I weighted him with rocks and pushed him into the lake. He did not resurface."

"Christ, a bit drastic. Anyone see you?"

"No, it's dark."

"How about the taxi driver?"

"No, he left thirty minutes ago."

"Well, I guess that's something. Okay, okay... We'll just have to clean it up. Is that where you are now? In the park?"

"Yes, I'm still by the lake."

"Fine, wait there, we'll come pick you up."

The phone in Calder's hand goes dead but he has no wish to wait around, so he starts walking towards the park entrance, eventually finding his way to the road that leads downtown. His bio-tech heart is still palpitating too fast but the cool night air feels good and, as he walks, he takes in some deep breaths. He's trying to feel some sort of remorse about what he's done, searching his conscience for a glimmer of regret, but the truth is that, now it's over, he feels nothing at all, just like the clone.

Hours later, when he gets back to the hotel, he calls Arran.

"Hello?" she says anxiously.

"Done," he tells her.

It's their own code to say that the ugly task is complete. But it's not over yet. The plan they worked out still has one final phase.

• • •

The following morning, Calder dresses in the same suit he bought for the clandestine meeting with the Chinese and, at eight sharp, he enters the Quinlan building. On his way up to the executive suite, various employees greet him as if he's a part of the landscape.

"Good morning, Mr. Quinlan."

"Morning," he throws back. Just another day at the office.

When he arrives at the executive suite that was once his father's – and more recently the clone's – he finds his assistant waiting for him. She's a tall, middle-aged woman, highly competent. She leads him through an ante-room to the CEO's sanctum, where there's somebody already waiting for him, a big man sitting on the edge of the desk.

"Thank you, Ms. Ingram," says the man curtly, a not too subtle hint that she should leave. When the door closes behind her, he says: "What the hell happened? You were supposed to wait by the lake."

Calder immediately understands that this man is security, one of the clone's minders, but whether he's part of the Quinlan squad, a U-Tech staffer, or a federal agent of some sort, it's difficult to know. "I felt like walking," he replies.

"You felt like walking? You felt like walking? What are you now, freelance? You're supposed to follow instructions."

"I'm supposed to be CEO."

"Excuse me? You think you're the one making the rules now?"

"You may leave."

The man is incredulous. "I may leave? *I may leave*? Who do you think you are, you piece of..."

"Either leave or I'll call security."

"I *am* goddam security."

"Then I'll call the institute."

"You'll what?"

"They told me you would offer guidance. They did not tell me to follow your orders. You may leave."

By this time, the man is furious but there's not much he can do. Then it dawns on him that he's getting upset with a clone, which is ludicrous, so finally he just smiles to himself and leaves quietly.

Calder manages to maintain a blank look on his face, just like the clone, but he's secretly pleased with his own performance. It's actually fun. He calls in his assistant. "Ms. Ingram, I need you to do me a favor."

"Yes, of course."

"I need you to clear my schedule for a few days. Can you do that?"

"Well, there are several items that require..."

"I've got some business I must attend to. I'll leave it in your hands to reschedule. Is that a problem?"

"No, no, I'll take care of it. You'll be leaving as of when?"

"As of now. Please have the transport standing by."

She nods and leaves his office, all part of the day's work. And that's when he begins to realize that the formidable Ms. Ingram is probably not part of the plot and nor are any of the other employees. As far as they're concerned, the clone was the real Calder Quinlan and, by extension, so is he. For them, there's been no change at all.

As he boards the corporate craft, he knows he's going to have to impose himself like this a good deal more in the weeks to come but he's hoping they'll put this new assertion down to a better adaptive response than they anticipated and perhaps even congratulate themselves on a successful project. For a while, his life will no longer be his own but that's the price he'll have to pay and, eventually, that will change. If it doesn't, if he finds he can no longer maintain the charade, he can always resort to other means. The fact is that human cloning is still a serious offense under both federal and international law, one that's punishable at the highest levels of the judiciary and if they decide to oppose his independence in any way, he'll have no hesitation in using the full resources of the Quinlan empire to expose them and their entire criminal apparatus.

In the meantime, as the craft begins its ascent towards the flightpath, he's well aware that he's no longer invisible. He's back on the grid as Calder Quinlan and,

even though he's managed to escape the personal security blanket, he knows that they'll be monitoring every detail of his journey back to Highcliffe. They'll be wondering why he's chosen that particular destination and who he intends to see there.

He tilts back his chair and closes his eyes, content with his progress so far and apprehensive about the difficulties ahead. But with all his careful forethought, there's one possibility that hasn't yet occurred to him.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he asks, when he sees the look on Arran's face.

She rushes towards him but for the moment, she can't speak, she just needs to hold him. They stay like that by the door for some time until, slowly, she leads him over to her terminal. The screen is mid-gray and on it is a single-line of type:

A MESSAGE FROM YOUR GOVERNMENT

"Ah, hell," he says. "Not again. I don't believe it. Did you click through?" He sees her nod. "And?" Another nod, as if to confirm the worst. She's had her identity erased and all he can do is shake his head in frustration. "When? When did it happen?"

"Today," she says. "About midday."

"Seems like their favorite time. Why didn't you call me?"

"Could you have gotten here any sooner?"

He acknowledges the point. "All right, let's just relax. If there's one thing I've learned from all this, it's not to panic."

"I know. That's what I thought too but..."

"But what?"

"But what if they've got another me inside there. What if there are hundreds of clones in circulation... thousands, millions?"

He looks at her for a while. "What did we do that night in Biblion?"

He's asking her the self-same test question she once asked him and, for a moment, it unnerves her.

"Wait, you think I'm..." She pauses, takes a deep breath, then calms down. "We went to the cathedral to see my uncle's friend, Elias, keep the promise." When she sees him nod, she sighs. "That's what happens, that's the result. They prevent us from trusting each other."

"Yes... I know." He rubs a hand across his face, an attempt to wipe away some of the tiredness. "Okay, okay, let's just sit down and work this out. I have a hard time believing they'd create two clones, then steal the identities of two different people who, just by chance happen to be living together. Too much of a coincidence."

"So... you think it's just random?"

"Could be. But it could also be they made the connection between us."

"Even before you got here? How?"

"You want my theory? You remember when we sat together in the quadrangle at U-Tech? All we were worried about was whether they could hear us. But they saw us, too."

Arran catches on immediately. "That's right. They must have thought you were the clone, then wondered why I'd be talking to it. Hey, maybe they thought the clone was hitting on me... or me on it."

"Maybe... And maybe they've been tracking you ever since. Wait a minute... They knew the transport was heading up here the moment the pilot entered the flight plan for Highcliffe. They must have worked it out, put the pieces together. If they already knew where you were and then discovered where I was going... all they had to do was make the connection."

"But why would they want *me* out of the way?"

“Who knows? Maybe it’s too early in their experiment. Sexual relations aren’t supposed to happen yet.”

“It’s like they’re playing God.” She shakes her head slowly, then looks up at him. “So what do we do now?”

Calder’s mind seems unable to escape the image of Arran caught in the endless nightmare of Green Earth detention. “Well, you can’t turn yourself in, that’s for sure. And running doesn’t help, believe me.”

“Maybe I could claim sanctuary back in Biblion.”

For a second, Calder looks at her, then sees the smirk on her face. He realizes she’s teasing him and grins back. The fact that they can smile at all under the circumstances seems to demonstrate to him that something’s changed. A new maturity? Perhaps. But more likely, it’s just a new attitude born of world-weariness. In a sense, it’s a way of saying they’ve already survived the worst, so what else can life do?

“I think the first thing,” he says, “is to learn from experience. Top priority is to call the Baseman and get you wiped clean. At least that will stop them tracking you.”

“But won’t that just seal my fate forever? I’ll never get back on the grid.”

He puts his arms around her. “That’s the second thing to learn,” he replies. “Everything I’ve been through tells me there’s no such thing as never.”

• • •

“A hundred percent?” says the Baseman. “You’re offering me a hundred percent?”

It's late at night and they're in the Highcliffe coffee emporium, the local version of a sensor-free speakeasy. They know that Calder's here if they're tracking his movements but they probably don't know who he's meeting.

"You're not interested?"

"You said an increase but I never guessed this. "

"Well, well, I managed to surprise you, how about that?"

"So now you're going to tell me what I have to do to earn it."

Calder sits back and thinks about his reply. The agreement was initially for twenty-five percent of the Quinlan pornography business. Then, with the addition of the weapon, it rose to forty-five. "I'll put it as simply as I can," he says. "Arran's lost her identity. For a hundred percent, you'll first wipe her clean, like you did for me..."

"And then?"

"And then you'll get her back on the grid."

Benitez shakes his head even before Calder's finished the sentence. "I told you before, that's not possible."

"Three months ago, how possible was it that you'd own one of the country's largest porn empires, lock, stock and holodisk? Now here you are."

"Granted, but that doesn't make your request any easier."

"You want in or not? A porn empire going begging. All that cash, all those starlet freebies, maybe a nice private island... You can give up the weapons business, sit back and watch it all come rolling in. "

"And none of that happens if I'm caught."

Calder grins at him. "So take your own advice. Don't get caught."

Benitez is clearly tempted, just not completely ready to commit. "Look, I'll have to think about it."

"Sorry, this is a one-time deal. You take it or leave it right here and now."

"Ah, finally... the ol' Quinlan talent showing through. I knew you had your father's streak inside you somewhere."

"Hell, I hope not."

"All right, tell you what," he goes on. "I'll try. No promises, mind, and certainly no guarantees. To be frank, I don't even know where to start... but I'll give it some thought."

"That's all I'm asking," says Calder. "So do we have an agreement?"

"We do," replies Benitez, already getting up to leave. "By the way," he goes on, "I never congratulated you for getting this far. I didn't think you had the guts to pull it off."

"Yeah, well, that makes two of us," says Calder. "Okay, let's get out of here. The less we're seen together, the better."

• • •

An hour later, Calder's back explaining everything to Arran. Outside, it's dark and peaceful – no glare or constant hum like in Edifice – and it's almost possible to believe that the world is a normal place.

"You think he can really do it?" she asks him quietly.

"Piece of cake."

"You know what I think? I think you're doing all this for me. I think there's not one chance in a million he can do it and I think you gave away all that income just to give me some hope."

Calder tries to shrug it off. "I never wanted that porn business anyway."

"Maybe... but thanks anyway. By the way, I called Uncle Wilmott while you were away. He's arriving the day after tomorrow."

"He's coming here? Now? I'm not sure..."

"What? That this is such a good time? It's the perfect time."

"Why?"

"Think, Calder, think. Has becoming a CEO already dulled your brain?"

He just shakes his head, so she tries giving him clues.

"Uncle Wilmott flying in? Doctor? My tiredness, my change of diet. Hello? Don't you ever notice anything?"

Then the realization sets in and, very gradually, his face changes, adjusting from incomprehension to disbelief and, finally, to exhilaration.

"You mean... Why didn't you tell me?"

"I think you had a couple of other things on your mind."

For a long time, he just stands there like a fool with his mouth half open. Then, she gives him another prompt by opening up her arms and, all at once, he rushes into them, unable to speak, unable to do anything but reciprocate the wild hug. He lifts her off the ground and swings her around until she's obliged to say:

"Whoa, whoa, ease up. She's going to get dizzy."

"A girl? We're having a girl? A tiny little Arran?"

"Actually, she'll be more like a tiny little Anonymous."

"We'll get your I/D back in time."

"No, we won't. The poor kid'll have a loser for a mother and a felon for a dad. Great start in life."

"Yeah, but on the other hand, she'll be a born survivor. That much, I guarantee."

Arran smiles at that but then she turns serious again and there's a distant look in those gray-green eyes. "I don't even know if we're doing her such a favor, bringing her into a world like this."

It's a truth that's hard to deny and Calder just gazes at her for what seems like a long time. Then, as a kind of belated reply, he says: "Ever thought about the moon?"

"The moon?"

"I hear Peco Leandros is forming a consortium to bid for a lunar condominium contract. What do you think?"

"I don't know much about real estate."

"No, I mean to live there."

"Live on the moon?"

"Live, work, raise our little Arran."

"Work at what?"

He looks a little embarrassed. "I guess... I had an idea."

"What kind of idea?"

"I'm supposed to be in development, so I thought maybe I could..." He pauses, realizing how silly it's going to sound.

"You could what?"

"Maybe... Well, maybe plant a forest up there. You know, turn the Leandros project into a resort, help him win the bid. Maybe add a hotel, a golf course... Remember all those early astronauts? I always wanted to do that, play golf on the moon. You could drive the ball half a mile easy, maybe more."

At first she stares at him, then laughs out loud. "Are you serious? A forest... and a golf course? On the moon?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's..."

She's about to say impossible but she stops herself in time. And now that she actually thinks about the concept, her scientific mind begins to realize that it's not so stupid. By modifying the right desert species and applying some kind of quantum feed technology for the requisite nutrients, it might be feasible. She could actually get interested in that. After all, what better use of genetics than to create a tree that can thrive on the moon? And what better way for the Quinlan Corporation to help make up, at least in small part, for the mess they've made down here?

In the end, she has to shrug her agreement. "You're right," she says. "Why not?"

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